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## Attitudes of the Residents of a Small Southern County Toward LatinosThe

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# Attitudes of the Residents of a Small Southern County Toward Latinos

Ronnie Martin

## Abstract

The rate of immigration has increased dramatically as a result of changes in the global economy, ethnic and political conflict, and the increased availability of communication and transportation networks. This increased immigration has caused much resistance and tension among the countries experiencing an influx of immigrants (Esses, Jackson & Armstrong, 1998). In America, which has a long history of anti-immigration sentiment, immigrants are met with ambivalence. This article reports the results of a survey designed to show the attitudes of the residents of a small southern county toward Latinos. A community-based sample (N=173) from a small southern county was asked to complete a survey on attitudes toward Latinos. The literature suggests that attitudes toward Latino immigrants in rural areas are for the most part negative. Contrary to the literature, the survey data indicate a positive attitude toward Latinos. Although there were areas of negative opinion concerning Latinos, the survey data suggest that the bias and negative attitudes toward Latinos by residents of a small, rural county is somewhat exaggerated.

**KEYWORDS:** Latinos, Immigrants, Attitudes, Survey

Martin: Rural Southerner's Attitudes Toward Latinos  
**The Attitudes of the Residents of a Small Southern County Toward Latinos**

Ronnie Martin

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America is known as a land of immigrants. There are many Americans who are descendents of immigrants. Despite this, the literature suggests that the majority of Americans do not welcome recent immigrants (Morganthau, 1993).

Immigrants are defined as aliens who voluntarily move from their own established society to another (Martin & Midgley, 1999). Potocky-Tripodi (2002) defines immigrants as those individuals who leave their countries voluntarily usually in search of better economic conditions. There has been a great deal of anxiety among Americans over the continued large-scale immigration occurring in the United States (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

According to the literature, large-scale immigration has become an important social development (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The rate of immigration has increased dramatically as a result of changes in the global economy, ethnic and political

conflict, and the increased availability of communication and transportation networks. This increased immigration has caused much resistance and tension among those countries experiencing an influx of immigrants (Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998).

### **Latinos and Immigration**

The majority of the growth in the Latino population in American during the past three decades has been due to immigration (de Haymes, Kilty, & Segal, 2000). Latinos are currently the fastest growing minority group in the United States (U.S. Bureau of census, 1999). It has been predicted that at the current rate of growth, Latinos will constitute 25 percent of the population in America by 2050 and will eventually be the majority group in the United States.

Martin and Midgley (1999) report that Mexico is the predominate country of origin for those most recently immigrating to America. There are 33 million Latinos living in America with

Mexican-origin persons comprising 60 percent of all Latinos (Guzman, 2001; Therrien & Ramirez, 2001).

### **Legal and Illegal Immigrants**

According to Potocky-Tripodi (2002), a person who is not a citizen of the United States is known as an alien. An immigrant is an individual who has been legally admitted into America. Illegal immigrants are those who do not have a legal right to be in the United States. He further reports that half of the illegal aliens in the United States in 1996 were from Mexico. This is only an estimate since illegal aliens are undocumented and therefore the true number of illegal immigrants from Mexico can only be estimated.

Mexico also had the largest number of legal immigrants admitted into the United States in 1998 (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). The number of legal immigrants from Mexico admitted to America (131,575) in 1998, and illegal immigrants from Mexico in 1996 (2,700,000) differs greatly. Mexico is the leading country of origin for illegal immigrants as 2.7 million (54%) of illegal immigrants in the United States are from Mexico (Balgopal, 2000).

Illegal immigrants, for the purpose of this study, are those individuals who enter the United States without proper documentation or who enter the country as immigrant workers and stay beyond their employment dates (Balgopal, 2000). The debate on undocumented immigration in America has been a hot topic of discussion on which many social issues have converged (Murata, 2001). These large number of undocumented immigrants are seen as un-American others.

### **Attitudes**

Attitudes are defined as the sum total of a person's inclinations and feelings, prejudices or biases, preconceived notions ideas, fears, threats, and convictions about any specific topic (Thurstone & Chave, 1929). According to Roehrer (1961), the constellation of cultural judgments concerning an individual or a group of persons and the standards of behavior expected of them are made manifest by an attitude. Attitudes are important determinants of the behavior one chooses (Scott, 1996). It has been suggested that attitudes determine the social expectations and treatment granted an individual (Roehrer, 1961). Research reveals that individuals organize their perceptions of the world in terms of their attitudes toward various stimuli (Diener, Larsen, Levine, & Emmoms, 1985; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Russell, 1983).

### **Negative Attitudes**

It is believed that individual prejudice and discrimination reflect a lack of knowledge (McLemore, 1994). According to Hewstone (1986), the more people learn about inter-group similarities and differences, the less prejudiced they will be. There is some evidence that under specified conditions, increases in people's knowledge about other groups leads to increases in inter-group cooperation and respect (McLemore, 1994).

The social construction theory refers to how groups are characterized and seen by the culture at large. A generalized belief system is termed a stereotype. Groups are socially stereotyped and may possess positive or negative attributes (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). These

stereotyped beliefs can be used to defend discrimination against minority groups (Berry & Dalal, 1996).

According to Blumer (1958), between majority groups that are dominant and minority groups center on the idea of group conflict. It is thought that the dominant group may feel that certain resources belong to them alone. Members of the dominant group feel that the minority group is a threat to these resources. The member of the dominant majority group may worry over the loss of income or government resources as a result of competition from the minority group over resources. There is a belief that the more the minority group obtains; the less is available for the majority group. (McLaren, 2003; Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001). The result is likely to be a hostile attitude from the majority group toward the minority group. The majority group may express negative attitudes toward the minority group in an effort to discredit the minority group.

### **Negative Attitudes Toward Immigrants**

According to Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001), America has a long history of anti-immigration sentiment. Anti-immigration attitudes are based on common fears that give rise to conflict. Fears about immigrants as a threat to "our way of life" have been present since the birth of the country (Reimers, 1998). These fears have led in the past to restrictions and exclusion of immigrants (de Haymes, Kilty, & Segal, 2000).

The term "ethnos of reception" was coined by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001, p. 36). The "ethos of reception" includes the general social

and cultural climate immigrants face in America. This climate is determined by the attitudes and beliefs held by Americans toward immigrants. The dominant anti-immigration attitude is that immigrants are flooding our shores, causing unemployment among Americans, increasing the crime rate, and taking advantage of our social welfare systems (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2001). Citizens of the United States feel that the American way of life is evaporating and that immigrants, both legal and illegal, are stealing jobs and abusing the welfare system.

Massey (1995) suggests that anti-immigration bias is the result of the fear among native-born Americans that the traditional cultural milieu of America is being lost as evidenced by the large number of non-English speaking, non-European immigrants that are visible. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) suggest that a consistent thread throughout American history has been the fear that immigration would undermine the institutions of the country and lead to its disintegration and downfall. Pavalko (1980) implies the fears from native-born Americans include seeing immigrants as threats to the political order, threats to the economic system of the United States, threats to social and cultural components of the American way of life, and finally threats to the natural environment.

According to Balgopal (2000), the "melting pot" idea, where the immigrants would learn and adopt America's values, norms and language, has not resolved ethnic tensions, discrimination, and prejudice directed toward immigrants. Many view the increasing diversity of the United States

as excessive, which poses a threat to social harmony (Murata, 2001). *Interdisciplinary Social Work Journal*, Vol. 1 (2005), Iss. 1, p. 4

Many of the beliefs about Latinos are misperceptions, misrepresentations, and misunderstandings that draw on a legacy of cultural perceptions and beliefs (Rodriguez, 1997). Some of the most popular misperceptions regarding immigrants are 1) that most or a large number of immigrants to America are here illegally; 2) that welfare programs are generally available to and largely used by immigrants; and 3) that the generous welfare system of the United States acts as a draw for illegal immigrants (deHaymes, Kilty, and Segal, 2000). Fix and Passell (1994) argue that studies all overstate the negative views held by the general public. They report that these studies underreport the tax collections from immigrants, overstate service costs of immigrants, ignore the economic benefits of immigrants consumer spending, overstate job displacement impacts and costs, and overstate the size of the immigrant population, especially in regards to the illegal immigrant population.

### **Attitudes Toward Latinos**

According to Aguirre and Turner (2004), the increased number of Latino immigrants will only add to the hostility and resentment of white Americans and the belief that their majority status will be threatened. They suggest that the negative beliefs about Latinos have legitimized discrimination against them. These negative beliefs include the opinions that Latinos are lazy, prone to criminality, are welfare cheats, and are gang oriented and violent. The literature also implies that fears about the overcrowding of schools, loss of jobs for

non-Latinos, the burden placed on welfare and the health care system, and the loss of mainstream cultural beliefs have contributed to discrimination and prejudice toward Latino immigrants.

Anti-immigration attitudes based on nativism stem from a belief that aliens pose a serious threat to America and her people and their way of life (Jaret, 1999). Americans believe that Latino immigrants do not want to learn to speak English. A 1988 survey indicated that Americans were concerned that the English language was becoming irrelevant and that the very fabric of the American culture was at risk of being destroyed (United States English, untitled letter, Washington, DC, 1988, p.1).

### **North Carolina and Immigration**

Whites, African Americans, and Native Americans have long been a numerical majority of the population of North Carolina. This has changed dramatically in the last two decades as population growth has been driven by immigration. This immigration has transformed the racial and ethnic composition of North Carolina (Johnson, Johnson-Webb, & Farrell, Jr., 1999). Latinos now comprise the largest and most visible immigrant group in North Carolina.

North Carolina had the fastest growing immigrant population of any state in America during the 1990s' ("Poll: Residents", 2003). It has three cities that are ranked in the top 10 cities in the United States for percent of total growth of Latino population (Hong, 2002). According to the 2000 census, North Carolina had an increase of 274% of its foreign-born population in the 1990s with Latinos comprising the

majority of North Carolina's foreign-born population. In 1990 the Latino population was 76,726 while in 2000 the Latino population was 378, 963. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census this was an increase of 393.9% ("Poll: Residents", 2003).

### **Attitudes of North Carolinians Toward Immigration and Latinos**

The News and Observer of Raleigh, North Carolina ("Poll: Residents", 2003) reports that the citizens of North Carolina are not used to large-scale immigration. During the industrialization period in North Carolina, unlike other states, its factories employed white sharecroppers and not immigrants from Europe. The same poll indicates that the majority of residents of North Carolina think America admits too many legal immigrants. The poll results also indicate that 75% of North Carolinians believe there are too many legal immigrants in the United States. It has been suggested that the citizens of North Carolina harbor negative feelings about the "invasion" of Latinos into North Carolina. According to a study conducted in 1996 by journalism students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolinians were found to harbor negative attitudes about the presence of Latinos in their state. The study shows that almost half (42 %) of North Carolinians polled stated they were uncomfortable with the increased numbers of Latinos. The same poll reports that 67 % of the respondents stated they thought their neighbors would not approve of Latinos moving into their neighborhood, and 55 % stated they did not feel comfortable around those who do not speak English.

Johnson, Johnson-Webb, and Farrell, Jr., (1999) report that over half of North Carolinians said they do not feel comfortable around those who do not or cannot speak English. It has been reported that 73 % feel that Mexicans who arrive in North Carolina illegally should not be allowed to remain. This is true even if they are law-abiding ("Poll: Residents", 2003)

There are ever growing numbers of Latinos settling permanently in states such as North Carolina. Murillo and Villenas (as cited in Murillo, 2001) labeled this "the New Latin Diaspora". He suggests that interaction between Latinos and the natives of these areas are often conflictual, emergent, and in transformation. The longtime residents and natives are often distrustful of their new neighbors. The majority of these Latino newcomers are subject to racism and the added problem of speaking a minority language.

### **Southern County**

Many Latinos in North Carolina move to rural areas where newcomers are unaccustomed to outsiders. Latinos are settling in areas that have not historically been home to them. The lack of knowledge or familiarity with these immigrants spawns conflictual relationships among the old and new residents. There is a great deal of tension and conflict regarding jobs, housing, schools, and welfare benefits that are the result of the Latino influx (Johnson-Webb, & Farrell Jr., 1999).

Immigrants, for the most part, are more welcomed in urban areas than in rural areas. The Penn State News ("Metropolitan Areas", 2002) reports that negative attitudes toward illegal immigrants may occur more often in

rural areas than in urban areas. This may be attributed to the residents of rural areas having less contact with immigrants.

Johnson, Johnson-Webb, and Farrell (1999) report the site of this study, in 1996, was one of five nonmetropolitan counties in the state of North Carolina with the highest concentrations of Latino births (19.9%). The southern county where this survey was completed has a population of 50,000 and can be considered a rural county based on its population. The Latino population is reported by the Chamber of Commerce in the surveyed county to be 20%, with some residents estimating the Latino population to be 30% or more.

The participants were those individuals who consented to complete the survey. Therefore the study used a convenience sample. They were residents of the small southern county chosen for this study. The participants were recruited from a community college, civic clubs, fraternal lodges, and businesses located in the county.

Participants in this study consisted of 173 individuals (88 men, 85 women). There were 137 whites, 31 African Americans, 3 Asian Americans, and 2 Native Americans. The most frequently occurring age range was from 18-22 (N=44) with 25 participants in the age range of 48-52. The participants earned a wide range of incomes. The income ranges with the largest number of participants were those in the \$0-15000 income range (N=55) and the income range from 55001-above (N=43). Ninety-one of the participants were married while 63 were single. The occupational group most represented by the participants was the professional group (N=90) with the blue collar (N=39) and the student group (N=33)

representing the next largest groups. The majority of the participants resided in the surveyed county for five years or less (N=37) while 30 had resided in the county for 16-20 years (N=30). A large number of the participants (N=86) reported a high school degree as their highest level of education. Forty-eight had an undergraduate degree with 20 holding a masters degree. There were two participants who were Ph.D.s and one with a J.D. degree.

A demographic questionnaire gathered information regarding age, gender, ethnicity, education, income earned, occupational classification, number of years as resident in county surveyed, and marital status.

### **Attitude Survey**

Each participant completed a survey on attitudes toward Latinos. The author developed the survey, which contained 28 items. The participants answered the survey questions using a Likert-type scale. The scale was as follows: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=undecided; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Attitudes toward Latinos were measured using a series of questions presented to participants. The participants were asked to indicate whether they thought Latinos were "inferior", "discriminated against", "should have the same rights as American citizens", "should learn how to speak English", "are a decent set of people", "be encouraged to leave the county and go back to where they came from", "are unpleasant people", "are no worse than other people", "can't be trusted", "are a nuisance to society", "break the law more than other groups in

the town and county," "are the cause of the increased drug problem in the county", "I would be comfortable if my child dated a Latino", "I would be comfortable if my child married a Latino", "the borders from Mexico to the United States should be closed", "our taxes should help Latinos residing illegally in the United States", "children of Latinos who are born in the United States should be made citizens", "Latinos should be eligible for welfare", "Latinos are causing unemployment problems by taking all the jobs" Latinos are hard workers", "I would be upset if a Latino family moved next door to me", and "It would be alright if a Latino family became members of my church".

The participants were also asked questions concerning the responsibility of Latinos for their own problems, if America would be better off if Latinos moved back to their country of origin, can Latinos be trusted, and did the county surveyed benefit from Latinos presence.

The survey questions were intended to address the many concerns the literature suggests has been the attitudes of Americans of Americans toward immigrants. These concerns, as mentioned previously in this paper, include increased unemployment caused by immigration, the increased crime rate, immigrants taking advantage of our social welfare system, and threats to social and cultural components of the American way of life.

## Results

The results of the survey suggest that the participants had positive attitudes toward Latinos for most of the situations presented to them in the survey. The participants were positive toward

Latinos in the following areas: "Latinos are inferior to Americans" (30% strongly disagreed; 45% disagreed); "Latinos are unpleasant people" (19% strongly disagreed; 54% disagreed); "Latinos are no worse than other people" (51% agreed; 18% strongly agreed); "Latinos are a nuisance to society" (18% strongly disagreed; 51% disagreed); "Latinos are hard workers" (56% agreed; 27% strongly agreed); "I don't trust Latinos" (17% strongly disagreed; 43% disagreed); "I feel uncomfortable when around Latinos" (14% strongly disagreed; 45% disagreed); "It is usually a mistake to trust a Latino person" (19% strongly disagreed; 46% disagreed); "Latinos are a decent set of people" (52% agreed; 13% strongly agreed); "Americans would be better off if all Latinos would move back to where they came from" (17% strongly disagreed; 45% disagreed); Latinos are discriminated against" (41% agreed; 14% strongly agreed); "Latinos are causing unemployment problems by taking all the jobs" (10% strongly disagreed; 42% disagreed); "I would be upset if a Latino family moved next door to me" (14% strongly disagreed; 41% disagreed), and "It would be alright if a Latino family became members of my church" (46% agreed; 27% strongly agreed). Areas where the participants were not so supportive of Latinos included: "Taking care of Latinos should be the responsibility of Americans" (46% strongly disagreed; 36% disagreed); "Our taxes should help Latinos residing illegally in the United States" (62% strongly disagreed; 24% disagreed); "Latinos should learn how to speak English" (36% agreed; 56% strongly agreed); "Latinos should be eligible for welfare" (33% strongly disagreed; 21% disagreed); "I would be

comfortable if my child dated a Latino (32% strongly disagreed; 17% disagreed); "I would be comfortable if my child married a Latino" (31% strongly disagreed; 16% disagreed), and "Latinos should have the same rights as American citizens" (23% strongly disagreed; 28% disagreed).

The participants were also divided rather evenly on some issues. These included the following: "Our community benefits from the large number of Latinos that live here" (40% strongly disagreed and disagreed; 30% strongly agreed and agreed); "The borders from Mexico to the United States should be closed" (40% strongly disagreed and disagreed; 38% strongly agreed and agreed), and "Latinos break the law in my county more than any other group" (36% strongly disagreed and disagreed; 31% strongly agreed and agreed).

One interesting aspect of the results was the "undecided" responses". The participants were given the opportunity to answer "undecided" on any of the survey questions. The undecided responses occurred more frequently from questions regarding child dating or marrying a Latino, should the borders be closed, the benefits of Latinos to the community, and the trusting of Latinos. The largest "undecided" responses were in the areas of crime (32%) and the benefit Latinos are to the community (30%).

The results indicate that the participants had more concerns with Latinos as regards welfare, the reluctance to support Latinos who are not citizens of the United States, the opinion that Latinos should learn the English language, the belief that Latinos should not have the same rights as Americans citizens, and the reluctance to accept Latinos socially such as dating or

marrying members of their family. These concerns are supported in the literature (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Pavalko, 1980; de Haymes, Kilty, and Segal, 2000).

The participants were supportive, however, of Latinos in the areas of trust, being pleasant people, the benefits they bring to the community, being accepted as members of the community in some regards such as joining churches, the belief that Latinos are not inferior to Americans, are a decent group of people and no worse than Americans, and are not a nuisance to society. These attitudes toward Latinos contradict results from earlier studies (Jaret, 1999; Johnson, Jr., Johnson-Webb and Johnson, 1999).

### **Limitations**

A convenience sample was used for this study. Therefore it is possible that the results of the study may not generalize to the population. The use of an "undecided" response in the survey allowed some participants to not have to commit to a best answer. Further research would be better served by omitting the "undecided" response from the survey.

As the number of immigrants entering the United States increases each year, many social workers will practice in settings that serve this population. It is estimated that by 2040, immigrants and refugees will account for over one-quarter of the population of America. To effectively work with immigrants, social workers must acquire a specialized knowledge of the many and unique issues of immigrants, both legal and illegal. (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002).

One such issue is the attitude one has toward immigrants, both legal and illegal. This is especially true for Latino

immigrants as they are the fastest growing immigrant group in America.

Attitudes determine the social expectations and treatment granted a person. Social workers must recognize the impact negative attitudes can have toward a group of individuals, such as Latinos, and attempt to change those attitudes from negative to positive. Involving non-Latinos in activities that will promote contact between them and Latinos may accomplish the fostering of more positive attitudes among diverse groups. Educating non-Latinos about the trials and tribulations Latinos face in the United States may also develop positive attitudes toward Latino immigrants.

America is experiencing a social, political, and economic change as a result of immigration from Latino counties. This change can be positive or it can be one that has negative consequences. Social workers can help ensure the change is a positive one.

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