Forever Changed: The Transformation of Rural America through Immigration

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Abstract: *This qualitative case study reveals the impact of immigration on one rural Midwestern community and its longtime residents. The 123 phone interviews and sessions conducted with two focus groups provide compelling insights into residents' perceptions of immigration and immigrants as well as their ensuing personal and collective struggle with and adaptation to an immigration process that forever changed the community. The residents offer prudent insights for policy makers, immigrants, and other communities facing similar challenges. While the focus of the study is on the macro conversion of the community through the eyes of its residents, the author stresses the need for social workers to refresh their professional roots in community organization and highlights the vital role they play in helping communities adapt effectively while negotiating the needs of residents and immigrants alike.*

Introduction

America is a country founded by immigrants yet one that has repeatedly revolted against them. The country's historical struggle with its dependence on immigrants and the love-hate relationship surrounding related issues is real. Yet one cannot overlook the reality that "the impact of immigration on the economy and on society is shaped not only by characteristics of immigrants themselves, but also by basic features of the society that those immigrants have joined" (Reitz, 2002 p. 1). As rural communities pursue business ventures to revive their sagging economy, counter population decline, and maintain political representation, the consequences of this pursuit often include a flood of immigrants, migrant workers (documented and undocumented), and refugees that bring with them an overwhelming number of social needs that communities are unprepared for. It is a forced relationship that neither group really wants, but desperately needs to negotiate in the interest of survival. This negotiation process presents the social work profession with an opportunity to refresh its roots in community development and organization, while mediating the competing needs of residents and immigrants.

This study takes place in Lexington, Nebraska, which was once a typical rural community–predominantly white, agricultural, with a middle- to lower-class population. A meatpacking plant moved to the town in the early 1990s and initiated the recruitment and employment of a large wave of immigrants. This event propelled the community into a historic change. The company employed over 2,000 workers, causing an eventual demographic shift and a total reversal of majority and minority groups. A special census was requested by city officials and conducted in February of 1993. The results of the census showed that in a little over two years this community had grown from 6,011 to 8,544, "an increase of 1,943 or 29.6%" (Gouveia & Stull, 1997, p. 3). In 1990 Caucasians made up approximately 97.74% of the total population in Lexington, while Hispanics were only .0498%, Blacks .00045%, and other races .0163% of the total population (Census Bureau, 1990). Within ten years the county seat grew from an agricultural community of about 6,011 in 1990 to a spectacular 10,011 in 2000 (Census Bureau, 2000). In 2000, Whites made up 46.3%, Hispanics 51.2%, Blacks 1.17%, and other races 30.8% of Lexington's total population (Census Bureau, 2000). However, according to city officials, the census is inaccurate, as a substantial number of immigrants are not recorded due to their lack of participation (cause by fear of government crackdown) and inability to understand official forms and documents.

The purpose of the study is to tell the story of Lexington as voiced by long-term residents, gain a deeper understanding of their experience, and offer insights that can benefit other communities. Despite the community's pursuit of the meatpacking company and its preparations for the imminent changes involved, Lexington found itself unprepared for the immigration process that unfolded. The study is significant as it provides helpful lessons for lawmakers, communities, and social institutions facing similar challenges. It is especially important to generalist social workers who "…engage in a planned change process ….respect and value human diversity …identify and utilize the strengths existing in people and communities ….[and] seek to prevent as well as resolve problems" (Suppes & Wells, 2003, p. 7).

Literature Review

Immigration is not a new phenomenon, and public perception of immigrants and their impact on municipalities is no different today than it was in the early development of our American nation. Moreover, community work and the assimilation of early immigrants into American society are at the very roots of the social work profession. The book *Twenty Years at Hull-House* chronicles the early struggles of European immigrants and the heroic efforts of Jane Addams, who pioneered the settlement house movement to promote their adaptation to the new world (1998). Sidel's introduction to the book notes how the very definition of the term "American" has evolved from its original reference to Anglo or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant individuals (1998). It narrates the challenges facing early immigrants, the harsh stereotypes they confronted, and their impact on American cities in the late 1800s. The first few waves of immigrants coming from Germany, Ireland, and Scandinavia were already established when the poorer Italian, Polish, and Balkans entered America and struggled with social and economic conditions (1998). Jane Addams advocated empowering communities to address social change. This advocacy is echoed in the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) definition of social work, which also focuses on the macro role of social workers and states "the social work profession promotes community change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being" (IFSW, 2000). Immigration and its impact on communities is relevant not only to the social work profession; it begs professional engagement and action beyond mere advocacy.

Several theories have been proposed to explain communities' reaction to immigration. Group Conflict is one such theory. It hypothesizes that negative feelings between different groups of people are the result of competing interests that result in judgment and exclusion of the out-group (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998). The in-group represents the citizens already established in the community, while the out-group refers to the immigrants moving into the community. Group Conflict theory maintains that measures taken against the out-group are aimed at eliminating competition through "out-group derogation, discrimination, and avoidance" (Esses et al., 2001 p. 4). Out-groups are usually considered and viewed with more hostility than the in-group members. This discrimination is referred to as in-group-out-group bias (Lee & Ottati, 2002). Group Conflict theory complements the concept of resource stress, which "refers to the perception that, within a society, access to a desired resource is limited" (Esses et al., 2001, p. 4). This viewpoint could be as simple as the idea that immigrants move into communities and take jobs from citizens. Because immigrants are accepted into society more easily when their presence is not considered a threat to community resources, they face a paradox. If these immigrants become successful and affluent citizens, they may be suspected of attaining these accomplishments at the expense of their neighbors; however, if they fail, they become a drain on society. Esses et al. indicate that competition is at the center of group conflict, and assimilation of the out-group and in-group is a way to avoid or eliminate this conflict (2001). Conflict is more likely to occur when inter-group goals are different from societal goals, thus leading to negative behavior on the part of residents (Esses et al, 1998).

Group conflict and resource stress are not the only factors that potentially affect the community's perceptions of immigrants and immigration; social identity also plays a vital role. Perceptions of the existence of an in-group and out-group arise from "motivation to maintain a positive sense of Social Identity" (Lee & Ottati, 2002, p. 2). Dividing people into sub-categories, "increases perceptions of group differences and causes in-group members to favor their own group with higher rewards while penalizing out-groups" (Chandler & Tsai, 2001, p. 2). Residents in a community will begin to discriminate against out-groups if they feel their existing social identity is being threatened. Anti-immigrant attitudes can lead to extreme eruptions of violence. In Omaha, Nebraska, in 1909, Greek immigrants were taken from their homes and beaten as their houses were burned to the ground (Jaret, 1999). Social identification theory maintains that people are "motivated to avoid social isolation or disapproval and to seek self-enhancement and self-validation" (Chandler & Tsai, 2001, p. 2). Therefore, communities look to maintain a positive social identity and preserve the balance that exists in their society. Pratto and Lemieux report that immigration leads to two outcomes: group inclusion or group threat. This result, again, is consistent with group conflict theory regarding feelings of dissension over resources (Pratto & Lemieux 2001). When group goals are in agreement among immigrants and residents, group inclusion can ensue. Moreover, "group inclusion speaks to the basic needs of belonging with others and defining one's identity in reference to others" (Pratto & Lemieux, 2001, p. 2). These two theories, Group Conflict and Social Identification, explain why many people may be threatened by the arrival of immigrants.

Mulder and Krahn use the Scarce Resources theory to note, "competition for scarce resources leads to reduced public acceptance of immigrants, especially by those who feel they have the most to lose (e.g., the unemployed or the working poor)" (2005, p. 422). They compare this observation to the Contact Theory established in 1962 by Gorden Allport. This theory proposes that "those who have the most contact with immigrants will come to know them better, feel less threatened by them, and be more likely to accept them as part of their community" (2005, p. 422). Maulder and Krahn find that education plays a major role in changing attitudes towards immigrants, and make a note of Guimond, Palmer and Begin (1989) and the influence of education reformers such as John Dewey who highlighted the role of education in addressing and solving social problems such as racial intolerance.

Interestingly enough, "the American public expresses positive and approving attitudes toward immigrants who came earlier, but expresses negative sentiments about those who are coming at whatever time a survey is being conducted" (Simon & Lynch, 1999, p. 3). This tendency accounts for the now receptive attitudes toward previous out-groups such as Italians, Irish, and Eastern Europeans and discriminatory perceptions toward current out-groups such as Mexicans and Cubans. Another factor that affects an individual's view of immigration and immigrants is the color of that individual's skin. Research has shown that Blacks, in particular, were anti-immigrant because of the rights granted to immigrants that were previously denied to Blacks (Jaret, 1999, p. 4). Whites are found to be proponents of limiting immigration, although 60 percent of non-whites were also in favor of reducing immigration (Chandler & Tsai, 2001, p. 8). Factors such as income, race, and fear of crime do not seem to significantly influence people's attitudes towards immigration (Chandler & Tsai, 2001).

Citizens view immigrants as a cultural threat and the introduction of newcomers as the promotion of new traditions. Immigrants are sometimes viewed as "a menace to cherished cultural traditions" (Chandler, & Tsai 2001, p. 6). Pratto & Lemieux note that in areas with high concentrations of immigrants, prejudice is fueled by the view of immigrants as a threat to cultural norms, uncomfortable social interaction, and negative stereotypes (2001). The real or perceived threats posed by immigrants are evident across the country as many states have formally affirmed

English as their official language (Jaret, 1999). These states include Nebraska, South Dakota, and California. The media influence beliefs over immigration when intense reporting of a difficult economic market promotes competition for resources and leads to more unfavorable attitudes towards immigrants (Esses et al., 2001). Perception of immigrants is greatly shaped by the economic climate of the community, and the perception of a depressed local economy can fuel anti-immigration attitudes and the fear that immigrants take jobs away from long-term residents (Chandler & Tsai, 2001). Educational level has the greatest impact upon perceptions of both illegal and legal immigration, as those with higher levels of education tend to be more in favor of immigration (Chandler & Tsai, 2001). Political alignment is another major influence, with those leaning to the left of the political spectrum more supportive of immigration, whereas those leaning to the right are more likely to oppose or favor limiting it (Betts, 2005).

Despite the tremendous community attention, media coverage, and existing literature related to immigrants and immigration, an exhaustive search uncovered no practical studies related to the direct attitudes and experiences of citizens towards immigrants and immigration. Many studies focus on the changes in the community's landscape, with total disregard to the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of residents. Even studies that focus on the impact of immigration on rural communities seem to overlook the direct experiences of the residents whose lives and communities are changed forever through immigration. The uniqueness of this groundbreaking study lies in its attempt to fill this gap and present a more personal account of how immigration is changing the face of rural America and the life of its citizens.

Methodology

This qualitative case study explores the attitudes and experiences of residents regarding the consequences of immigration on their rural community. The study's objective is to provide an accurate and in-depth sketch of the community from the perspective of long-term residents, to view the situation through their eyes, and give voice to their stories. While the viewpoint of immigrants is equally crucial, its inclusion within this study would undermine the depth and breadth of information sought from each group and the presentation of results. The enormous quantity of data produced by such a study would result either in a lengthy text exceeding manuscript length requirements for journals, or in superficial coverage of each perspective, thus sacrificing quality. Consequently, while the absence of the immigrants' perspective will be a shortcoming of this study, it is deserving of a special follow-up study.

A qualitative research format is most suited for this purpose which posits that "reality is subjective and multiple as seen by participants in a study" (Creswell, 1994, p. 5). Qualitative research focuses upon a process or phenomenon as experienced by participants, reality as they perceive it, and the subjective nature of their perspectives. Of interest in this study is the process of community change as perceived and reported by long-term residents who experienced the consequences of immigration over time. Long term residents are defined as those people who have resided in the community for fifteen years or more, witnessed the precursors of change, and continue to live through the consequences that immigration brought to their community. Fifteen years was chosen as a timeline, as it dates from the emergence of the immigration movement into the community. A purposeful selection process was used and participants were located in a city directory provided by the Area Chamber of Commerce. The directory lists in street order the participants' names, addresses, phone numbers, and the year they established residency in the community. The number of households listed in the directory as having established residency before 1991 was 1,083, and phone contact was attempted with all of them. Of the 1,083 numbers dialed, 731 potential participants were unavailable or didn't answer the phone, 39 numbers were no longer in service, 188 residents declined participation, two terminated part way through the interview, and 123 completed the interview. Table 1 shows the profile of participants, which

shows the average residency in the community for all participants as being 44.56 years and the ethnicity as 98.4% white and 1.6% Latino.

Table 1

Participants Profile

Years of Residence	Ethnicity	Income Level	Educational Level	Primary Languages
Mean 44.70 Max. 84 Mode 50 Median 44	98.4 % White 1.6% Latino	5.6% $10,000 or less 30.89% 10,000-24,999 21.2% $25,000-34,999 12% $35.000-49,999 35.2% $50,000+	4.87% -8th grade & some High School 39.83% H.S. Graduate 27.2% Some College 16.0% College Graduate 4.8% Some Graduate School 6.4% Master's Degree	100% English

Income levels reflect the placement of most participants as middle to working class, with 35.2% having income levels at $50,000 or more, 12% between $35,000-$49,999, 21.2% at $25,000-$34,999 , 32.0% at 10,000-$24,999, and 5.6% at $10,000 or less. The majority of participants have at least a high school diploma. One hundred percent of the population surveyed used English as the primary language in their home; a few families used Spanish as a secondary language. All but one citizen identified the meat packing plant as a determining factor in bringing immigrants to the community.

Due to the sensitive and controversial nature of the topic, phone interviews were chosen as more appropriate than face-to-face interviews for data collection because an oral medium provides participants a higher degree of anonymity and a reduced sense of anxiety or fear of judgment. Phone interviews used a standard, IRB-approved in-depth questionnaire with thirty questions. The interview ended with an invitation for respondents to participate in one of two focus groups aimed at further exploration of their perspective of immigration's impact on their community. The average phone interview lasted approximately 17 minutes, with a maximum time of 40 minutes and a minimum time of 9 minutes. The interviews followed the same format and all participants were asked the same questions; the researcher read from a typed script and transcribed responses directly into a computer. The questionnaire began with two screening questions age/adult status and the length of residency in the community. Participants responded to a standard questionnaire that included thirty items related to the following areas: ethnicity, household income, education level, language(s) spoken, population description, factors promoting immigration to the community, immigrant groups, impact of immigration on the community, educational system, health care system, criminal justice system, social service system, businesses and banks, feelings about immigration, view of immigrants, changes in the community, attitudes towards immigrants, concerns about immigration, positive aspects of immigration, advice for other communities facing a similar situation, information for policy makers, information for immigrants, feelings about the impact of immigration, community adjustment to immigration, and willingness to participate in a focus group.

Upon completing the phone surveys, each researcher individually read and coded results from a computer printout. Both researchers took notes during the focus group sessions and later compared responses. To accomplish a triangulation of results, sources were sought outside the primary research completed by the researcher. Online sources as well as books and articles were used to establish the validity of the research. The United States Census Bureau was extremely helpful in locating past and current demographic statistics for the community. Researchers separately identified trends or themes for the community.

Focus groups are highly instrumental in providing direct information related to a product, process, or phenomenon. Krueger notes that "attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services or programs are developed in part by interaction with other people" (1994, p. 10). Focus groups allow people to listen to the thoughts and feelings of others, which helps them to better define their own position (Krueger, 1994). A focus group allows a free exchange of ideas among community members. Therefore, two focus groups were organized in the community on to meet on a weekday, and participants who agreed in the phone interviews to participate were invited to attend. Upon attending the group session, all participants were provided with an informed consent to read and sign. The form outlined their rights, potential risks, and future uses of the study. Both researchers attended the focus group and facilitated a fairly structured process in which twelve questions were asked. The focus group questions expanded on areas addressed in the phone interviews and covered the following: immigration's effect on the community as a whole, areas of impact, current perceptions of immigration and immigrants, potential business and service impact, influential changes, factors influencing one's view of immigrants, future outlook, impact of policy changes, the community response to immigration, feedback for incoming immigrants, and implications for other communities.

The focus group sessions were audio-taped for later transcription and analysis. The first focus group consisted of five community members who had lived an average of 29.2 years in the community. The second focus group consisted of six participants; however, only four of the participants had actually participated in the survey. The remaining two group members were spouses of the participants. This group had been living in the area for an average of 39.75 years. All participants in both groups were Caucasian, spoke English, had at the least a high school diploma, and all but one had an annual income over $50,000.

Upon completion of data collection through phone interviews and focus groups, the researchers worked independently to analyze the data and identify themes. The researchers compared their analyses of phone interviews and focus groups then compared the resulting themes. Triangulating information, comparing and contrasting all responses, and sorting and coding were important for data analysis. The triangulation of the data from phone interviews and focus groups with the observations of researchers was intended to fortify the validity and reliability of information. Wiggins (1998) posits that the collection of evidence from multiple sources along with the cross-checking of results provides a more accurate outcome. Other research supports the need for redundant information from a variety of sources to confirm the validity and reliability of findings (Jacob, 1990; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Maxwell, 1996; Wiggins, 1998). Sorting and coding involved the search for recurring themes, phrases, and descriptions. Since qualitative research is concerned with process and meaning rather than outcome, the goal of this study is to gain insight into the residents' attitudes, perceptions and experiences related to immigration's effect on their community. Although the outcome may reflect the experiences of residents of other rural communities facing similar circumstances, generalization is not a major concern or goal. However, the outcome may be one that residents of rural communities facing similar circumstances may be able to relate to and understand. Furthermore, the change that this community experienced is not unique and may be representative of similar change processes elsewhere.

While Table 2 provides in-depth coverage of the precipitating factors that brought immigrants to the community, the immigrants' origin, and a description of the community as provided by participants, a brief summary is provided here**.**

Table 2

Precipitating Factors, Immigrants Origin & View of Community

Precipitating Factors to Immigration	Immigrants National Origin as noted by participants	Description of Community
-98.3% noted that processing plants and work availability as driving force. -One person noted willingness of the community to accept immigrants. -One did not know.	Continents mentioned: 99.18 % said Mexico & Central and South America 12% said Africa. 5.6% said White/Europe. 26.4% Asia. Specific countries mentioned: Sudan 49.5%, Somalia 24.8%, "Blacks" (including African Americans) 22.7%, "Tall Dark People" 7.2%, Liberia 4.0%, Nigeria 2.4%, Ivory Coast .8%, Tanzania .8%, Kenya .8%, Ethiopia .8%, & "State of Texas" .8%.	-48% of participants noted Hispanics are currently the majority -23.2% note that community is diverse, mixed, multi-ethnic -7.2% Feel like the minority now, with some feeling discriminated against -4.0% Feel the community is split down the middle -7.2% See the community as growing -8.8% View community negatively, "overpopulated," "unbalanced," "bad," "too many immigrants," & "terrible" -.8% Report division in the community

Results

Survey Outcome

All but two participants noted that the meat processing plant was the reason for the high number of immigrants coming to the community. It was pointed out by 99.18% of participants that immigrants in their community come from Mexico, and Central and South America. Other continents mentioned were Africa and Asia, as well as a small minority of immigrants coming from Europe. In describing the community, 48% of participants explained that Hispanics are now the majority in their community, 23.2% described their community as "diverse, mixed, and multi-ethnic," and a smaller percentage of participants observed that although they are Caucasians, they now feel discriminated against and view the community as "negatively overpopulated."

Participants in the study seemed to view immigration as a doubled-edge sword and were divided over it impact on their community. Of the participants, 54.82% indicated that

immigration positively affected the community, while 47.57% noted a negative effect on the community. A few reported not having much of a choice in what happened to their town, that the city "fathers" or planners made the decision to bring in the corporation without the consent of its citizens. On a more personal level, 17% felt more positive about their community as a result of immigration, while 43.5% expressed negative feelings, 22% had mixed feelings, and 7.25 either weren't affected or had no comment. Since the average residency of participants was 44.56 years, many of the participants represent an older generation and expressed a general sense of confusion and frustration at the changes in their town. The community seemed different from the one they grew up in; they are not able to overlook immigration's negative impact on taxes, property values, the school system, medical system, social services, and crime. One resident that has been living in the community for 65 years noted, "We have major problems with every facet of the community. People are leaving here in mass exodus; it is not a nice place to live anymore." Older generations view the situation differently than the younger. A participant who had been living in the community for 44 years shared a more positive view: "When IBP [meat packing company] first opened I wanted to leave, but now that the Hispanic families are coming and wanting a home and to be part of the community it's positive, even more so with Tyson [meat packing company]."

As for their view of immigrants, 51.6% of participants reported mixed feelings regarding immigrants; 33.06% held a positive view and 11.2% a negative perception. For the most part, immigrants were viewed as hardworking people seeking a better life, but negative community changes were attributed to their presence. Comments such as "They are good people" or "For the most part, they are nice industrious people," and "By and large, they are very, very nice people. Very good to deal with and an asset to our community" were tempered with other comments such as "75% are human trash–the rest are good people," "If you put on your sombrero you can get away with about anything," and "The ones that are coming now want to change our way of thinking and we are just in the way." Interestingly enough, when participants were asked about the general attitude towards immigrants in their community, 47.5% believed that it was negative, 26.6% thought it was mixed, and 18% thought it was positive. This shows a divergence between people's feelings about immigrants versus their view of the community's response.

Table 3

Participants View of Immigration's Impact on Community Systems

System	Highly Impacted	Very Impacted	Somewhat Impacted	No Impact/ Don't Know
Community as a Whole	59.34%	31.70%	8.94%	-0-
Schools	85.36%	11.29%	3.25%	-0-
HealthCare	63.41%	21.13%	2.43%	-0-
Criminal Justice	60.97%	26.97%	10.56%	1.6%
Social Services	68.29%	21.95%	8.13%	1.6%
Businesses	60.97%	25.2%	11.38%	1.6%
Commerce/Banks	20.32%	26.82%	28.45%	23.4%

The reader is referred to Table 3, which summarizes the participants' perceptions of immigration's impact on the community systems. Most impacted were the schools, followed by social services and health care. Businesses and the criminal justice system were equally

impacted. More specifically, participants discussed the negative impact on businesses as the face of their downtown changed.

With the explosion of the immigrant population, many white businesses lost their customer base and were forced to close or move out of the community. Their space was quickly filled with immigrant-managed businesses such as clothing and food stores. Participants reported, "They've tried to take all the businesses in town" and cited "downtown stores I don't care to go to cause they're all Hispanic or Laotian." Education and schools underwent the second most commonly reported change. While participants expressed the desire to secure a good education for all children, they had concerns that the needs of Caucasian students are taking a back seat to those of immigrant students who present a different set of needs. Participants note, "Our schools are busting at the seams, education took on a whole new outlook," Schools are overcrowded," and "It's just the overall change of a larger population. The schools are just not equipped to handle those students. We need to pass the school bond." The third most commonly reported change in the community involved housing, with participants noting a shortage of housing and deteriorating conditions of already available housing. Comments such as "houses are tore up, not a nice community anymore" and "people are renting houses and not taking care of them, they are turning into slums" seemed common. Several participants expressed concerns for law enforcement and the increase in crime rate. Some participants noted that they now keep their doors locked and one has even considered purchasing a gun for protection. Finally, 9.6% of participants mentioned the flight of white residents out of the community due to the influx of immigrants; one even said, "Normal people are leaving" with another sharing that "the integration has not been good."

Participants expressed various concerns regarding the changes that immigration brought to their community. Topping the list of concerns were the presence of illegal immigrants and the need for effective and timely reform in the Immigration and Naturalization Services. Only 12% expressed no concern about immigration in the community; however, most reported that illegal immigration is a serious problem. One noted, "I think we should be doing what the sheriff is doing in Arizona, sending illegals back and sending the bill to the Federal government because they are supposed to protect the borders." Some expressed irritation. "They boast about being illegal, they are proud of being illegal," and "… send them back or something, I think we will be overrun by illegals and will not have a chance." Others reported fear: "… the Hispanic people are going to take over the white people's living quarters" and "if something isn't done about them abiding by our rules, all the whites will move out." A few remarked that they would like all illegal immigrants sent back or held accountable. Fueling their concerns are the taxes that continue to skyrocket in order to support new schools and services to accommodate the influx of incoming immigrants. A widespread belief is that some immigrants avoid paying their share of the taxes by sharing space with multiple families in a single dwelling, thus undermining the tax base of the community. In the eyes of the residents, these people are cheating the system and shifting the burden to taxpayers.

While the negative aspects of immigration seemed overwhelming for the majority of participants, 78% were able to recognize positive side effects. Only 22% of participants failed to see any beneficial outcomes. A majority of participants recognized that immigration brings a cultural awareness that many rural agricultural towns rarely experience. One participant commented, "I think it's given us an awareness of other peoples. Just because this is the way we've always done it doesn't mean we can't try it another way." Several participants stated that the immigrant workforce is doing jobs that Caucasian residents wouldn't do, thus sustaining the meat-packing plant and community. Many seem excited about the expansion of cultural horizons and appreciate the richness that diversity brought to their community. These participants shared

comments such as "We realize we are part of the world" and "It's been enlightening–people have learned quite a bit about the rest of the world. We used to be quite insulated." Twenty-two percent of participants note economic benefits, such as a higher tax base, higher yields from sales taxes, and the mere fact that the community has become alive again.

Most participants expressed uncertainty and concern when considering the community's future in light of immigration. Twenty-three percent had no clear vision for the future, 21.13% do not see much change from the community's current status, 21.13% believe the community will go "downhill," 12% project continuing growth, 10.5% were positive about the future, 6.5% fear that immigrants will take over the community, 2.4% emphasize that the future depends on government action or inaction related to immigration, and the remaining 3% didn't respond. When prompted to offer advice to other rural communities facing similar challenges with immigration, the majority of participants stressed the importance of preparation, as well as researching and visiting other communities. More specifically, 24% stressed the importance of research and preparation, 23% did not know how a community could prepare for such an incredible change, 20% stated the importance of keeping an open mind and welcoming immigrants into the community, 15.44% advised against allowing meat-processing plants into the community, and .8% (one person) advised moving out of the community. One recurrent issue raised by several participants in this category is the importance of maintaining English as the "language of the land" or community, and enforcing the teaching and usage of English among incoming immigrants.

When prompted for recommendations for policy makers, one of the most prevalent issues that participants continually emphasized was the stress that immigration places on the community's infrastructure. Specific concerns included taxes; adequate housing; services in healthcare, welfare, education, and law enforcement; and the impact on local businesses. Illegal immigration was another major concern that participants believed policy makers were out of touch with as it relates to rural communities. While most didn't offer specific solutions, some asserted that immigration laws should be eased into, with more restrictions on illegal immigrants. One said, "I think we need to control them better; they need to be citizens and speak English." "We are too easy to let them have their own way and language and not demand anything of them," and "Don't give in to immigrants. Lexington has catered to them. We are nobodies anymore." The general theme in this category is one of anger and resentment toward immigrants and frustration with the lack of empathy on the part of policymakers.

Participants were asked to offer advice to incoming immigrants and all but 3.2% eagerly obliged. A recurring theme mentioned by 41.4% of participants related to the English language and its use at the very least in public contexts. While participants seemed to sympathize with the difficulty in learning a language, they want to be able to communicate with immigrants. Whereas some recognized the importance of keeping one's culture, 46% would prefer that the immigrants assimilate, adjust to life in America, and abide by local rules and regulations. Eighteen percent specifically stated their desire for immigrants to feel welcomed into the community. Six percent were critical of immigrants and stressed immigrants' obligation to care for their property, contribute to the community, and keep in mind that "there is no free ride."

The researchers invited participants to select one of the following responses that best fit how they feel about their community because of immigration: My community is better, More interesting, Worse, Forever changed, or free response. Five percent believe their community is better because of immigration; 24.39% believe their community is more interesting because of immigration; 11 percent believe their community is worse, and 64.22% believe their community is forever changed. About eight percent (8.1%) offered their own assessment, stating, "They have helped, but they have run a lot of people out of town and several businesses out of town," "Our community is devastated because of immigrants," and "It couldn't be any worse if it had to be."

Participants were asked to assess their community's adjustment to immigration and seemed to fall along three lines: 58% viewed their community's adjustment as effective or positive; 24.4% viewed the community's response as negative and challenging; and 18% viewed the adjustment as an ongoing process with positive and negative attributes. Some positive comments were, "Overall we've handled it fairly well" and "I feel that Lexington has really accepted them and done everything they could possibly do, and are still doing that." Some negative comments were, "I really don't think it has adjusted; it is overwhelmed and tolerated. They haven't immigrated; they've invaded" and "It's bent over backwards for them, given them anything and everything their little heart's desire." As for those who believe that the adjustment is continuing, "I don't know that it's completely adjusted yet" and "As a whole, it's still in the process. We've gone through different stages of adjustment." The survey ended by offering participants the opportunity to provide additional input. Fifty-four percent made no additional comments, while the rest elaborated on issues related to language, housing, services, crime, and the increased cultural awareness of the community.

Focus Groups

Two focus group sessions were conducted in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes and experiences of participants. The group process was fairly fluid, and all participants responded to all questions. The average group session was approximately two hours and could have been extended much longer, as members were eager to share. This section details the outcome of both groups, and direct quotations will be used to best reflect the sentiments of members. The groups began by discussing the impact of immigration on their community as a whole and the feedback was mostly positive. "If you are going to have a community, you need people" and "Immigration has done wonders for the community" best described how members felt. Group members couldn't overlook the benefits of immigration, and as one stated, "There were a lot of vacant houses, so many who didn't have jobs…, with immigration you start to see life coming back into the community." However, they also commented on the fact that the community was ill prepared for the wave of immigrants and suffered because of it. "People are not comfortable with new [newcomers or immigrants], a lot of white flight, which has subsided now." As for the particular areas in which immigration impacted the community, participants seemed to point out more negative aspects such as the burden on schools, "stress on public resources," and money leaving the county to immigrants' homeland. Comments such as "We are the United Nations of Nebraska" and "Watched the children's colors change; it's getting to be more of a melting pot" reflect some of the positive feelings of the members.

Of interest to the study were the initial changes that residents observed as immigrants entered the community. The responses were interesting as participants shared the following comments: "All of a sudden there were a lot more people," "low riding SUVs," "traffic," "loud music," "hearing Spanish spoken on the streets," "having to translate in my head," and "trash on my side of town." Many participants indicated having no prior opinion of immigration until it became real to their community. One noted that prior to immigration the community lost a major industry, and it had been proposed that someone should write the following sentence on the water tower: "Last one to leave town, turn off the lights." This reversal of the community's economic fortunes explains the sense of appreciation and respect that participants expressed towards immigrants, including their desire to create a better life for their families and the tremendous challenges they confront. They described the immigrants as "children of God," "incredibly brave people," and "accommodating people." They appreciated their determination and noted, "I wouldn't have the courage to leave my country" and "They probably suffered a lot of the things that our ancestors suffered entering Ellis Island." Some of the participants noted that getting to know the immigrants has influenced their personal outlook on immigration. "The plight of

immigrants opens your heart… it personalizes it" and "instead of being critical, you become more compassionate." Yet a predominant regret seems to revolve around the perception that the community may have catered too much to immigrants with little attention to their need to learn the U.S. culture.

Although participants recognized the contributions of immigrants and that "immigration is needed for commerce," they hold the government and industry responsible for bringing immigrants to communities without supporting the accommodations that localities and their tax payers are forced to bear. Blaming the government is a major theme that emerged in both focus groups, as members indicated that immigrants are used "when it is convenient for the U.S. …" "Our immigration laws in this country are totally messed up." One participant asserted, "I believe in immigration now–we need reform and to demand of government fairness for all immigrants."

Participants provided mixed reviews regarding the impact of immigration on businesses and services. On one hand, the population has increased, diversity has enriched and added to the excitement of shopping, and many services have been upgraded to meet new demands. Yet the community seems divided: "The white people have tried to isolate themselves and the immigrants haven't felt welcomed." Some of the most influential changes in the community relate to community members banding together to address community needs. One member stated, "It made us look at ourselves more, ask what would you do in that situation. Immigration helped the community to cooperate with each other." New stores, churches, and educational approaches were positives, but the increase in unfunded state and federal government mandates and increased crime rate proved strenuous for the community.

Participants were proud of their Lexington's response to the large number of immigrants and recognized that there had been "a lot of growing pains." Despite initial shock and anxiety, community leaders and members "stepped up to the plate." They felt optimistic for the future of their community and foresaw additional growth, the need to attract more industry, more skilled labor, and the need to market their community. The future will see needs for additional housing, hotels, and restaurants. Some of the concerns for the future related to the possible relocation of the meat-processing plant, which would have a devastating effect on the community. Another major concern focused on changes in national immigration laws, especially the deportation of illegal immigrant. Participants noted, "It took Lexington fifteen years to stabilize, it would destabilize the community," "It will rip this town apart." Another added, "If 20 percent of workforce is illegal….that is 400 people gone….to see 200 houses vacant, wow" and "Economy nationwide could not stand to ship all back, it would collapse," "We've got to have them–who else would do the jobs they do for the wages they do and work hard?"

Participants were asked to provide suggestions for incoming immigrants and in response urged them to learn the language, to be patient with local residents who may be struggling with the changes to their community, respect the culture of the land, and work to become actively involved in the communities they enter. They encourage communities that may be facing similar immigration challenges to "be flexible," "patient," "open minded," "look for the good, there will be bad and hard times," and to recognize that despite any preparation, there will be surprises. Most importantly, they recommend educating community members about incoming immigrants and the potential changes they will bring, along with learning from the experiences of other communities to avoid making costly mistakes.

Discussion

The outcome of the study reveals the personal journey, growing pains, current struggles and future fears of long-term residents whose community was forever changed because of immigration. Their community was transformed in every sense: the majority population became the minority, English took a back seat to Spanish, Hispanic stores replaced white downtown businesses, and diversity became an inescapable reality. The residents' story reveals the reality of endangered rural communities fighting to survive, seeking continued existence through the recruitment of industries that mainly employ vulnerable immigrants in pursuit of a better life. The interdependent reality of rural communities and incoming immigrants creates an environment filled with paradoxes, forced relationships, and seemingly endless adaptations for both. The study further exposes the residents' need to process their transformation as a community. The absence of such a process promoted their willingness to participate in the study, especially through the anonymity of phone conversations and the safety of a focus group format with likeminded residents. Their struggle reveals the aftermath of community culture shock, collective identity crisis, and the makeover resulting from both. Moreover, the outcome confirms the many theoretical elements discussed in the literature review, namely the competing interests and struggle for social identity noted in the group conflict theory (Esses et. al, 1998), the in-group-out-group bias (Lee & Ottati, 2002), and group inclusion or group threat as outcomes of immigration (Pratto and Lemieux, 2001).

The community's distress is compounded by the overwhelming and continuous needs that immigrants bring with them and the call for communities to accommodate them. Despite the cultural erosion of a traditional way of life, this is a price that communities are more than willing to pay in order to preserve their existence. While forced, at least initially, relationships seem to be one avenue for promoting tolerance, understanding, and mutuality. Residents seem to appreciate the economic contribution of immigrants to the community but regret the astonishing price they had to pay. The Caucasian majority culture, English language, community solidarity, community complexion, a sense of safety and familiarity, and lower taxes were sacrificed to preserve the community. Having gone through years of struggle and achieving the growth they had hoped for, long-term residents are now fearful that the same government that abandoned them in their time of need and betrayed their trust will now pull the rug from under them. They oppose any governmental policy changes that would undermine the stability and success they've achieved. The issue of illegal immigration is a concern they want the government to take corrective action on and to halt. However, they desire fair treatment for the legal immigrants who are now part of their community.

While total assimilation seems like an ideal solution for most participants, they realize that it is unrealistic and instead wish for the immigrants to meet them halfway. They want immigrants to respect American culture and language, take an interest in their new communities and contribute to their progress, and to appreciate the struggle of immigrants who have come before them. They want immigrants to understand the sacrifices made by the community and its residents to accommodate their needs and to be accountable for their own needs and actions as well. The researchers cannot overstate the significance of language in breaking down barriers, promoting cross-cultural communication, and supporting long-term community solidarity.

The study highlights the need for social work intervention and the impressive role social workers can play by utilizing their knowledge and skills. This is an opportunity for the profession to revive its role in developing communities, enriching their resources and promoting the healthy adaptation of citizens. Focusing on strengths, providing consultation and education, assessing resources, framing solutions, mediating, and networking are just a few of the social work skills that would be helpful in bringing together immigrants, longtime residents, and community leaders in promoting solutions as communities address immigration. Advocacy,

social action, and the promotion of economic justice can be neutrally utilized to benefit communities, residents, and immigrants as they engage in collective redefinition of their identities and mission. Social workers can be employed by communities to work with meatpacking companies to make policy and program provisions that are fair to communities and immigrants. They can be employed by many agencies to encourage multicultural practices, bridge gaps, connect people with resources, and ensure that all voices are heard. The roles and possibilities are endless for social workers in community development and practice, and communities are desperately needing and seeking professionals with such expertise. In fact, as a consequence of immigration, rural and urban Midwestern communities are now hiring school social workers to problem-solve adaptation issues and work toward more responsive services for students and families. One of Lexington's churches hired a social worker specifically to help the immigrants and community members. This strategy demonstrates recognition of the knowledge and expertise that social workers possess and can employ in community development and practice. Police departments and other community agencies that were reluctant to hire social workers in the past are now open to hiring them. However, social workers shouldn't wait for an invitation, and need to proactively market their skills and educate communities in their unique role and relevance.

This groundbreaking study and its fresh presentation of residents' perspectives does have some limitations as it made no distinctions for gender, age, or immigrant generation status of longtime residents. The crucial perspective of immigrants, legal or illegal, is absent and deserves its own in-depth research analysis to bring about a more holistic understanding of the immigration issue. The inclusion of immigrants' perspective in this study would have resulted in superficial coverage of all views that would undermine content and quality while making the manuscript too lengthy for publication in a scholarly journal. Since immigration seems to have a unique impact on rural communities, a model is needed to help communities plan for the immigrants' arrival and the adaptation of both the immigrants and local residents. Several participants noted that religion and churches played a strong role in changing their views and actions in reference to immigrants and it would be interesting to explore such an impact. The implications of this study are far reaching for community and state leaders who design programs and policies impacting rural settings and their residents. Policymakers need to heed the call of rural residents to draft policies that are compassionate toward all people and take into account the limited resources of rural communities and their desire to survive. Finally, immigrants should understand that while their struggle is unique to them, it is not new to the country and that successful adaptation is best accomplished through their involvement and partnering with residents as they jointly confront local, national, and global challenges.

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