

My semester with the immigrant experience: We all could learn a little

Rachel Ziemba

University of Richmond

Abstract

Much of the common knowledge about immigration in the United States is based on the stereotypes of immigrant communities. Lack of understanding hinders the lives of these immigrants. Thus, educating the public is the only way to improve this situation and change the common social attitude towards Hispanic and Latinx immigrants. Increased learning and general use of the Spanish language also will help to bring about a more receptive North American society with respect to immigrants. Spanish-English bilingualism is an easy and useful way to increase the inclusion of immigrants from Hispanic origins in the U.S., a feat that will benefit the entire country.

When I decided to take the class “Spanish in the Community” during the summer of 2017, I thought I would like the class because of my great interest in the Spanish language and also because I loved to volunteer. Yet, I did not know anything about the Hispanic and Latinx experience in this country nor of the reality of immigration in present day. I arrived at college with a false sense of security and little knowledge with respect to this topic. I was similar to, one could say, the majority of the population of white Americans in the United States. I did not know that, in four short months, I would be opened up to problems and topics that I had never thought about before. The only experience that I had had with immigration involved a Spanish teacher in high school, who had immigrated to the U.S. from Cuba when she was a child. I did not know anything about the process involved with her immigration or about her experience as a Latina immigrant in this country. Regardless, she inspired me to continue my education in Spanish. Now, I have learned that this education is a force that helps to create a more receptive society. I never thought that this class would include and require many profound discussions about the situation of Hispanics and Latinx in the U.S., but after this semester, I am confident that I learned many important things that should be shared with everyone. Fundamentally, immigrants offer much more than our society thinks and the manner in which we treat these people is not in accordance with basic moral human conduct. I hope that all people, independent of race, religion, origin, nationality or age, can learn from my experience and observations.

Immigration: A Misunderstood Problem

I believe that lack of knowledge and understanding is at the heart of the problem with Hispanic and Latinx immigration in the U.S. The majority of conversation concerning these immigrants centers around undocumented immigration, or the action of entering our country without legal, government issued papers, and the legality of immigration. While these issues are

important and require much discussion, the popular ideas and perceptions that exist about this topic in our society are structured around many stereotypes of the Hispanic/Latinx community. Education can be a powerful weapon in the fight against these erroneous suppositions. My class used discussion as a tool to define and then break the stereotypes of this group within the American population. In addition, the service aspect of the class put me in contact with Hispanic/Latinx immigrants and the people that support them.

One common misunderstanding involves the criminalization of this community, something that drives conclusions about how the undocumented population is growing very rapidly and that these people are immigrating to the U.S. to steal jobs and participate in gang-related activity. As explained below, these ideas are false, but are accepted as fact in American society due to lack of effort on the part of American citizens to understand the situation. The total population of undocumented immigrants grew rapidly from the year 2000 to 2013 (Rosenblum & Soto, 2017). Conversely, while Mexican immigrants comprise 52%, the largest group, of all undocumented immigrants in this country, the data show that the population of undocumented persons of Mexican origin has decreased since 2009 (Passel & Cohn, 2016). Additionally, other data show that Hispanic and Latinx immigrants are less likely to commit crimes and be incarcerated than the native-born population (Nowrasteh, 2015). With respect to the labor force, in general, Hispanic and Latinx immigrants hold jobs associated with low socioeconomic classes regardless of their education levels. According to the 2000 census, only 26% of immigrants work in careers that correspond with their education levels, while this number is 40% for native-born U.S. residents (Chiswick & Miller, 2009). This demonstrates the hidden value of educated immigrants who are overqualified for their jobs. The works of plastic artist Ramiro Gomez explore the presence of Latinx workers that are often invisible in

mainstream Anglo-Saxon, white society. Gomez makes and paints cardboard figures that depict people gardening, cleaning houses or caring for white children (Weschler, 2015). These jobs are not highly sought out by native citizens of the U.S.; however, they are important works that assure the normal daily function of the lives of millions of American people. Also, only six of 474 civil occupations are majority held by immigrants (Camarota, Richwine, & Ziegler, 2018). Thus, it is an unfounded assumption to say that immigrants rob jobs that white American citizens would hold otherwise. Furthermore, it is clear that many of the stereotypes surrounding the Hispanic/Latinx community in this country do not make sense and are not based on fact. Despite these facts, which serve to question the stereotypes about the Hispanic/Latinx community in the U.S., as long as there are undocumented immigrants living in this country, the conversation about the criminality of this community will exist. In my volunteer experience with VA Interfaith Center for Public Policy, I learned that criminalization is not the only way to think about the community of immigrants in America. In fact, immigration violations in the U.S. are considered civil violations and are not concrete crimes. Therefore, undocumented persons are not criminals in the literal sense of the word (Clark, 2017). Going further, it is impossible to say that the life of a human being is “illegal” and does not merit the same respect and opportunity of any other. The life of an undocumented person is hard and full of fear, and this situation only worsens when people like me, American citizens with almost no contact with immigrants, do not try to understand the difficulties of their lives. Places like VA Interfaith help these immigrants despite all of this. VA Interfaith offers services of legal help to undocumented persons, employing a sense of welcoming and genuine understanding of their situation. Other organizations also help immigrants without asking about their immigration status. During my time working at Interfaith, I specifically helped to organize the Sanctuary Network of Virginia,

which is a conglomeration of congregations that support immigrants who are fighting against the threats of deportation and ICE roundups. Through these focuses, undocumented status is dealt with in a relative and empathetic way. Thus, I have learned that the search for a better life can never be an illegal action. In fact, the human action of improving your life should be more accessible for all people in our country.

History: Essential Context for Understanding the Life of an Immigrant

Many complexities exist surrounding the situation of Hispanic/Latinx immigrants that can be explained with analysis of the history between the U.S. and many Central American countries. We cannot discuss the situation of immigration today and talk about solutions without having proper understanding of the context of this situation. The involvement of the American government and armed forces in Central American throughout the twentieth century is directly connected to the state of the region today. The interference in Central American governments by the U.S. had a politically destabilizing effect (Pavis, 2014). The economic and anti-communist motives of the U.S. indirectly brought about “vacuums of power” that allowed for the rise of drug cartels and paramilitary groups and the fall of economic opportunity. For example, in 1952, the Agrarian Reform Law of Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz gave land to the poor for cultivation. Two years later, pressure from the United Fruit Company caused the CIA to forcefully replace the democratic president with the authoritarian Carlos Castillo Armas. The new regime then undid Árbenz’s reforms that empowered the economically powerless. Additionally, since 2004, the free trade agreement CAFTA-DR has assured that all or almost all of agricultural exports from the U.S. to El Salvador and Guatemala are duty free (Tseng-Putterman, 2018). Local farmers then lack the ability to compete with American goods, and because of this thousands of these farmers choose to immigrate to other countries like the U.S.

Thus, the effects of American interference are still visible many decades after; specifically, they manifest in the flight of thousands of Central Americans. Governments in the region that are supported by the U.S. all have roots in coups d'état – destabilizing conflicts between democratic or communist governments and authoritarian regimes backed by the U.S. The link between selfish economic interests, the establishment of brutal governments, and the free reign of violent gangs is clear. Today, many of the immigrants that travel from Central America to the U.S. are fleeing dangerous situations in their countries of origin, that primarily involve gang violence (“Migrant caravan,” 2018). Because of this, we should have compassion for these people in search of a better life as a result of situations caused by our country.

The history of American politics and attitudes surrounding immigration is just as important as the context of the conditions that cause emigration out of Central America. From 1954 to 1980, detention of immigrants was the exception and not the rule. Immigrants were able to live in society while their cases were examined and there were few immigrants incarcerated for extended periods of time (Minian, 2018). Nevertheless, there was an event that caused a change after 1980 that profoundly affected the immigration system. This event is known as the “Mariel Boatlift” of 1980 in Cuba. Essentially, Castro’s regime offered the opportunity for any person to travel via boat to Florida. In exchange for this freedom of travel, these people had to travel with others that the government wanted to get rid of: primarily criminals and the mentally ill. As American news outlets emphasized this impending arrival of thousands of Cuban criminals, widespread fear towards immigrants was born (Minian, 2018). It is clear that after the dissemination of fear of Latinx immigrants, the accepted attitude of the American public became a reflection of this fear and began to favor deportation as a measure of national security. A few

decades after, Hispanic and Latinx immigrants still fight against these stereotypes of criminalization today.

It is difficult to know the true history of a situation if we only have the information given to us by our society. If American citizens are afraid of immigrants from South and Central America, these immigrants in response will be afraid of occupying places in society that are not simply at the periphery. During my work with VA Interfaith, I never had the opportunity to speak with immigrants directly. I talked a lot with the people that help these immigrants and heard their stories of immigration in indirect ways. This fact represents the importance of perspective in the construction of assumptions towards immigrants and the lack of enough direct immigrant voices in our national discourse about the lives of these people. With such a complex past concerning immigration, it makes sense why our country fervently debates this issue. Thus, it is important to remember that, during political debates about immigration, immigrants are simultaneously discussing internally the realities of their lives in a foreign place. The life and writing of Jose Antonio Vargas¹ explains this struggle perfectly. In his 2011 article in which he decided to reveal his undocumented status to the world, Vargas discussed the internal dilemma of choosing between the pursuit of a good life and the maintenance of an honest integrity. He had to lie about his immigration status to advance his professional career, and because of this ended up with a crisis of identity (Vargas, 2011). As native-born U.S. citizens, we never worry about problems like these, but we still can remember the daily struggles of immigrants. This recognition acts as a form of solidarity and can be the first measure for improving the lives of immigrants.

¹ Jose Antonio Vargas is a writer and filmmaker who was born in the Philippines and immigrated to the U.S. as an adolescent. He is an undocumented immigrant who promotes the rights of all immigrants through his organization Define American.

Bilingualism: A Way to Improve the Life of an Immigrant

I describe the first time that I picked up a phone and spoke in Spanish with a member of the sanctuary network as a ‘shock to the system.’ I never thought of the impact that my desire to be bilingual would have on American society and on the experiences of Hispanics and Latinx in this country. In that moment, I realized that the importance of my studies extended much farther than the classroom. The bilingualism of people like me and those who work at VA Interfaith, who are not Latinx and do not have any direct familial link to any Latino culture or to the Spanish language, help to create a more receptive society. In the absence of legal rights for immigrants, actions like learning their language and trying to understand their cultures are very important for the integration and inclusion of this community. Previous generations of Hispanic/Latinx immigrants recognized the prejudice towards bilingualism and believed that this would be a problem for the integration of their kids into American society (García, Evangelista, Martínez, Disla, & Paulino, 1988). Today, this opinion has changed due in part to the change in attitude of Anglo-Americans, who see the Spanish language as an international tool that is valuable in many areas of life (Esquivada, 2016). Even so, it is very important that we do not form a preferential attitude towards immigrants that arrive educated and perfectly bilingual. Those who do not know any English or are not highly educated deserve inclusion and the opportunity to learn a second language in a safe and open environment. Thus, the retention of their native language, combined with the learning of English, is not evidence of lack of assimilation by Hispanic or Latinx immigrants. Bilingualism is a vehicle for integration and brings about the inclusion of immigrants in a society where we accept this fact and try to participate in this revolution of language and culture.

Everyone would benefit from a new culture that respects all people, native-born or immigrant, who live in this country. Thus, it is very important that bilingualism is viewed in a respectable way and not as a tool for appropriation of Hispanic/Latinx culture. The integration and subsequent inclusion of immigrants within American society depend on the ability of the entire public to construct a new and authentic identity for this country. Together with the advantages of bilingualism in businesses and the labor market, authors like Sandra Cisneros believe that the diffusion of Spanish forms of expression celebrate the diversity of the Hispanic/Latinx community and help immigrants form their identities (Lemus, 2011). When these people feel that their culture is valued and that their lives are celebrated by the country in which they live, all of society benefits as immigrants are then able to contribute freely and completely to the betterment of the nation. This celebration of cultures will result in a cultural hybridization. These hybrid practices will then be resources for recognizing differences and tensions between groups of people. In the long run, the multiculturalism of this country could then transform into interculturalism (Rodríguez Soriano, 2015). Language is an extension of culture, and, if we are able to become an almost all-bilingual society, American culture could then be inclusive to all people living outside their places of origin.

At the start of the fall 2017 semester, I was a new college student and still had a very closed way of thinking. Through the complexities of class discussions, however, I learned to think critically about issues that had never before crossed my mind. After learning about the immigrant experience of thousands of people in this country, I felt obligated to share these experiences and make them known to all. No one can help immigrants if they do not understand the struggles of these people. I have outlined many reasons why immigrants deserve respect and equal opportunity to a better life. Despite recent large-scale legal change in the U.S. immigration

system, ordinary people like you and me can improve the lives of Hispanic/Latinx immigrants in some ways. We can fight against the stereotypes of this community, advocating for a mixing of cultures that respects diverse origins while we stimulate dialogue and progress. We can change the narrative about Hispanic/Latinx immigration from one of struggle, crime and poverty to one of triumph, success and significant contribution. And this change begins with truthful education of the American public.

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