



Building relationships and facilitating immigrant community integration: An evaluation of a Cultural Navigator Program[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Despite the long history of immigration in the United States, communities around the country struggle to integrate newcomers into the economic, cultural, and political spheres of society. Utilizing results from the program evaluation of one public library's Cultural Navigator Program, the authors illustrate how communities and public institutions can promote integration and relationship-building between newly arrived immigrants and long-time residents. Existing social networks within receiving communities, conceptualized in this article as social capital, were leveraged to build capacity among newly arrived immigrants and foster inclusivity and integration at the community level. As a place of intervention, public libraries are suggested as a safe and shared space where community integration can be fostered. Insights derived from the evaluation inform a discussion on engaging approaches to immigrant integration. Lessons learned and recommendations for program evaluators and administrators are provided.

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The immigrant population in the United States has increased from 7.9 percent (9.6 million) in 1990 to 13 percent (40 million) in 2010, and is expected to grow to 19 percent of the U.S. population by 2050 (Passel & D'Veira, 2008; United States Census Bureau, 2010). Contemporary immigration trends illustrate that newcomers originate from a wide range of countries and settle in nontraditional destination communities in addition to historically established "gateway" states such as California, New York, Texas, and Florida (Walters & Trevelyan, 2011).

Despite the long history of immigration in the United States, communities of all sizes struggle to integrate newcomers into the economic, cultural, and political spheres of society. For immigrants, adjusting to life in a new country is often challenging, as they face a multitude of barriers to integration including language and cultural differences (Martone, Zimmerman, Vidal de Haymes, & Lorentzen, 2014). Integration, with its emphasis on the incorporation of differences, addresses these challenges by

facilitating greater information-sharing between immigrants and the receiving communities in which they settle (Jimenez, 2011). The benefits of integration are numerous, including increased access to information, resources, and services (Jimenez, 2011; Rubaii-Barrett, 2009).

This article presents a process and outcome evaluation of a Cultural Navigator Program (CNP) which aimed to facilitate integration through relationship-building between receiving community members and newly arrived immigrants residing in the U.S. for three years or fewer. The authors illustrate how social networks, relationship-building, and trust, conceptualized in this article as social capital, were leveraged and extended to immigrant newcomers through the pairing of receiving community volunteers, known as Cultural Navigators, with recently arrived immigrants. A brief description of the CNP model is provided.

Insights derived from the program evaluation inform a discussion on approaches to integration and illustrate how safe and shared spaces like public libraries can meet the needs of diverse communities by providing a setting for socio-cultural learning and support. The authors conclude that the CNP is an intervention which can facilitate integration and supportive community networks for newly arrived immigrants through deliberate and systematic relationship building between

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immigrants and receiving community members. The article concludes with lessons learned and recommendations for researchers evaluating similar programs and for administrators interested in developing and implementing a CNP.

1. Literature review

Scholars have traditionally approached the interactions and relationship between immigrants and their receiving communities through the lens assimilation and multiculturalism theoretical constructs (Gans, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008). Assimilation theory explores the process through which immigrants relinquish their native culture and identities in order to assimilate into the mainstream culture of their receiving society. In contrast, multiculturalism articulates and explores a process of mutual transformation and adaptation among both immigrants and the receiving society (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008).

Scholars have explored the process of immigrant adaptation through the concepts of *place* and *belonging*, looking specifically at how immigrants and receiving communities understand each other (Hiebert and Ley, 2003; Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008). From this perspective, *place* is seen as the arena where people of all ages learn to negotiate with others and create a sense of belonging, or socially recognized membership. Assessing the negotiation of space and belonging among immigrants is helpful in understanding elements of exclusion and privilege often associated with place building and integration (Hiebert and Ley, 2003; Massey & Denton, 1993).

1.1. Social capital

Social capital literature has explored immigrant integration using concepts of social networks and trust to analyze immigrant-receiving community interactions and factors associated with positive relations (Portes & Rivas, 2011; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Social capital is a nonmonetary source of knowledge, power, and influence. Whereas physical capital refers to material objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, “social capital refers to connections among individuals, social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). At the community level, social capital is a collective good or resource that supports collective problem-solving and increases community capacity (Putnam, 2000).

Three dimensions of social capital exist – bonding, bridging, and linking – representing different types of relationships between members of a shared social network (Woolcock, 1998). These dimensions of social capital have been used to describe the interactions within immigrant communities and their outward relations with receiving communities (Briggs, 1998; Portes & Rivas, 2011; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993).

Bonding social capital refers to relationships formed with one’s own extended family or immediate network. Members of these tight-knit networks provide each other with information and resources necessary for getting by in their day-to-day lives. These types of relationships are often present within immigrant enclaves, where members provide and receive assistance or information from one another. As Martone et al. (2014) found, “immigrants of an enclave may promote self-employment through the creation of small businesses supported by the circulation of information and monetary resources within the enclave” (p. 304).

Bridging social capital refers to relationships formed with those outside one’s immediate social network – or in the case of immigrants, connections to members of the broader communities in which they settle. These types of relationships provide individuals with access to a wider range of resources and information, including economic and employment opportunities

(Hutchinson & Vidal, 2004; McGrath, 2010; Zhang, Anderson, & Zhan, 2011). Briggs (1998) found that African-American adolescents with higher levels of bridging social capital, including networks of individuals outside of their ethnic enclave, had access to more information regarding employment opportunities.

Linking social capital represents relationships formed with institutions or people in positions of power, such as community-based organizations or political bodies (Fox, 1996). Relationship-building between those in positions of power and community members, especially traditionally marginalized members, allows for the pooling of resources, information, and knowledge, increasing problem-solving capacities within a community (Thomas and Medina, 2008; Fox, 1996). Lang and Novy (2014) found that housing cooperatives serving as intermediaries helped link community residents to urban housing policy makers. Such connections increased community participation in decision-making processes and brought residents’ ideas and resources to the attention of public decision-makers.

1.2. Immigrant integration

Stemming from the theoretical frames of multiculturalism and social capital, immigrant integration has been conceptualized as the real-world process through which immigrants become accepted in a society, both as individuals and as groups. At the local level, immigrant integration is the foundation for community cohesion and provides immigrants with access to information and resources, improved health, and increased sense of community well-being (Diwan & Jonnalagadda, 2001; Nash, Wong, & Trlin, 2006).

In addition to social benefits, economic and demographic statistics suggest that the net effect of immigration is to increase national income (Putnam, 2007). Local economies often improve when receiving communities and immigrants support one another’s businesses and foster diverse opportunities for economic development (Anetomang, 2009). Immigrant workers provide greater labor market flexibility and allow employers to capitalize on rapidly emerging economic opportunities (Nelson, Nelson, & Trautman, 2014). Conversely, local economies struggle when immigrant workers leave, housing units are vacated, and businesses are forced to close as a result of poor community relations and a lack of immigrant integration.

Barriers to immigrant integration. Acknowledging the benefits of immigrant integration, receiving communities and immigrants alike face many challenges related to the process (May et al., 2015; Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008). For immigrants, adjusting to life in an adopted community is both socially and psychologically challenging. Immigrants face the reality of having left behind what was familiar and known in their home countries while encountering new societal norms and customs in receiving communities (Bhattacharya, 2011; Portes & Rivas, 2011; Segal, Mayadas, & Elliott, 2010; Yeh, Ching, Okubo, & Luthar, 2007). Immigrants face a multitude of barriers to integration, including language proficiency, lack of knowledge regarding local community programs and organizations, discrimination, stigma, mistrust, and low socioeconomic status (Carmona, 2013; May et al., 2015; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Stewart et al., 2002). Nelson and Hiemstra (2008) identified poverty, low-wage and insecure employment, social exclusivity, racism, and white privilege within receiving communities as major obstacles to social belonging and place-making among new immigrants.

At the community level, integration is challenged by negative social categorizations and intergroup relations between immigrant and receiving community populations. These co-occurring processes impact receiving community residents and immigrants’ perceptions of and willingness to interact with one another.

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