

Community, Social Networks, and Support

The Case of Mexican Migrant Women in Boulder County

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2 April, 2018

Introduction

The history of immigration between Mexico and the United States is long and complex. For decades, structural forces have influenced the movement of people across countries, and that in turn has influenced the economy, politics, and other aspects of the relationship between the two neighboring countries. However, there is another side of it: a more human and interpersonal side of the relationship between Mexico and the United States. This facet of the relationship is characterized by the social connections that form between individuals. I am interested in understanding these connections for my study because they have the potential to create resourceful and supportive networks. These relations develop when people live, work, and socialize in the same place—regardless of national origin. I am also interested in how individuals maintain these connections across borders and how women, in particular, view those connections as networks that facilitate access to resources.

Research has shown that social ties and networks are important for all individuals. They can provide emotional support in times of distress and economic support in case of an emergency (Granovetter, 1973; Small, 2017). Connecting with a variety of strong and supportive social ties is particularly important for immigrants, as they can provide information on how to navigate U.S. society. Networks can increase their access to employment and educational opportunities, and they can help immigrants overcome other barriers such as learning English (Gigendil and Stolle, 2009; Grey and Woodrick, 2005).

Gender adds another layer of complexity when talking about the importance of social networks for immigrants, in particular for Latina women, who face more risks and vulnerabilities compared to men (Domínguez and Watkins, 2003; Radey, 2015; Villalón, 2010). For example, in the case of low-income Latina mothers, researchers argue that having the support from family and friends is a main component of their social networks (Domínguez and Watkins, 2003). According to other research, economically disadvantaged mothers report fewer people and smaller networks to count on for financial and emotional support. Mothers of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Hispanic descent, for example, show lower perceived support than non-Hispanic Whites (Radey, 2015).

Gendered experiences like these inspired me to learn about Mexican migrant women and their lives in the Boulder area—particularly in relation to social networks and support. Given how the different intersections of identity shape immigration experiences, integration into the United States, and access to resources, I wanted to understand the way social networks influence the lived experiences of different women.

Literature Review

General Benefits of Networks

Research on social networks has found a variety of benefits that come with belonging to different social groups. For example, maintaining both strong and weak ties increases the

ability to access resources, information, and various forms of support (Granberry and Marcelli, 2007; Hagan, 1998; Liu, 2013; Wilson, 1998). Strong ties are defined as links between close friends and/or kin, whereas weak ties refer to the relationships between acquaintances (Granovetter, 1973). Both types of ties can increase information flows and social mobility opportunities for individuals. Many authors report that belonging to voluntary organizations provides a set of potential contacts that can offer social support in case of distress. In particular, it has been noted that life-changing events create stress, which may be alleviated by the support of weak and strong ties in the community (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1982; Small, 2017).

Immigration and Networks

In relation to the process of migration, social networks facilitate incorporation and provide social capital to immigrant communities in the United States (Curran and Saguy, 2001; Garcia, 2005; Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2003; Wilson, 1998). The history of migration from Mexico to the United States is long and varied. For many decades, both countries have been exchanging commodities, resources, and labor—in particular, labor that comes from Mexico to the United States. This ongoing relationship not only shapes the shared economy but also the cultural and ideological landscapes of each country (Cerruti and Massey, 2001; Singer and Massey, 1998; Massey et al., 2002). Immigration is an essential part of this exchange, as the movement of people facilitates the movement of ideas and resources.

Focusing on the migration patterns between Mexico and the U.S. provides insight into the ways people connect with and support each other at a transnational level—particularly when it comes to understanding how social networks operate and the role they play in immigrants’ relationships in Mexico and the United States.

By developing connections with their kin, coworkers, and friends, Mexican immigrants can access information, resources, and support that facilitate the arrival and integration into the country of destination (Hagan, 1998; Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2003). Moreover, having strong social networks can also help navigate social institutions and structural policies. Through the use of strong and weak social ties, immigrants can increase their access to different job opportunities and information about government services and benefits (Gigendil and Stolle, 2009; Livingston, 2006). Developing strong social ties is particularly important for Mexican immigrants, as dense networks have the ability to provide more social capital and upward mobility to their members (Wilson, 1998).

In terms of kinship networks, family ties are much more likely to be of the same racial, ethnic and religious groups, which can limit the access to information and resources (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001). In her research about Mexican-American and Anglo-American families, Keefe found that Mexican-Americans have larger personal networks and visit more family members on a regular basis. Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans have comparatively large local family networks, in comparison to Anglo-Americans. Mex-

icans—and Latinos in general—tend to rely heavily on their family ties when they seek support (Keefe, 1984).

The makeup of social support networks is also influenced by ethnicity and nativity. Foreign-born Mexican and non-Mexican Latinos report higher levels of support from family members, whereas non-Latino Whites rely more heavily on their friends for support. Overall, Anglos seem to perceive their friendship ties as more supportive than their family ties, in comparison to foreign-born Mexicans. Both first and second generation Latinos seem to regard their friendship ties as less supportive than Anglos do (Almeida et al., 2009).

The literature shows that social networks are an intrinsic part of the migratory experience for Mexicans. Mexican immigrants have diverse social networks—a variety of strong and weak social ties—that shape relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances, and their ability to access resources. Given how multifaceted and diverse the Mexican migratory experience is, I chose to focus on the experience of Mexican migrant women in order to explore how gender further influences and shapes the experience of immigrants living in the United States.

Gender, Immigration, and Social Networks

Although social networks provide a variety of emotional and economic support, gender, race, and immigration experience can result in different network structures. Not everyone

benefits equally from the advantages of social networks—immigrants, for example, tend to rely more heavily on their networks for support (Almeida et al., 2009; Boyd, 1989; Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2003; Livingston, 2006; Wilson, 1998). The literature on Mexican migration and gender emphasizes how gender roles and expectations affect migrant networks, personal agency, and gender relations. Societal expectations about gender performance and conformity influence the experiences of migrant women from Mexico. From making the decision to migrate to managing their social networks years after their arrival, women weigh and evaluate the ways gender affects their everyday lives. Processes, motivations, and social norms of migration are different between men and women, which are aspects that make patterns of migration distinctly gendered (Boyd, 1989; Currán and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003; Domínguez, 2011; Liu, 2013). Several authors have discussed how gender relations change after migrating to the United States, particularly when it comes to balancing work and family duties. Women tend to rely more on their husbands for support after migration, as a mechanism for coping with the difficulties that come from moving to another country. Hirsch, meanwhile, states that both women and men see more egalitarian family structures as a modern ideal (Domínguez, 2011; Hirsch, 1999).

The fact that the composition of social networks varies by gender and immigration experience influences both the access to job opportunities and the gender relations that develop in the workplace. Exclusion from high-ranking positions in work organizations prevent white women and people of color from forming ties with powerful network members (Mcguire,

2000, 2002). Moreover, despite the fact that migrant women are more than twice as likely to work as their counterparts in Mexico, the jobs that are readily available to them are usually in the informal labor sector. These low skilled positions, often related to domestic work, can actually perpetuate occupational sex segregation and a continued gender gap in labor force outcomes (Campbell, 1988; Hagan, 1998; Livingston, 2006; Parrado and Flippen, 2005). While the way in which women experience work and labor can entrench gender norms, it is also true that the act of entering the workforce generates social capital for many women. This, in turn, allows them to challenge these norms and expectations at home (Mummert, 2010). Increased social capital allows women to negotiate access to resources from a more favorable position and provides more leeway in balancing their many social roles (Domínguez, 2011).

Several authors have also pointed out how personal agency is assessed and acted upon during the migration experience and integration to U.S. society—migrating can be an opportunity for women to assert their agency and negotiate their social positions. Many women choose destinations with female networks to assure access to information and assistance in various aspects of adjusting to life in the U.S. (Davis and Winters, 2001). With attaining higher social status and respect as one of their goals, migrant women create symbolic capital through their employment experiences—whether they are formal or informal.

The intersection of gender and immigration status can put Latina immigrants in more vulnerable and risky positions, compared to men. In particular, research has shown that networks tend to have a homogenous structure based on sociodemographic characteristics. Homophily—the fact that similar traits influence the structure of social networks—limits the formation and the size of individual’s social networks (McPherson et al., 2001). In the case of Mexican immigrants, research has shown that women’s networks are not as diverse when compared to men’s. Mexican men tend to develop more relationships outside of the family, particularly in the workplace, whereas Mexican women’s networks are delimited—and restricted—by family ties (Granberry and Marcelli, 2007). Moreover, research has shown that Latina immigrants have to manage a variety of complications in order to access resources. These bureaucratic hurdles can be exacerbated by gender and domestic violence, creating a particular experience of migration that is specific to women (Villalón, 2010). Gender plays a central role in the composition of migration flows and profoundly impacts the public and private lives of women—from labor participation, to religiosity and marital roles (Pedraza, 1991). Although in many instances women start working to support the family and complement their husbands’ income, their familial role as caregivers is expected to continue. While migrant women may contest power relationships in marriage, it is not clear if migration challenges these relationships and ideologies (Malkin, 2004).

Previous literature on gender, Mexican immigration, and social networks has focused on aspects of the migratory experience that are particularly gendered. Research has paid

more attention to the migratory experiences of men, especially in terms of understanding their decision to move, the benefits of their social networks, their access to employment opportunities, and other structural barriers that men face—such as racism and English proficiency. Less attention has been paid to the importance of social networks for Mexican women who have migrated to the United States, especially in relation to understanding how their support network might be scattered between two countries. My study, in particular, touches not only on the configuration of Mexican women’s social networks, but also in their perception of community, support, and apparent access to resources—both in the country of origin and the country of destination.

Methods

Population of Study

For this study I interviewed ten Mexican migrant women and seven U.S.-born white women. Conducting a qualitative interview study provides detailed descriptions of the ways participants see and understand the world (Weiss, 1995), which is particularly important when studying how women perceive their social networks and their access to resources. Because I was interested in all stages of the immigration experience as well as the different personal networks that develop after migrating from Mexico to the United States, I chose to focus on Mexican migrant women who have resided in the U.S. for at least a year. Although

all my participants were from different states in Mexico and from all over the United States, they all currently reside and work in either Boulder or Lafayette.

Regarding my immigrant sample, for the purpose of controlling for only two main variables (nationality and race), I focused particularly on immigrant women who have some sort of documentation—in my sample, I included individuals with permanent residency, work visas, or who are naturalized citizens. The ages of the Mexican participants range from 30 to 58 years old. Five of my participants are married and have children, three are single with no children, and two have children and are currently single. Year of entry into the United States ranges from 1973 to 2017, with most participants arriving first to other states before moving to Colorado. The level of integration into U.S. society varies depending on different experiences, so a diverse sample—in terms of race, ethnicity, and age—allowed me to understand how social networks are both maintained in the country of origin and created in the country of destination.

As a way of understanding what may be unique to Mexican migrant women's experiences, I chose to include a comparison group of U.S.-born white women who also reside in the Boulder area. Comparison groups allow researchers to understand if the phenomena they are studying is in fact more prevalent in their sample than among people who are not in that situation (Weiss, 1995). Having a comparison group allowed me to draw similarities and differences, further informing the ways migrant women create and develop social networks

depending on their nationality and race/ethnicity. Moreover, my U.S.-born participants also provided insights in the way women negotiate their roles, responsibilities, and expectations in relation to social networks, family ties, and their access to resources.

The inclusion criteria for the group of U.S.-born white women were mainly their nationality (born in the United States) and their race (they had to self-identify as white). I interviewed seven white-identified individuals who currently live in Boulder, and their ages range from 21 to 71. Three of them are married and have children, three of them are single with no children, and one is married and has no children.

The educational level for all participants in the immigrant women group is varied and ranges from middle school to doctoral degrees. On the other hand, all of the U.S.-born white women have a Bachelors degree or above. Having a varied sample for both groups allowed me to understand different experiences based on their age, ethnicity, and immigration experience; moreover, it allowed me to compare and contrast how women perceive social support and community engagement based on their personal identities.

Site Description

Boulder County, Colorado, has a primarily white population. As of 2016, the U.S. census reported that 78.2% of the population identifies as non-Hispanic white, in comparison to 13.8% of Hispanics/Latinos. Given that a high percentage of the population is white, it

makes the Boulder area a different region compared to others cities in the United States that have larger immigrant niches and populations. The characteristics of this population make it a unique place to study the social networks of Mexican migrant women in particular, as social interactions and the creation of networks are influenced by race, gender, and the particular demographic characteristics of different places. All the women who participated in the study (both Mexican and U.S.-born) have stabilized their residency in the area—they have lived in either Boulder or Lafayette for at least a year, and plan to continue doing so in the near future. Most of them have spent several years in other regions of Colorado and the United States. Time of residency in the Boulder area (and in the United States in general) mattered for my study, as spending more time in a particular place allows women to form and develop stronger ties in the community—in comparison to someone who has just moved in to a specific community.

Method Process

For this study, I used a convenience sample of ten Mexican migrant women and seven U.S.-born white women. For initial responses, I relied on my previous connections with Mexican women in the community. Those connections allowed me to contact participants in the Boulder area, primarily in Boulder and Lafayette, who later put me in contact with their friends and acquaintances, illustrating a snowball recruitment method. Contacting members of their own networks provides researchers with meaningful connections and provides access

to certain research sites and informants (Lofland et al., 2006). Moreover, convenience sampling is useful when focusing in particular populations, such as immigrants (Weiss, 1995). In my study, starting with my own connections and using snowball sampling allowed me to understand the structure of the social networks of my participants, how they are formed, and how they involve both weak and strong ties. Snowballing allowed me to further understand the structure of social networks, how they are formed, and how they involve both weak and strong ties.

I prepared a set of questions that touched on their perceptions and experiences around community, and created a particular set of questions for the Mexican participants to specifically learn how their migration experience has shaped their social networks and how it informs the ways they perceive support. For that particular set of experiences, only individuals who were born in Mexico and had later moved to the United States are included in the study. I asked them about their social networks, family ties, friendships, religious association, and the different people they reach out to when they seek support. I conducted the interviews at the home of the respondents or at a location of their preference. Although I approached the interview in a semi-structured way, during the interview I adapted the questions to individuals' particular narratives and to the flow of the conversation. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to approach the world from the participant's perspective; adapting the language and using unscheduled probes permits comparisons across interviews and the opportunity to explore certain topics and responses in more detail (Berg and Lune, 2012).

Each recorded interview lasted approximately one hour, and I conducted the interviews in the language respondents showed being most comfortable speaking. All the interviews with the Mexican participants were conducted in Spanish, which allowed for a better exchange of information since Spanish is their native language. I later translated those interview to English. All the interviews with U.S.-born participants were conducted in English.

Positionality

My positionality as a bilingual Mexican student living in the United States allowed me to connect with the participants of both groups in different and meaningful ways. Being able to conduct the interviews in Spanish with my Mexican participants created an environment of trust and camaraderie, and allowed my participants to speak the language they feel most comfortable with. For the same reasons, it was important to conduct the interviews with my U.S.-born participants in English. Proficiency in both English and Spanish allowed me take on an “insider” participant researcher role. An insider role can be helpful in creating connections, as individuals tend to feel more comfortable talking to a member of their own group (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Moreover, insiders have the advantage of knowing potential participants and members of the group to be studied, and they know who to ask or tell first (Lofland et al., 2006). This was particularly important for the connections I developed with my Mexican participants. An insider role—as a Mexican woman myself—allowed me to develop trust and rapport with the women I interviewed on the basis of our shared

cultural experiences. I also experienced the role of “insider” with my U.S.-born participants. Speaking English, understanding social roles, and my role as a college student allowed me to connect with my U.S.-born respondents regardless of our cultural backgrounds.

Findings

Emotional Support and Increased Access to Resources

In this section, I will highlight the components of my three main findings: the importance of family ties for Mexican women, the ways community and social networks develop, and how different intersections of identity (in this case, gender and national origin) create both benefits and constraints for women when seeking resources through their networks.

I begin with an analysis of how my respondents connect with their families, and I go on to explore how family ties influence the ways my participants reach out to their kin or friends for support. Next, I explain how community and social networks develop after living in the Boulder area for several years, focusing on the similarities and differences between Mexican and U.S.-born women. In particular, I pay attention to the ways they develop social networks in the Boulder area. Lastly, I explain how gender, identity, and English proficiency play a role in navigating access to resources and their responsibilities in the home as mothers and caregivers.

Connection and Support: The Importance of Family Ties for Mexican Immigrants

Family members in the United States and in Mexico are the main sources of support that my Mexican participants reported. However, the role their family plays in their lives differ depending on geographic proximity and the type of support people seek in different situations. All of my Mexican participants have strong connections with their family members who still reside in Mexico, and they are also in touch with the relatives who have also migrated to the United States. Siblings, parents, and partners are the family members with whom the participants first migrated to the United States, and they are also the closest ties they have to ask for help and support—in terms of both geographical distance and emotional intimacy. Proximity with family members is important when it comes to receiving economic assistance and emotional support, particularly after migrating. When asked about their families, most of my Mexican participants talked about the family members who live near them as the first ties they would go to for economic support; family members in Mexico are usually reached out to when my participants seek emotional support.

One of my participants, Nadia, described how she has stayed connected with her numerous family ties in both countries, and how she reaches out to them differently depending on the support she needs. She is forty years old and moved to the United States with a previous

partner in 1995, and settled in Chicago. A year later, Nadia, her sister, and her brother-in-law arranged everything for her mother to move to the U.S. as well. Since then, Nadia's mom has always lived with her—and in fact, they work together in the same place. She now lives in Lafayette with her two daughters, and two of her siblings live near by with their respective families. This constant proximity with her family has allowed her to reach out to them for support; for example, her mom helps her take care of her daughters, and her sister has provided economic aid in times of distress.

Mariana, another participant from Mexico who came to the U.S. in 1990, shared with me the close relationship she has with family members who reside in Wisconsin. They are the first people she would invite to family gatherings and parties, and they talk over the phone quite often:

“In the United States, I only have other family members living in Wisconsin. I talk mostly with my aunt, and we talk over the phone every three or four weeks. When my son was born, I invited her to be his godmother.”

Mariana works to maintain a strong connection with her family members who also reside in the United States. In her case, her *comadre* in the U.S. provides another source of support and connection to Mexico, and she is also the family member who is closest to her in terms of distance. Mariana's case illustrates the arguments of previous literature that shows that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans tend to lean more on family ties for support than U.S.-born whites do (Almeida et al., 2009; Boyd, 1989; Keefe, 1984).

Although relationships that are geographically close matter for the overall wellbeing of all my participants, Mexican women also expressed the importance of maintaining deep and meaningful connections with the family members who live in the country of origin. In particular, my participants from Mexico expressed a strong and significant connection with their mothers. In my sample, most Mexican daughters and mothers stay in touch after migration, usually talking about two times a week—sometimes even more frequently. Despite the physical distance, my Mexican participants have found ways to stay in touch with their mothers and other family members through the use of technology (mostly with phone calls and texts; sometimes video calls), which provides emotional support and connection. In addition to staying in touch with her family in Wisconsin, Mariana also makes an effort to talk frequently with her mother and sister, who still live in Mexico. Because of her job obligations, she hasn't been able to visit them in the last few years. However, between phone calls and visits from her husband, they have been able to talk quite often:

“L: And with your family in Mexico? How do you stay in touch?

M: I talk to my mom two or three times a week. I call her at home, because she doesn't have a cellphone or a computer to do video calls. Last year my husband went to visit her and we were able to see each other through my daughter's phone. My sister lives with her, so we always talk if she's around when I call my mom. This is my way of staying in touch with them, because sometimes it is hard.”

Throughout the interview, Mariana shared how important it is for her to maintain family connections in both Mexico and the United States. Her husband and her two older daughters are the people she would call first in case of an emergency and with whom she stays

in touch every day—her nuclear family represents the closest kin ties she has in terms of geographical proximity and intimacy, which is a theme that came up in all my interviews. Both Mexican and U.S.-born women described their nuclear family ties as their strongest and most meaningful social ties, particularly in terms of economic support (for example, sharing house expenses with their husbands) and emotional support (for everyday life, accidents, emergencies, or other difficulties). However, borders and geographical distance add a layer of complexity to the social networks of my Mexican participants, as the dynamics of those relationships are influenced by their migration experience. For Mariana and my other Mexican participants, maintaining those relationships via phone—and social media—is important, since moving to the United States has limited their chances to see their mothers, siblings, and other family members in person.

In other instances, the mothers—and other relatives—of my Mexican participants also live in the United States, like in the case of Valeria. Valeria is a mother of two who moved to the U.S. in 2007 following other members of her family. Both of her parents migrated together to the United States before her, and these days they live close enough that her mother can help take care of her two kids while she and her husband work. Nadia is another example of the importance of this proximity. Her mother currently lives with her, and she helped her raise her daughters after Nadia left an abusive partner. She described their relationship as crucial for her integration into U.S. society:

“If my mom weren’t here with me, I wouldn’t know what to do. She is every-

thing! If I didn't have my mom, who would help me? I would be all alone, especially since I'm a single mom. But my mom has always been there, she helps me a lot. She and I have always been very close. I've always been the one who has helped her, and she has helped me. We have that type of connection. The day my mom is gone, everything is going to fall apart, because we are one and the same. We've never been apart, only for a few months when I first came to the United States, but then she was able to come here soon after."

Nadia's mom has helped her by taking care of her daughters, in addition to other forms of support: they split domestic responsibilities, and she provides emotional support in times of difficulty. In my sample, fathers were not mentioned as often as mothers. Family dynamics for my Mexican participants were varied and complex: in some cases they were raised by both parents; in others, their parents separated; in others, they were raised by one parent. My participants did not dwell on the role their fathers played in their lives, but maternal figures, for all my Mexican participants, play a huge role in their social networks. Mothers represent not only a tie to one's home country, but a deeper, stronger connection to kinship ties and the way migrant women from Mexico perceive their family members as a crucial component of their support networks.

Another important aspect of the ways social network develop (in relation to family ties) is the fact that migrant women from Mexico tend take on the role of supporters themselves. Margarita, for example, goes back to her community in Mexico at least once a year and brings appliances, clothes and other goods with her to share with her friends and family in Juárez.

"L: And do you have friends in Juárez?

M: *Uuh hija*, in Juárez I have many, many friends. I'm not going to say that I'm rich, but whenever I can help, I do it. When I visit Juárez I take shoes, clothes, anything I can take, and the people I know there distribute them to whoever needs something. I like to help people."

Supporting family members in Mexico means sharing resources as well as emotional support, as Margarita's story shows. Most participants shared certain responsibilities around sending money back to their communities, being available over the phone, and sharing the capital they have with their families in Mexico. Dalia, for example, is a respondent whose sister and mother have lived in Mexico together since she moved to the U.S. in 1993. While being here, she and her husband have built a house in their hometown in Mexico—a narrative that was also expressed by several other participants. In some cases, my participants and their families invest money and resources in Mexico near where their families live—to either eventually go back or to secure economic stability. In this case, Dalia lets her mother and sister lease the house she and her husband have built, thus providing them with means to support themselves while she is here:

"I try to help my only sister whenever she needs it. I used to send her money from here to Mexico; three hundred dollars in December and another three hundred for mother's day. But my husband and I built a house there and she asked us for permission to rent it. My mom and my sister use that money for themselves. They get some income out of it and that way they don't have to depend on anyone."

As a way of supporting her family and strengthening kinship ties, Dalia has found a balance in sharing her family resources with her mother and sister—which also provides them with the means to economically support themselves. Furthermore, my participants

also shared instances in which the strength of these family ties pays off, particularly when it comes to receiving support in case of an emergency or illness. Lety, for example, is a thirty-two year old participant from Tabasco. She is one of my three Mexican respondents who live in Boulder by themselves, without any immediate or extended family living nearby. A few months ago, she went through a minor surgery and her mother came and stayed with her for a couple of weeks, helping her at home and to get around. Lety reached out to her family for support despite the distance, which came naturally for her as she has always maintained strong connections with her family in Mexico—particularly with her mom and siblings. Family ties—and specifically mother-daughter relationships, as I continued to see through my study—are vital in my Mexican participants’ lives. I found that family ties are key in facilitating their integration into the U.S.—both as companions during the migratory experience and as ties to the country of origin—and provide assistance and support in times of distress.

In contrast, my U.S.-born white participants didn’t express such a strong reliance on their family members in times of difficulty. Although they do stay in touch with their family members, they usually don’t live close to them and don’t rely much on their extended families for support. These findings tie into previous literature that has shown that Latinos and Mexicans tend to reach out to their families in case of an emergency, whereas Whites tend to turn to their friends and other social ties (Almeida et al. 2009; Keefe 1984). Joy, for example, is a U.S.-born white participant who talked about her friends as some of the

most important ties in her life. She is forty-five years old and moved to Colorado with her partner and their son just a few years ago. She shared with me that she perceives her friends as being their immediate support system:

“I think my community is who can I pick up the phone and know that whatever I need they are going to be there. And because it’s not my family, since my family is not here, then it is this next level of friendships. I was really involved in the mothers club when we lived in Sonoma. We tried to do a lot of outreach to the Hispanic community, but they’ve got their community, and the abuela is raising the baby, right? They got the multigenerational help, and even sisters will help raise the family. That doesn’t happen in this country. Maybe because we all move so much (except for some of my cousins) but most of my friends do not have family wherever I’ve moved.”

Several of my U.S.-born respondents shared the same experiences of reaching out to their friends and other clubs or organizations as a means of support, instead of relying on their families like my Mexican participants. Moreover, a couple of respondents expressed their view of what community means for other groups, especially Latinos. As Joy shared, Latinos are perceived to already have a defined set of social networks, which puts them—in some cases—beyond the reach of their own networks. This finding, in particular, illustrates the different types of networks women reach out to depending on the people they perceive to be closer to them. In the case of white U.S.-born women, distance goes beyond cultural aspects of their experience: physical distance creates a structural difference in their lives that shapes the ways they perceive and reach out to their social networks.

How Women Develop Networks and “Community”

I found two particular narratives when I asked my participants—both Mexican and U.S. born—about what community means for them and the different communities they feel they are a part of. First, we talked about what community is and the roles they think community and networks play in their lives. Secondly, I asked my participants about their friendships and acquaintances as a way of understanding how community develops. In both narratives, participants also talked about the ways they perceive their position in different communities—in terms of gender roles and their immigration experience (if applicable). I found that women reach out to different social networks depending on the type of support they need: although family ties represent a great source of support for emotional and economic issues—particularly in relation to accessing different job opportunities for Mexican women—friends and acquaintances also provide access to information and first-hand experience on how to navigate U.S. society.

There are a few common themes in my Mexican participants’ description of what community means to them; in particular, they all expressed the importance of “feeling welcomed.” My respondents described this feeling as having “open doors in the community” and being able to ask for help when their families need it. In my interview with Mariana, she shared some of the benefits of being part of the Lafayette community:

“L: Do you feel a part of a community here in Lafayette?

M: Oh yeah, I am a part of Lafayette’s community (laughs), particularly of the church community. I know a lot of people there because they also live near

me, and because I've been living here for a while now. I also participate in my kid's activities and other programs for parents.

L: So what does being part of a community feel like to you?

M: Being part of a community means a lot of open doors. For example, if I want to sell my tamales, it's easy. I just have to call [my contacts] without even having to leave my house, just like I can call people and ask for help or for anything else I might need."

Mariana has created a strong, reciprocal relation with the members of her community; she feels welcomed and integrated, and her network also provides a web of contacts for generating income.

In terms of community development, I found that community is cultivated in three particular spaces, which depend on the type of resources my participants seek: the church, their children's schools, and the occupational sector. Women interact differently with their ties depending on the type of resources they need; for example, the church offers a place to express their spirituality and their children's schools provides resources and information relevant to their education. Moreover, I found that small networks such as the ones developed in church or schools usually expand and facilitate the formation of other social ties. For example, attending mass in Spanish every Sunday allows women to connect with other people who also take zumba classes in the church, and participating in classes for parents at schools provides a setting for friendships with other moms to develop.

The church, in particular, is an important space that allows network development for my Mexican participants since most of them reported to be Catholic. The church has provided

not only a network in which spirituality can be practiced, but the members of that community also provide a source of support when emergencies or accidents happen. This was the case for Esmeralda when she had to leave the U.S. to attend her father's funeral in Mexico. She is a mother of four and came to United States in 1989. She shared with me the different ways her community at church helped her and her family overcome those family difficulties:

"L: And do you know people at church who have helped you or your family in an emergency?

E: Yes, they do help you in case of an emergency. Like when my dad passed away and I had to go to Mexico, my friends came home and supported my husband. Everyone goes to that church, but the people we are closer to are Hispanics. My husband works for the postal service, and in the church he is part of a group that organizes events for men. They also provide scholarships for students and other resources like that."

Esmeralda is truly engaged in the communities she has formed at church, and they have provided more support beyond her religiosity. She and her family have found a Hispanic community there - she takes zumba classes with other women every week, and her husband participates in the community groups they have for men. This has allowed her to create and develop a broad network of friends and acquaintances with whom she stays connected to share resources and support. In contrast to my White participants—a group in which only one individual reported to be religious—my respondents from Mexico tended to describe stronger social networks formed and develop with their religious community. Seven out of my ten respondents from Mexico self-identified as Catholic. In the case of Esmeralda, she and her family moved to Colorado seventeen years ago, and they have established their lives and social networks with many other members of their community—which meant, in

many instances, access to emotional support and other resources through their community at church. In fact, Esmeralda put me in touch with two of her Mexican friends from church who later participated in my study.

For the participants who are mothers—regardless of race/nativity—their children’s schools were also important spaces where social networks were created and developed. In the case of my Mexican participants in particular, I found that they reported higher levels of participation in programs and classes for parents after moving to Colorado. They have found different educational opportunities and resources at their kid’s schools both in Boulder and Lafayette. Involvement in these programs—which range from coffee talks, to classes on children development, to volunteer opportunities—represent the importance they place in their children’s growth and educational outcomes. In Mexico, the popular idiom “*estar al pendiente de los hijos*” denotes this particular involvement in their development. Moreover, my Mexican participants expressed higher levels of autonomy and a stronger sense of agency: accessing these resources is not only positive for their children, but for their own emotional well-being as well. Mariana, one of my Mexican participants, is deeply involved in her church community and in her kids’ school activities. She is a mother of four—two of whom already left the home and married, one who is a senior in high school, and a little girl who goes to middle school—and shared with me the many different events and activities she is currently involved in:

“L: And you have found more resources in your kids’ schools here in Colorado?
For your younger children.

M: Oh yeah, especially here in Lafayette. There are many programs my kids can sign up for, like sports or other activities they want to do after school. They also provide help with homework, and there are programs for the entire family to socialize and have fun during the summer. I know a lot about this because I'm very involved. For example, if they are promoting programs or activities at school I sign up if they look interesting, and I always go to meetings for parents because I want to learn.

L: And all of those events are in your kids' schools?

M: Yeah, in schools, or in the community. Schools send you information for activities in case you want to participate, and if they are interesting I sign up.

L: Are you involved in anything right now? Or recently involved?

M: When my daughter was still in elementary school, I used to sell nachos, fresh fruit, and other snacks after school; I proposed that idea to the school principal in order to fund raise for an ESL program. I knew several moms who were worried about the reading comprehension and writing abilities of their children, because some kids were struggling with English."

Mariana is extremely proud of her children and their accomplishments, and she has actively tried to find programs that provide information and other resources related to college opportunities, scholarships, and summer programs. Moreover, her relationship with the teachers and the principal at her daughter's school has allowed her to promote her own ideas and activities. Speaking English (an important aspect of integration that I analyze later on in the study) and participation in her kids' school has allowed Mariana to cultivate meaningful relationships that benefit her children's development. However, she is also aware of the difficulties her kids experience in school. Her youngest daughter, for example, struggles with reading comprehension and writing in a bilingual school. Because of that, Mariana has taken it upon herself to find information and services through her own networks:

"M: I went to a program called Paridad. They had a class about reading and writing comprehension, specially to understand the level your kids have. I took that class because in school meetings the teachers don't usually tell you

that.

L: So you went and asked, yourself?

M: Yes, because they explain the skill level your kid is at, and they use tables and information that are easy to understand.

L: You are really involved; you have a lot of information.

M: Yes, but that is also because I have the time. My husband says that I should open a restaurant, but I tell him I won't because I wouldn't be able to take care of my children or him! (laughs)"

Mariana spoke passionately about her children and the roles she plays in their development. She is excited about the opportunities she has found in those programs, since they have provided resources and information she can bring home and share with her grandchildren as well. However, balancing responsibilities, time, resources, and gender expectations is a particular theme that came up several times with my Mexican participants, and that showed both benefits and constraints when accessing resources.

In contrast, community for my U.S.-born white participants was described more in terms of social networks and "groups." The word 'group' was used to describe social ties composed by friends and acquaintances, sometimes in relation to hobbies or other voluntary associations that my participants felt a part of. I argue social networks tend to be more clear if words such as 'group' are used to define them, since it is easier to associate a group with a feeling of community and belonging. Juliet, for example, is a U.S.-born participant from Nebraska who has lived in Colorado for several years. She is currently retired, and she and her husband have the chance to practice several hobbies and volunteer in different organizations. She shared what she sees as her stronger social networks:

“I don’t really consider myself a part of any particular community. I have friends with a lot of different kinds of people, so I don’t think of myself as being a part of any one group or anything like that. As far as groups go, I would say that the people who share the interests I’m pursuing in my retirement would each say that I’m a member of that group: non-profits, my card playing group, mahjong group, the city government group, my extended family group, and then all of these girlfriends of different ages.”

Most of my U.S.-born white participants shared similar feelings in relation to community: friendships and associations with other groups of people (or organizations) were some of the relationships that were constantly mentioned in terms of community and support. In contrast to my Mexican participants, who see their family ties as their main relationships of support, white participants tend to feel more identified with ‘groups’ of friends—and tend to rely more on them for support.

Moreover, I found that educational attainment also plays a role in the ways women perceive “community,” particularly for my white participants. Molly, for example, is a fifty-year-old program manager and entrepreneur who works from home. This allows her to have more flexibility in terms of caring for her three young children, especially since her husband also works full time. When I asked her what community meant for her, she describe it as follows:

“Community is something more personal and familial to me. . . it’s something that my husband and I talk about quite a bit. For me community means something I can step back to when I go home, and they are people who have known me since I was a child. Community are those folks who make a place feel more like home. . . there is also a term that has been popping up to me more in the past year. . . the community of practice. People that do similar sort of things. For many years, my community was very much my colleagues since I was working as much as 80 hours a week for several years. Now I would say that the community of practice are folks that I’m still in touch with and

who I know through my past work. They are not very many, it's a small field. It's a sort of a global community that has continued to work on these issues. Primarily the network is through social media."

Molly and other U.S.-born participants saw their colleagues as a group or community they feel part of, in contrast with my Mexican participants, who talked about their coworkers as their friends. For this particular difference, I argue that educational attainment is key for understanding the ways my participants talked about their communities. All of my U.S.-born white respondents have a Bachelors degree (or are in the process of finishing it) or above, and have experienced the employment sector in different ways: as teachers, professors, social workers, entrepreneurs, and more. The workplace, for my white participants, was described as a tangible place that relates to the development of their career, and that has allowed for communities of colleagues to develop. In contrast, the educational attainment of my Mexican participants is more varied. For example, three of my respondents were only able to study for a few years in elementary school, two finished high school, two have master's degrees, and two are currently working towards their Ph.D. These different experiences have influenced the types of job opportunities they have access to, and in turn, that informs their perceptions of what community is and how it develops. In contrast with my U.S.-born participants, who see their colleagues and the workplace as a tangible community, my Mexican participants described different dynamics. In fact, many of them currently work in the informal sector, cleaning houses in the area with their friends. I found that many of my Mexican participants found work opportunities through their network of friends—who are also Mexican women

working in the informal sector—and, in many cases, some of my participants even team up and work together, or cover for one another if someone needs it. Besides influencing the employment opportunities that my participants have access to, educational attainment also influences the ways they perceive and understand community. For my white participants, community can be a group of colleagues; for my Mexican participants, their community of friends can give way to job opportunities.

Social Networks and Access to Resources

My Mexican participants shared with me how the different intersections of their identity influence their involvement in the community. In particular, gender creates both benefits and constraints when accessing resources in relation to childcare, and this plays out in different ways. Moreover, other structural barriers play a role in the way women experience community and access resources. For example, English proficiency and educational attainment both play a role in their integration and employment opportunities.

One of the main themes that came up in my study is the importance of speaking English in order to access resources and information. Being able to communicate with the members of a community is a necessity, and this ability influences every aspect of their lives. This is a structural barrier that my U.S.-born participants don't have to face. Margarita, a respondent from Ciudad Juárez who came to the United States when she was fifteen, shared how crucial learning English has been for her integration into the United States. She moved

to El Paso first, and although she knew other people who spoke Spanish there, Margarita felt the importance of being able to communicate with coworkers, potential employers, and the broader society once she moved to Boulder:

“L: What things do you think have helped you integrate into the community?
M: Speaking English. It is a foundation for everything, and allows you to communicate with everyone. In El Paso a lot of people speak both English and Spanish, and I knew a little bit of English back then, but when I got to Boulder there weren’t many Latinos or Mexican families here. When I moved here I used to cry a lot because I didn’t feel comfortable, there was no one I could speak my language with. I didn’t work at first, but then I started working at a home for the elderly. I took a semester of English classes; it was free and I finished it. It helped me a lot. Then they told me to take a class in order to become a supervisor, and I got nervous. My son told me to take a dictionary with me, and I did that. Thankfully, they gave me the certification.”

Margarita has lived in Boulder for forty years. She shared with me that one of the main things she has seen happen in Boulder is the growth of the Latino and Mexican population in the past decades. During her first years in the United States, she came to see the ability to speak English as one of the main aspects that was important for her integration into society and the overall well-being of her friends and family members. Being able to communicate in English became a priority for her, especially when she separated from a previous relationship and became a single mom. Margarita became the sole provider for her five children, as well as one of the sources of support for her two brothers in Mexico. In fact, gender plays a crucial role in her story. After her mother’s death in Mexico—when she was nine—she became the motherly figure in her brothers’ lives, and helped raise them. Even more recently, she is still one of their main sources of support. Margarita’s nephew disappeared about a year ago

in Juarez, and after finding out about it, she quickly travelled to her hometown to be with her brother and help him and his family. When she shared this particular story, Margarita highlighted her role as a caregiver: she has always been there, and will continue to be there, for her brothers, despite the distance. Unfortunately, after several months of searching her nephew is still missing. It is in instances like these that my participants' connections with their families were emphasized. Margarita, like other women in my study, shared how complicated and painful family interactions can be, even when there is a foundation of strong relationships and support. When Margarita became a mom herself (while she was already in the U.S.), she had to learn how to navigate job opportunities and how to access other resources to raise her children. All these experiences have helped her integrate into society and build her own community and social networks.

The knowledge Margarita has acquired in her time living in the Boulder area has allowed her to help people outside of her own family. She proudly describes herself as a person who has helped her friends and acquaintances navigate U.S. society in many ways, particularly when it comes to interpreting/translating English:

“M: All my life I had to work two jobs in order to raise my children. Because of that, I was also able to help other people get jobs. I also helped a lot of people who didn't speak English; I interpreted for them. I have always felt accepted in the community because of that.”

Besides taking on two jobs to provide for her children, Margarita has found ways to show support for her broader community as well. Now, just two years away from retirement,

she has taken it upon herself to motivate her friends at the workplace to take ESL classes: she expressed that she has been motivating her coworkers to take English classes because she understands what the process of moving to the United States entails. Right now, she is also helping raise her grandchildren, as she provides childcare free of cost for her older children. In many ways, her role as a woman has always been experienced through the lens of a caregiver—a role that, in many cases, constrains her opportunities to expand her own networks beyond that caregiver role. All her narratives about community—except for the one of helping other people get jobs—are based on her experiences as a mother and caregiver.

Another example of gendered experiences in relation to immigration is Valeria's case. Just like Margarita, she also expressed the importance of speaking English:

“V: I would like to learn English and go to school, because I understand it [the language] but I can't speak it.

L: Have you been able to take any English classes here?

V: Yeah, I took some classes with Intercambio, and I had a personal instructor for a while, but it was difficult to continue the program because of my kids' schedules, since I have to take care of them.”

In many instances, like in the case of Valeria, the responsibilities of childcare create more constraints on top of other structural barriers that women already face. This was true for both my Mexican and U.S.-born participants. Taking care of their children—and sometimes their grandchildren as well—is a responsibility that often falls mostly onto them. These gender roles and expectations can create constraints and benefits at the same time—particularly when my participants talked about their access to resources. As I noted in the case of Mari-

ana, the skills she has learned through her involvement in her kids' school are both empowering and helpful, but at the same time she has had to negotiate her position as the sole caregiver of the family. Throughout her life, she has been the one taking the lead with her children's development, focusing not only on childcare, but on housekeeping and the overall maintenance of their home as well.

This is a theme that similarly showed up for my U.S.-born participants as well. Joy (one of my U.S.-born white participants from California) shared the ways she balances childcare and other tasks:

"L: I'm wondering about how you and your partner balance those family responsibilities and life in general.

J: It's like this (makes a sign of imbalance with her hands). I also feel like since I'm not working full time I should put food on the table every night, I should do the shopping, the planning, the prepping, the cleaning, the laundry, the cars, the dog, the garbage... I feel like I should. It's really hard still, in this day and age to balance home life. My husband in particular wants to help. He says he doesn't know how to, but he does. It's not good because it builds resentment. Any time we want to do something I'm finding the solution for our son and now I just don't want to go through it all... it takes work. And I don't think that if I were working full time we would figure out the equity balance. I still don't think so. Part of it is who I am, and another part is that a lot falls on the woman. It just does [...] Why do I feel like it has to be about give and give? I'm starting to be more aware of it. I have a paid job at school, so I try to not volunteer as much. I don't want my son's world to be my world... it already is, to such a big degree, so that was a cautious decision on how to do this, to have some flexibility, some income, and some worth."

Similar feelings and experiences in relation to family responsibilities and childcare were expressed by several participants, regardless of national origin. Although increased participation in their children's schools can represent empowerment and autonomy—particularly

in the case of my Mexican participants—I found that the involvement in these social networks can be constraining in many ways, as they are highly gendered. The responsibilities and expectations that come with being part of school and family networks tend to be about childcare and other family responsibilities. Ultimately, I found that the time women spend taking care of their children limits the opportunities these women have for expanding their social networks, which therefore also limits their opportunities of finding jobs and connecting with other social ties.

Conclusions and Limitations

Overall, I found that the experiences of Mexican migrant women in relation to social networks are varied and complex. Not only do they have to balance different responsibilities, but Mexican women also need to learn how to navigate U.S. society after immigration. Their identities and roles come with different demands that influence the way they perceive community and social support. In particular, the Mexican women in my study emphasized the importance of family ties in their migratory experience and everyday lives in the United States. In contrast to my white participants—who rely more on friends for support—my Mexican respondents perceive their family ties as their most supportive networks. Balancing family relations in both Mexico and the United States was a common theme for all my Mexican participants, and I found that women tend to balance family dynamics through reciprocal relations of emotional and economical support.

There are a few similarities and differences between the experiences of Mexican and U.S.-born women in my study, particularly around perceptions of community. For my Mexican respondents, family comes to mind first; for my white participants, friendships and other social ties were mentioned first. Social networks and a sense of community develop in three particular spaces for both of my sample groups: the church, their children's schools, and the occupational sector. There are several identities that are not controlled for in my study—age groups, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, undocumented status, etc.—, which would inform my findings in different ways. Educational attainment, in particular, plays an important role in how women perceive and describe their social networks in the occupational sector. Colleagues and coworkers were words used by my White participants to describe their social ties in the workplace, whereas my Mexican participants shared more experiences of working in the informal sector and thinking of their coworkers as friends. In the case of my Mexican respondents, friendship connections developed first and later led the way to obtaining different job opportunities. The level of educational attainment of my U.S.-born participants was more homogeneous—they all have a Bachelor's degree or above—whereas my Mexican participants reported more variation. Although the focus of my study wasn't on class, it turned out to be an important factor that influences the ways my participants describe their networks and their access to resources. Four of my Mexican participants reported similar levels of educational attainment to my white participants—two have master's degrees, and two are currently working towards their PhD. These four Mexican participants also reported

strong connections with their family members but not always described them as their main resources of support. Although my sample did not provide enough information to generalize these experiences, my findings suggest that individuals who are working class might lean more on their families for support, regardless of race and ethnicity. A larger sample and more interview questions on class would help highlight in more detail how educational level plays out in the ways women experience community and support.

Developing social networks can be both empowering and constraining because of gender roles and expectations, which are important aspects to take into account in any study about social networks. All my participants who are also mothers shared the responsibilities and constraints that come with childcare. Taking care of their children (and sometimes grandchildren as well) is a role that falls mostly onto them. Although many of my Mexican participants feel empowered by the knowledge and resources they have access to in their community (particularly in school programs for parents), they also mentioned how childcare constrains them. Balancing time, resources, and their own well-being are aspects of being caregivers that limit their access to other resources and networks, such as work or educational opportunities.

My comparative findings provide insights into the different ways women perceive support, particularly in relation to how racial identities and their own lived experiences inform the makeup of their social networks. Moreover, a focus on gender and race offers an intersectional

approach to understanding social networks and the importance they play in women's lives.

Although a small sample allowed me to understand some of the ways women perceive and seek support, these findings are not generalizable. I only focused on Boulder and Lafayette, which limits the makeup of my sample. Since I was primarily interested in the experiences of documented migrant women from Mexico, random sampling techniques were not feasible. I chose to pursue a nonrandom snowball sample, given my previous connections with Mexican women in the community. Snowballing allowed me to understand the social ties of my participants in a meaningful way; in several instances, my participants put me in touch with their friends, who later participated in my study. However, that same aspect of my sampling technique also limits my findings. Although I was able to follow up on friendships and other social ties, I was only introduced to a few social networks in Boulder and Lafayette.

Overall, understanding how women perceive social support and their access to resources can help to better position the resources that they need in the community. Since social support is a big factor in the overall well-being of my participants, understanding how those interpersonal networks develop can speak to what works and what doesn't for building strong, supportive communities.

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