

***El Cambio, el Callejón, el Pueblo, y la Migra\**:  
An Examination of Ecological Influences on  
Immigrant Latino Families' Adjustment in North Central Indiana**

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*\*El Cambio, el Callejón, el Pueblo, y la Migra*: These phrases translate to “the change, the alley, the community and the immigration authorities.”

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examined the adjustment experiences of immigrant Latino families in a rural Midwestern community during a time of major demographic changes, economic instability, and a sometimes hostile social and political climate. The sample consisted of 63 immigrant Latino parents who resided in North Central Indiana. Using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model as a guide and ethnographic methodology, we explored (a) immigrants’ experiences within the social, economic, and political landscapes of their new community, and (b) the effect of these influences on immigrant adjustment. Findings demonstrated that *familismo* proved to be a source of social capital for the families. Other findings are discussed, as well as suggestions for working with immigrant families.

*Keywords:* immigrant Latino families, Bronfenbrenner, family adjustment

Immigration rates in the United States reached levels not experienced since the early 1900s, propelled by immigration from Latin America, primarily from Mexico, and also from Central and South America, and the Caribbean (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Often the families immigrated to the United States because of the possibilities of providing their children better educational and economic opportunities (Millard & Chapa, 2004). In a relatively short period of time, Latinos became the largest ethnic minority in the United States, decades earlier than predicted, with immigrant Latinos accounting for more than half of the entire foreign-born population in the United States. Specifically, immigration increased in new locations throughout the Midwest (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Simultaneously, European American populations declined, which resulted in a broad demographic shift referred to as the “browning of the Midwest” (Aponte & Siles, 1997). For example, Gouveia and Stull (1997) researched the migration and settlement of Latinos in Nebraska during a time of economic prosperity in the late 1990s and the challenges of working in the meatpacking industry. Other researchers continued to document the increasing demographics throughout the Midwest region and how it impacted different social and economic systems (Valdes, 2000). Latinos were drawn to the economic possibilities in the late 1990s; however, as a result of economic shifts and anti-immigration sentiment toward Latinos, families soon found themselves in a different Midwest than they originally settled.

From a social perspective, Latino immigrant families entered a “perfect storm” as the rapid increases in the Latino immigrant population occurred in the context of economic instability, heightened discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment, and political rhetoric (Viramontez Anguiano, Salinas, & Garcia, 2010). Moreover, as the perception grew that federal immigration policy failed to properly address unauthorized<sup>1</sup> immigration, state and local

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<sup>1</sup> The term *unauthorized* is used here over use of the terms *illegal* or *undocumented*, following Passel (2007).

governments passed restrictive legislation limiting access to educational, employment, housing, social, and government services (Chavez & Provine, 2009).

A major objective of the study was to examine the adjustment experiences of immigrant Latino families in a rural North Central Indiana community during a time of rapid demographic change, economic instability, and a sometimes hostile social and political climate. We used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) to provide a theoretical perspective to describe the positive and negative experiences that families and their individual members encountered as they resettled in a different part of the United States from most other Mexican and Central American immigrants.

### **Literature Review**

Since 1990, the Latino population in Indiana tripled from 1.8% to 6%. In North Central Indiana, specifically in Elkhart County, the Latino population increased over 700% from 1.9% to 14.1 % of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Similar to the La

The majority of these immigrant Latino families, primarily from Mexico and Central America, came to North Central Indiana for the economic opportunities available in the light manufacturing industry, specifically the recreational vehicle industry (Guzman, Jara, & Armet, 2011). For most families, better jobs, better schools, and safer communities were a welcome alternative to the poverty and growing social and political issues in Mexico and Latin America. Families believed this rural Midwestern region would provide a better quality of life than large cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago.

Despite the appeal of a small Midwestern community, the process of adjustment for immigrant Latino families was difficult. As with prior generations of immigrants, a number of varied familial, social, cultural, and economic factors made acclimating to life in their new environment a continual challenge. The reality of limited English language proficiency, as well as cultural differences between the mainstream culture in Indiana and the Latino culture, served as a barrier. The economic difficulties that immigrant families faced were due to the combination of hurdles related to occupational and educational opportunities. Often, immigrants worked in low-paying jobs and had a low level of educational attainment (Tumlin & Zimmerman, 2003). Latino immigrants typically worked in occupations that had dangerous working conditions and did not provide employment benefits. Specifically, immigrant Latinos were often assigned to activities in the factory that were more strenuous and lacked permanency, which prevented access to benefits. The fast pace and the physical nature of the work included assembling large objects; creating big molds, and using and making plastics, for RVs, boats, and other vehicles; lifting heavy objects that required strength and speed for the next station; and other grueling labor for long shifts with minimal breaks. Although the majority of the Latino families worked in industries that connected to recreational vehicle production, there were pockets of families that worked in food processing and agriculture, which also contained difficult work conditions. This delineation of employment placement created a class of individuals who filled these occupations that others didn't want to do.

In general, immigrant Latino families, particularly Mexican families, had the highest rates of poverty and the lowest median family income of any racial or ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The same trend occurred in Elkhart County, and immigrant Latino families were particularly vulnerable during the economic decline. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2010), the economic downturn precipitated by the collapse of the housing market in 2008 resulted in real gross domestic product (GDP) declines for all regions of the country, with the Great Lakes region of the Midwest facing the sharpest drop-off in real GDP in the nation. Between 2007 and 2009, the economic conditions within Elkhart County declined dramatically across a number of indicators: unemployment more than doubled from 7.5% to 16.1%; median household income dropped by 16%, from \$49,200 to \$42,700. Meanwhile, the ranks of families living below poverty increased from 8% to 12%, with nearly 1 in 4 families with children living below poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). For immigrant Latino families, this grim economic reality compounded the existing difficulty of adjusting to life in their new communities.

Beyond a bleak economic landscape, immigrant Latino families grappled with cultural discontinuity in adjusting to life in North Central Indiana. The competing cultural and familial beliefs often resulted in a stressful adjustment (Casey, Blewett, & Call, 2003; Gutierrez, Yeakley, & Ortega, 2000). For example, integration into day-to-day life was a regular struggle as a result of limited English language proficiency, which inhibited access to different ecological systems including the schools, the community, and government agencies. At the cultural level, the families struggled with the value system differences between Latino family norms and those of the mainstream society.

Research has documented that Latino families are sociocentric, which is conducive to the development of social capital (Viramontez Anguiano et al., 2010) where collective group orientation is placed before the individual. At the center of the social network is *la familia* that focuses on enriching the life of its members through the dissemination of social capital through social, cultural, economic, and spiritual support. This source of social capital has been defined as *familismo*, (familism) which begins in the family and stems out to the Latino community (Ayon, Marsiglia, & Bermudez-Parsai, 2010). Trueba (2002) determined that social capital within Latino families and their communities serves as a resiliency buffer.

To understand immigrant family adjustment, Payne (2005) suggested that it is essential to know how different systems influence the family system and its individual members. He also indicated that ecological theory provides insight on the influence of social, economic, and political factors on family systems, and how families adjust to these influences. Bacallao and Smokowski (2007) found that an immigrant Latino family's decision to immigrate to the United States for economic and educational mobility was often met with trade-offs in the family system's adjustment as it pertained to roles, communication, family values, and other aspects. In the following section, we provide a contextual illustration of how ecological theory can help explain the Latino family adjustment process.

### **Ecological Systems Theory and Immigrant Latino Family Adjustment**

For this study, Bronfenbrenner's (1989) model provided insight as to how ecological factors may differentially impact immigrant Latino family systems depending on the system level. Specifically, for the current study, understanding how ecological factors serve as strengths for adjustment or as barriers creates a holistic understanding of the settlement of immigrant Latino families in North Central Indiana. Special attention was given to understand how the concepts of place and time are manifested across centric circles and how these elements define the experiences of families (see Figure 1).

The macrosystem—the outermost centric circle—consists of overarching patterns of micro-, meso-, and exosystems' characteristics of a given culture, or broader social context (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). It makes particular reference to developmental belief systems. Resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange are embedded in each of these systems. In other words, the macrosystem may be thought of as the societal blueprint for a particular culture.

Research has found that macrosystem realities, including economic struggles, cultural and ethnic differences, and political ideologies, have been apparent for immigrant Latino families during adjustment to mainstream society in the United States (Viramontez Anguiano et al., 2010). Berns (2010), who used the Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory to explain the relationship between families and other social systems, illustrated that families within macrosystems often follow patterns of adjustment, including low-context or high-context orientation. High-context orientation is concentrated on collective group orientation and welfare, traditional family values, and cooperation, versus low-context orientation, which often includes mainstream families and is more focused on competition, individuality, and progress.

The next innermost concentric circle, the exosystem, reflects a setting in which children do not actually participate; rather, this system indirectly impacts the child and his or her family, for example, parents' jobs, the school board, the city council, and/or other governing bodies (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). For Latinos, research has documented that exosystem-level shifting political ideologies regarding immigration in the United States have influenced the adoption of policies and laws targeting immigrants (Belanger, 2010). Closer to the family is the mesosystem-level concentric circle, defined as the interrelationships between two or more of a person's microsystems (e.g., home and school, school and community), which was definitely impacting the families' adjustment. Prior research has documented that, at the mesosystem level, increases in Latino student population in U.S. schools create language and cultural challenges for families and schools alike (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992).

Bronfenbrenner (1989) described the innermost circle, the microsystem, as the immediate setting where a child is at a particular time (e.g., the family, the school, the community). Previous research has shown how Latino families struggle to find a balance between mainstream expectations and Latino family value systems, including religious and cultural customs (De Guzman, DeLeon, Gonzalez-Kruger, & Cantarero, 2010).

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1989) also described the chronosystem, which represents temporal changes in the ecological systems or within individuals, producing new conditions that affect development through the interrelationships in the concentric circles. The importance of the concept of time, the chronosystem, and the relationship with place have been critical to the migration and immigration of Latino families in the United States. Latino families migrating to the Midwest have faced distinct experiences over the last 100 years, often associated with the economic and political issues affecting the region (Aponte & Siles, 1997).

## Methods

A large research project explored how different ecological factors impact immigrant Latino families in North Central Indiana. The methods presented here, including the procedure, protocol, and the data analysis, were part of that project. This specific study focused on the familial, social, economic, and political factors that impacted family adjustment. The sample and research design are discussed in the Results and Discussion section.

### Procedure

We decided to have one of us, Viramontez Anguiano, serve as an active participant based on Spradley's (1979) model, spending numerous hours with family members and relevant others. From this point forward, he will be referred to as the *primary researcher* in the context of this study. The primary researcher also stressed at the onset of the ethnography that the research was intended to be a mutual learning experience.

Respondents were recruited through a purposive manner. Different Latino community leaders and others helped identify families for the study. No material incentives were offered to the participants. The study received approval by the sponsoring university's institutional review board and was approved by the local community school's educational board.

As part of the ethnography, it was important to understand the families and their realities through a process of participant observation. Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland (1998) stated that

the method of participant observation includes the explicit use in behavioral analysis and recording of information gained from participating and observing. Moreover, the participant observer takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of the people being studied. (pp. 259-260).

For example, Spradley (1980) developed a model that identified levels of participant observation as a method to collect data in a naturalistic setting by researchers who observed and/or took part in the common and uncommon lives of the participants.

As described by Spradley's model (1980), the primary researcher was engaged at various levels of participant observation. The primary researcher served as an active participant with the immigrant Latino families through interactions including daily activities (dinners and family

events), rituals (church and community events), and other discussions (after-school programming). Over the course of 2 years and numerous interactions and observations in the home, school, and community settings, the primary researcher became an active participant as described by Spradley's model. He lived in the community and, as a result of his cultural and educational outreach, the families invited him to participate in their lives. We—the primary researcher and Reyes, henceforth referred to in the context of this study as *secondary researcher*—were also invited to be active participants in the school and community environments, which involved family life outreach, Latino-centric educational programming, and general advocacy. The primary researcher is fluent in Spanish, the son of immigrants, and has had almost 20 years of experience working with immigrant Latino families, which served as a natural bridge to being an active participant. The secondary researcher and Chavez, henceforth referred to in the context of this study as *tertiary researcher*, had similar connections to the Latino community: We are all Latino, fluent in Spanish, and have immigrant backgrounds.

### **Interview Protocol**

As part of the overarching ethnography, the data collection also included semi-structured individual interviews, each of which lasted approximately 1 hour. Interviews were conducted in the home or an alternate convenient and safe environment, including churches, community-based organizations, and local businesses. Families, primarily adults, were invited to participate in the interviews; however, other family members were also allowed to be present during interviews. Consent forms were provided at the beginning of the individual interviews. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were conducted primarily in Spanish. Specifically, the interviews were conducted first and served as an introduction to the families with the goal of understanding their adjustment, which fed into the larger ethnography including participant observations and interactions. Open-ended guided questions included content concerning family values and adjustment, immigration and migration, relationships with other social systems (including schools and community), the role of leadership, and the general adjustment process (which included social and political factors that impacted North Central Indiana). For example, questions included were: *If you are not from North Central Indiana, how have you adjusted to this region? Please provide examples.* And: *What roles have members of the Latino community—including individuals, churches and community organizations—taken to work with you to ensure your child's education success? Please provide examples.* The complete protocol has been included in Appendix A.

The interview protocol was based on the previous literature that focused on immigrant Latino families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992) and the combined 35 years of experience that we had researching and working with immigrant Latino families. Moreover, because of the nature of ethnographic methods, respondents were asked to speak freely about their experience in North Central Indiana. It was not uncommon for the primary researcher to engage in follow-up interactions with the families, which enhanced the study.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by focusing on the different components of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory while looking at various experiences that impacted the families and their adjustment. A theme analysis—the process of extracting recurring themes from data—was conducted of all the data that was collected from the different components of the ethnography, including the interviews, observations, and interactions. Specifically, as a result of numerous hours of observing and interacting with the families and relevant others, themes were identified. Creswell (2003) stated that (a) ethnography consists of different components including interviews, observations, and multiple interactions with respondents, and (b) themes develop from the components through numerous hours of interactions with respondents. In this study, themes developed as a result of the primary and secondary researchers being active participants with the families, the community, and relevant others. In ethnography, often the initial interview serves as an introduction to the respondents. Through further participant observation and active participation through multiple interactions, different themes begin to develop as a result of the various components of data collection, including the interviews, observations, and interactions. Through field notes and field experiences, the ability to understand these themes in the ecological context of North Central Indiana became more apparent. Specifically, we triangulated the data by consistently revisiting the families and the community in order to bring more confidence to the findings. These themes were illustrated through the use of thick descriptions or quotations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As Creswell (2003) suggested, the data was mined for clarity in order to gain more detail on significant patterns and themes. A member check was also conducted to bring more trustworthiness to the findings. Specifically, in order to gain confidence in the data, the primary researcher continuously interacted with the respondents to verify the emerging themes and confirm what the respondents shared. Saturation of the data was determined through the analysis as a result of recurring themes throughout the overarching ethnography and its components.

## Results and Discussion

### Sample

The sample consisted of Latino families who resided in North Central Indiana. The respondents consisted of 63 immigrant Latino parents (40 families). Of the 40 families, 37 were from Mexico, 1 from Nicaragua, 1 from El Salvador, and 1 from Honduras. The parents' average age was 41 for mothers and 42 for fathers. The average number of children per family was 3. The parents' educational levels ranged from elementary to graduate studies. Eleven of the parents completed 6 years or fewer of formal education in Latin America. Twenty-four of the parents had completed grades 7-11. Fifteen of the parents completed 12 years of schooling in Latin America and 1 in the United States. Three of the participants completed 2 years of college education, and nine obtained a college degree. Out of these, five obtained their bachelor's degree in Latin America; two completed a master's degree in the United States, and two completed a doctorate degree in Latin America. The overwhelming majority of the respondents were employed by the light manufacturing industry. There were 38 individuals that worked in the light manufacturing sector: 25 males and 13 females. There were 14 homemakers, of which 13 were

female and 1 was male. The rest of the respondents were employed in the following industries: four business owners, two in the service industry, one in health care, one in a nonprofit social services agency, and one in an automotive repair center. Two respondents did not reply to the occupation question.

### **Ethnographic Design**

This ethnographic study was designed to gain a holistic understanding of the adjustment experiences of immigrant Latino families within a small community in a Midwestern state. Moreover, through participant observation and active participation, this design functioned on a continual basis in an effort to capture the realities of the respondents as recommended by Creswell (2003). In the present study, the primary researcher served as the main ethnographer who collected data, including conducting the qualitative interviews, participating in observations of families and the community, and serving as an active participant. He also led in the analysis, writing of the results, and discussion. The secondary researcher also served as an ethnographer by collecting data, including interviews and observation. All of us contributed to analysis of data and the writing of the manuscript.

Creswell (2003) stated that ethnography consists of different components—including interviews, observations, and multiple interactions with respondents—and themes develop from the components through numerous hours of interactions with respondents. In this study, themes developed as a result of the primary and secondary researchers being active participants with the families, the community, and relevant others. In ethnography, the initial interview commonly serves as an introduction to the respondents. Through further participant observation and active participation by way of multiple interactions, different themes begin to develop as a result of the different components of data collection, including the interviews, observations, and interactions. Through field notes and field experiences, the ability to understand these themes in the ecological context of North Central Indiana became more apparent. Specifically, we triangulated the data by consistently revisiting the families and the community in order to bring more confidence to the findings. These themes are illustrated in the results section through the use of thick descriptions or quotations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Creswell (2003) suggested that data should be mined for clarity in order to gain more detail on significant patterns and themes. A member check was also conducted to bring more trustworthiness to the findings. Specifically, in order to gain confidence in the data, the primary researcher continuously interacted with the respondents to verify the emerging themes and confirm what the respondents shared. Saturation of the data was determined through the analysis as a result of recurring themes throughout the overarching ethnography and its components. The Spanish interviews were transcribed and translated. The English interviews were transcribed. What follows is interpretation of the results and discussion.

### **Thematic Results**

The aim of the study was to delineate how different ecological factors (familial, social, economic and political) impacted the family adjustment process of immigrant Latino families in North Central Indiana. To better understand how the adjustment process of the families unfolded, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was utilized as a lens to interpret how the families

responded to the different ecological influences. Moreover, through this lens understanding how the families utilized their strengths in the adjustment process is illustrated.

Within the study, the key themes that emerged included *el cambio*, “the change” (family adjustment and the cultural and linguistic divide in the Midwest); *el callejón*, “the back alley” (a response to existing economic realities and marginalization that developed for these families); *el pueblo*, “the community” (response as a community); and *la migra*, “the immigration authorities” (the criminalization of the family). An important aspect that transcends these themes was the reality of a cultural and linguistic chasm between the families and the region.

### ***El Cambio: Family Adjustment, and the Cultural and Linguistic Divide***

The families experienced a linguistic and cultural divide, an example of a macrosystem reality, where the macrosystem serves as the culture system. In this case, high-context Latino families were in the process of adjusting culturally and linguistically to life in mainstream Indiana. An analysis of this experience at the chronosystem level revealed that a significant number of changes have taken place in the region in less than 20 years. The dramatic increase in the Latino population required that reciprocal adjustment between the mainstream and the immigrant families become a community reality. This process of adjustment was accompanied by harsh economic hardship in light of the nationwide recession. The interaction between social and economic changes contributed politically to a growing anti-immigrant sentiment. All of those interviewed stated that their families experienced a cultural divide as they attempted to adjust to living in a small city in North Central Indiana. According to Bronfenbrenner (1989) they were experiencing the influence of the macrosystem, which included frustration over limited English skills and a lack of understanding of mainstream American values. These barriers were evident as one woman shared her experiences:

Traditionally, it is the mother [who is] the one demanding that the child does his homework. In Mexico, the mother teaches mathematics to the child very early; we taught them the multiplying table. Here, we don't know English so we don't do it. The same in Spanish: We teach them to read and write at home, with syllables, but in this country we don't know how to spell, the language, it is impossible to teach our kids how to read and write. The role of the Mexican mother is diminished in this country.

This respondent's experience further documented the macrosystem realities among different social systems and how that specifically influenced the exosystem within the American educational systems. Another parent expressed similar frustrations at the macrosystem level and mesosystem interactions with her local school. She stated:

In my country, I was very involved in my older children's education and activities outside of school. Here I struggle with the language and knowing how to obtain opportunities for my children. Everything is different here, I go to meetings but I struggle to follow along. The Spanish-speaking liaison helps, but it is not the same. I sometimes feel that I am not in control of my children's education and future because of my lack of

knowing English and not understanding the American educational system and society. It can be very frustrating.

Despite the obstacles at the macrosystem and exosystem levels, the families and their communities demonstrated a tremendous amount of cohesion and resiliency. In many cases, other family members or Latino community members served as a social support through a high-context collective web that buffered some of the challenges for the families. This value has been identified as *familismo* that begins within the family and extends into the Latino community (Viramontez Anguiano, Salinas & Garcia, 2010). To offset struggles at the macrosystem, the families often drew from their social networks, including extended families at the mesosystem level. It was particularly striking that, despite the numerous challenges faced in this Midwestern community, the families and the immigrant community were able to maintain a strong sense of *familismo* through social networks. Through their active participation, we found that the families and their community served as a backbone of support for one another. For instance, one woman expressed how extended family had played a critical role when she was starting her career and adjusting to starting a family:

When I...arrived...I had studied [at the] university for 2 years. I had a technical career of teaching. I wanted to study here because I did not want to go to a factory. I went to a career center. I had a niece who went to translate for me. She went with me for 15 days and then the rest of the 2 years, I went by myself. It was hard. I was pregnant when I was still there.

Another woman stressed how the community helped her learn English at her place of employment:

At the beginning, it was a little difficult because I didn't speak English, but in the same restaurant I began working they paid me a little and the lady was teaching me, and my husband told me, "They pay you too little." And I told him, if you look at it from a different perspective, they are not paying a little because they are teaching me how to cook, they are teaching me English, and they pay me.

The cultural divide was another important aspect in understanding macrosystem influences in the adjustment of Latino families in the Midwest. The issue of cultural identity was evident in all the families in this study. The importance of retaining the Latino identity was consistent with prior literature, which demonstrates that immigrant Latino families within the first three generations value and often stress the importance of the Latino identity with an emphasis on the family rather than the individual, as well as respect, the Spanish language, and cultural traditions (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Moreover, we consistently encountered this theme in the data among the families regardless of the setting, whether it was the home, the community, or the schools. We also found that the families were deeply concerned about the cultural divide and how that impacted not only their own families but also the entire Latino community. One woman's reflection was an illustration of what the majority of the families believed. She discussed how her efforts to preserve her Mexican traditions and the Spanish language were closely intertwined. Her ability to maintain these elements provided a source of pride and strength for her and her family. She stated:

We stress to our children that they need to learn our customs and traditions. The importance of family values and religion has been reinforced since they were children. We have stressed the importance of speaking Spanish in the home. All of our children speak Spanish, they are proud to be of Mexican background, but they have also enjoyed their experience in Indiana.

On the other hand, a man shared about how different the culture was in the United States, yet he and his wife still wanted to instill the importance of respect of culture and family unity in their children. He stated:

The *Americanos* are not as strict as we are with our children. We want the children to be respectful and put family and God first. I think that they give their children too much freedom. If a child has too much freedom, they [*sic*] could end up making some wrong choices. Hispanics believe that they should show discipline with the children and be supporting and motivating.

The need to preserve their Latino culture while striking a balance for their children in mainstream American society was a reoccurring ecological theme at the macrosystem level that was observed throughout the ethnography. The families expressed a sense of disconnection because of language barriers, whether in the school, the community, or the workplace. However, a clear aspect about the respondents through the constant exposure to the families and the community was their cohesion to their families, culture, and the Latino community.

### ***El Callejón: Back Alley***

The economic realities of Latino families in North Central Indiana was evident as the families struggled to maintain a place on the “main street” and found themselves more and more in the *callejón*. *Callejón* literally translates to “back alley” in Spanish; however, across Latin America it is commonly understood that *el callejón* serves as a space among neighbors within a larger community or neighborhood. In this case, *el callejón* captures the unique experiences of the families. Specifically, *el callejón* illustrates the challenges between the macrosystem and the chronosystem—specifically, the interaction between place and time in responding to the daunting struggles brought about by the economic crisis in the region at that time. Some examples of barriers that the families faced include loss of jobs, limitations in meeting basic needs, housing instability, and multiple families living in one household. These experiences pushed families to the margins of the community, increasing their level of isolation and stress, thus highlighting the experience of *el callejón*. It was often difficult for us to observe the economic struggles that the families were facing over the course of 2 years of the study. Clearly, North Central Indiana was no longer the place of economic opportunity that the families reminisced about with us as they had increasingly become marginalized. Prior research in Nebraska that explored the lives of Latinos in meatpacking plants illustrated similar finding concerning the marginalization of workers and their families, even though employment was not concentrated to agriculture (Gouveia & Stull, 1997).

The unemployment rate at a national level was about 9%, while in North Central Indiana, in particular Elkhart County, unemployment rose to 16% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). However, the unemployment rate was based on the mainstream population. For Latinos and African Americans the percentage was several points higher. On one hand, immigrant Latino families experienced a tremendous amount of economic success in the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, yet as the result of the economic crisis, more and more families were living in economic dire straits. Another important factor to consider about *el callejón* was that factories were eliminating jobs. As we observed through the interactions, observations, and the interviews over the course of the study, it was becoming more difficult for the immigrant families to secure a livable wage. This period of time in North Central Indiana personified changes at the chronosystem level, as many of the families had previously moved to the areas because of availability of jobs; however, this was no longer the case. One woman stated:

At one point you could be offered two and maybe three jobs at the different factories. They wanted hard workers who were willing to work long hours that the Americans would not work. Now it is hard to find one factory job, and the pay is less. It is more difficult for a person with no documents. I worry that my husband or I will lose our jobs. It is becoming more difficult to live in Indiana. Times have changed—now you hope to make it through the week and pay your bills.

One couple reported on how they were going to lose their home to foreclosure and how it was becoming more difficult to make it in the United States. The husband stated:

We have done our best to keep our home, but we cannot make the payments ever since I got hurt at work. I had to go through a couple of surgeries and I am not as strong as I used to be. Because of my injury I am not able to do the heavy work that the factory demands of me.

Clearly, the economic shift in Indiana impacted the livelihood of the families as they struggled to sustain their families. Occurrences of unemployment, foreclosures, and evictions become increasingly commonplace. Another reality that we observed over the course of the study was that the Latino community was experiencing the closings of Latino-based businesses. For example, one of the business owners, whose establishment had been in existence for almost 30 years, shared with us that at one point all the different Latino-based businesses—whether restaurants, bakeries, or clothing and merchandise stores—had plenty of clients. However, as a result of the economic crisis, she began to struggle to pay the expenses of the restaurant. She and her family were considering moving to Michigan and relocating the business. As the economic, social, and political realities at the macrosystem level continued to confound, at the microsystem level the families struggled within *el callejón*. This was difficult in an environment of social and economic marginalization.

### ***La Migra: Immigration Authorities***

Distinct issues associated with the importance of place or location were also evident in understanding the criminalization of the family. The rapid change in factors such as the social, political, and economic climates of the local community served to increase feelings of being

unwanted for Latino families. Within the Latino community, *la migra* generically refers to Immigration and Naturalization Services (now Immigration and Custom Enforcement, ICE), but is primarily associated with street-level immigration policy enforcement. Clearly, the region's political and social compass had changed. Previous research demonstrated that immigrant labor, whether authorized or unauthorized, served a vital role in the United States regardless of the economic circumstances (Acuña, 2010). Beyond economic realities, immigration policy and reform were beginning to have a direct impact on immigrant Latino families in North Central Indiana.

At the exosystem, state-level policies were being enacted that targeted the immigrant Latino families, restricting access to social services and creating state punishments for immigration violations (Meyer, Segreto, Carter, & Morse, 2012). Furthermore, at this particular time in the chronosystem, the recent change in law was paired with growing concern about anti-immigrant sentiment. Although the majority of the community supported the immigrant families, a growing segment was increasingly anti-immigrant.

Overwhelmingly, these ecological barriers were affirmed by the large majority of immigrant families who noted feelings of fear and alienation, and this was a sentiment echoed among Latino families regardless of their citizenship status. For many, this reflected a change from their prior experiences and expectations. Indeed, many of the families responded that changes in the local community affected their daily interactions with family members and with the community, as well as their perceptions regarding their prospects for the future in the United States. For example, Latino immigrant families reported feeling (a) excluded from the broader community, (b) targeted by police and officials, and (c) generally fearful within the community. For us, the reoccurring theme through the different components of the ethnography of not being wanted was often reiterated by the families. For example, one woman and her husband believed that they were trapped and did not have any freedom. The husband stated:

There is no freedom here, no more opportunity if you want to go out somewhere with your kids, like the movies. Many times you're scared to go out in public now.

The wife reinforced her husband's statement by saying:

Adapting—you can't adapt now. You have to go out to go to the store, but it's straight there and then back to the house. We go from home to work and back. We don't want our kids to be like us, we want them to be involved. We have them in swimming, karate, chorus.... We don't want them to feel like us, it's too hard.

The social realities of Latino families at the exosystem level were transformed by piecemeal immigration policy. Like many other localities, local governments placed greater requirements and restrictions on services for immigrants. As a result of local lawmaking restricting services for unauthorized individuals, for Latino families accomplishing basic daily tasks—such as driving to work or to their children's extracurricular activities, and even acquiring a hotel room for the night—became problematic. For example, due to changes in laws restricting access to drivers' licenses (requiring a social security number), a particularly memorable observation from the data that demonstrated the realities of difficulties for these families was that

of the morning commute to work. During the morning drive to the factories, witnessing Latino men riding their *bicicletas* and *mopetas* (bicycles and mopeds) was a common event and, for many, an everyday necessity as they could no longer legally drive an automobile. In the state of Indiana, one can drive a moped without an official driver's license. For many Latino families, the moped did not simply serve as a means of transportation but also became a symbol of the criminalization of their existence. One woman's reflection illustrated what the majority of the families were experiencing:

I had a license, but once they started demanding a social security number I could no longer get one. In the past when I was in an accident, I had a license and insurance. Now, I pray to God that nothing happens. That's the difference in "the North" [here], the climate has changed, and without papers it's gotten really bad.

Another man who had recently become an American citizen shared the following:

When I first came, I thought it would be White and Hispanic mixed together here. But, they [Anglos] have what is theirs. I try to communicate, but our people are used to not complaining. We take it all. The police here, they take advantage of that, they don't respect you. And the people have become used to it.

The overwhelming majority of the families, whether they were citizens, legal residents, or unauthorized workers, believed that the climate toward immigrants was changing in North Central Indiana. For the families, having to adjust to this new environment was at times overwhelming. For some families, considering returning to Latin America had never been part of the discussion but now is a possibility. For other families, the decision to stay and deal with the criminalization of their existence was a major struggle in the adjustment process. These changes in the political climate were clear examples of how changes at the chronosystem had shifted in North Central Indiana, resulting in the criminalization of families. That all families mentioned these concerns, regardless of their immigration status, displays the degree to which the political rhetoric, anti-immigrant sentiment, and restrictionist immigration policies impacted the entire Latino community. Clearly, this was more than dealing with discrimination; they feared the repercussion of being deported and being targeted by immigration policies.

### ***El Pueblo: Community***

Overall, the families reported that the decision to settle in this place, in North Central Indiana, was not only for economic reasons. They believed that the community was mostly pro-immigrant and open to diversity. They especially believed that a high percentage of the public servants supported them and were empathetic. However, almost all the immigrant Latino families agreed that there were some *Americanos* that demonstrated an anti-immigrant sentiment and, more so, an anti-Latino mentality regardless of whether individuals were authorized or unauthorized. In this manner, the *el pueblo* theme was consistent with the previous findings reported in this study. We witnessed this firsthand with some of the *Americanos* that they interacted with at various meetings. One individual who was well-known in the community as a leader summarized it for the primary researcher:

I don't have a problem with the Latino families; however, I do have a problem with the families who are here illegally." He followed with a slogan that he would consistently repeat throughout the ethnography: "What part of illegal do you not understand?"

The cornerstone of the Latino community was the social capital shared among the families with the goal to provide a better standard of living for future generations. At the mesosystem level, social capital served as a buffer to the economic decline and growing anti-immigrant sentiment and policy. For example, for Latinos, social capital was rooted in *la familia* (the family) and branched out into *el pueblo* (the community). The life source of the community success was the consciousness of social capital. That is, for *el pueblo* it was important to share and give resources that would benefit the Latino community and its future. Social capital, broadly defined, was the means to understand how resources are acquired through social relationships and networks and how these relationships can be fostered or developed to support the success of a family and its community (Portes, 1998).

For the families in North Central Indiana, social capital served as an ecological strength in their survival, advocacy, and hope. Throughout the region, different players such as the families, the Latino community, religious organizations, and relevant others served various roles in dispensing and receiving social capital. This observation of social capital "in action" was made on a daily basis by the primary and secondary researchers. Moreover, the respondents consistently reinforced the importance of social capital to the primary and secondary researchers in their interactions. For example, it was important for us to observe how the families and the communities utilized social capital for the betterment of the Latino community through programming and events that promoted education at all levels, healthy families and basic needs, and the overall general well-being of Latino families and their children. Overwhelmingly, the respondents agreed that the families would encounter a harder existence if they did not have the buffer of social capital. One Latino male stated:

I have been here for over 20 years and we have encountered prejudice, discrimination, racism at every level; however, our community has endured. Whenever we need the Latino families, business[es], church[es], newspaper, and radio to rally around a need or a cause, Latinos support us by the hundreds. Although there are some *Americanos* organizations and individuals who may not want us to be here, I have found the majority of *Americanos* to be supportive of our community. The mayor and other prominent leaders in the city and the county have been open about how we make the community strong through our work and our culture.

Another Latino male stated:

We have to work together as a community to deal with the challenges that we face, whether it deals with immigration issues or helping our young people earn scholarships. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. struggled and fought for the rights of Black families so they would have a better life in America, Cesar Chavez fought for earlier generations of Latinos—we need to fight for our future, our children. It doesn't matter how much education you have, if you speak English or not or if you are legally here we have to be one community working towards the same goals to better our community.

Yet another Latino woman stated:

We have to develop our young people to carry on the work that we have started. I have been working with *la comunidad* (community) through the church, social outreach, and health initiatives for over 20 years, and I don't see enough of our young people being involved in our community. We, the elders, need to make sure that we challenge the young people that there will come a time that they will have to lead our *gente* [people].

Cesar Chavez reflected on the Latino community and social capital through the following quote: "We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community...Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others for their sake and for own" (Cesar Chavez Foundation, 1995). This quote exemplifies how the different Latinos families in North Central Indiana believed that successful adjustment to the United States was defined by a sociocentric lens rooted in *la familia* of social capital that guided community service. For instance, one of the community leaders provides an additional example of the bundling of social capital in the Latino community. He described how immigrant Latino families had grown accustomed to the anti-Latino sentiment from this segment of the community. However, he also discussed how *el pueblo* responded through constructive avenues by hosting (a) open forums on immigration and antiviolence marches, and (b) other programs that educated the Latino and mainstream community on immigration policy. For us, *el pueblo* demonstrated that, through a collective vision, Latino families and their communities could thrive in the Midwest regardless of the social and cultural environment.

### Conclusion

In summary, the present study evidenced the realities of family adjustment and how different ecological factors (familial, social, economic, and political) played out in the lives of the immigrant Latino families in North Central Indiana. Although the social, economic, and political crises made adjustment extremely difficult, the families sought refuge within the Latino community and supportive mainstream individuals throughout the region. These networks helped to offset the cultural and linguistic chasm. Through the use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the study demonstrated the continuous interaction between the levels that illustrate the complexity of adjustment for immigrant Latino families. As evidenced by the findings, a reciprocal relationship developed between the Latino and mainstream communities. Specifically, the Latino community contributed to the region by introducing them to the Latino culture through ethnic-based businesses, cultural events, and individual participation in community-wide events. This study contributes to the literature by providing a rich illustration of how immigrant Latino families drew on strengths in their families and communities as they struggled to survive in the wake of a social, political, and economic crisis. In the end, despite the overwhelming odds, the families' struggles to adjust to mainstream America were critical for

their children's success. Thus, despite the parents' hardship, the goal was better times for their children and future generations.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The use of an ethnographic research design and the proximity of the primary researcher served as a strength in gathering rich data for the study. Another strength of the study was the genuine openness of the Latino community in North Central Indiana and the surrounding communities and their dedication to making the study successful. The intersection of economic, social, and political forces created unique stressors and concerns for immigrant Latino families. Our findings will assist certified family life educators and professionals in higher education to understand and develop family-based and culturally appropriate psycho-educational interventions, which are more responsive to the lives of immigrant families in the region. One limitation of the study was the overrepresentation of Mexicans in the study and lack of other Latinos. Another limitation of the study was the difficulty in capturing all of the change resulting from the surge in immigration and from the economic crisis in North Central Indiana. A final limitation was the lack of exploration of the role of gender and how that would have played out in the family adjustment process.

### **Implications for Practice and Future Research**

These findings have implications for practice, as family professionals are encouraged to learn about the strengths and struggles of immigrant Latino families. Another implication is that family professionals are encouraged to learn about how immigration policies and reform impact Latino families. Moreover, family and educational professionals are advised to work to develop positive practices for supporting immigrant children despite their immigration status. Professionals are also encouraged to utilize family-education interventions in responding to the ecological needs of immigrant Latino families.

Future research should investigate the realities of immigrant Latino families in the Midwest as anti-immigrant/anti-Latino sentiment becomes more prevalent. Further research is needed to explore how the unauthorized status of immigrant Latinos families in the Midwest impacts other domains, such as educational success. Future research should also explore how grassroots efforts of Latino leaders could benefit immigrant Latino families.

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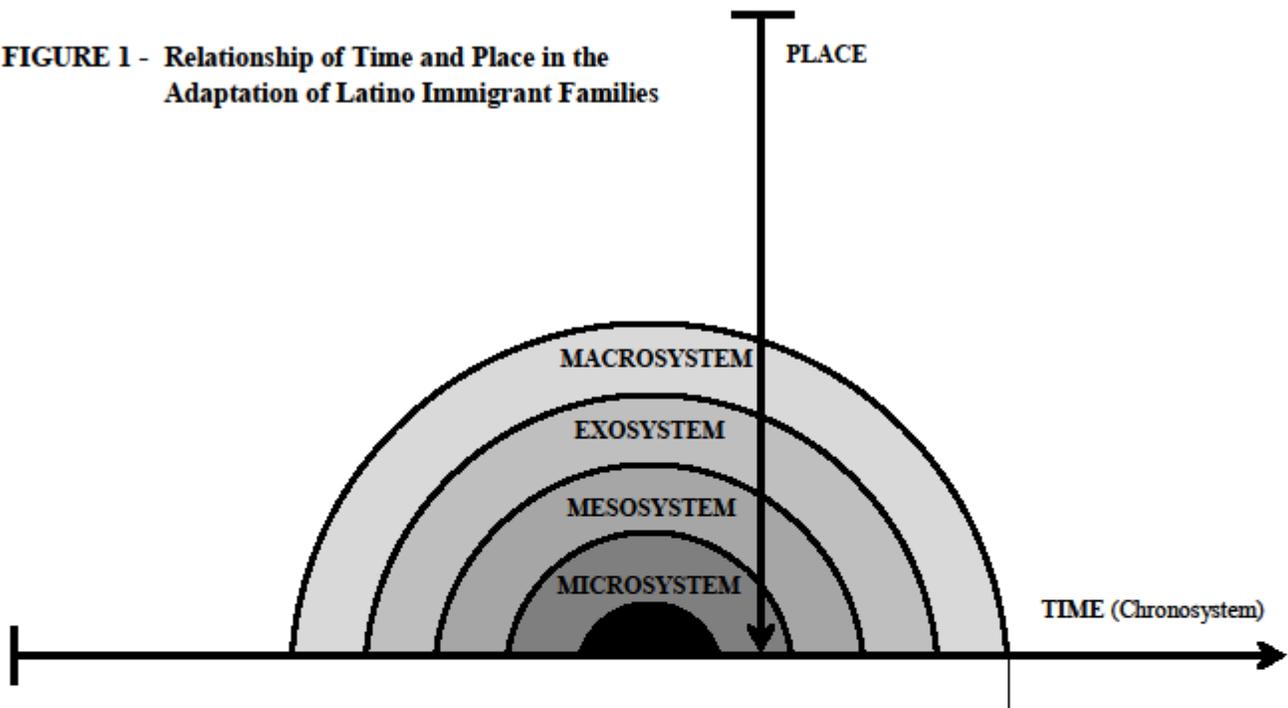
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**FIGURE 1 - Relationship of Time and Place in the Adaptation of Latino Immigrant Families**



**SYSTEM LEVELS:**

- **Macrosystem** – Ideology/Culture (Towards Immigrants)
- **Exosystem** – Neighborhood, State Commissions, Legislators and Social Services
- **Mesosystem** – Interaction between Social Systems (i.e. Communities Schools and other Related Systems)
- **Microsystem** –High Context Families

**ORGANIZATION:**

**Vertical Axis** – Influence of Place (i.e., Employment, Community-School Services, Political-Social Climate)

**Horizontal Axis** – Influence of Time (i.e., Circumstances in the Adaptation of Families (2008 Economic Recession))

Adapted from Carter and McGoldrick – Family Life Cycle Model