

## Recognising the Latino Immigrant's Space in the American Neighbourhood and Creating a Community for Peaceful Coexistence

Emmanuel K. Ngwainmbi(PhD)

*Department of Mass Communication, Jackson State University, MS, USA. Email: [engwainmbi@gmail.com](mailto:engwainmbi@gmail.com)*

### Abstract

*Americans in suburban communities have perceived local Hispanic immigrants in search for a better life as the cultural other, widening the 'space' for mutual learning and the opportunity for building a stronger, peace-enhanced community. But what is fueling the auto- and hetero-stereotypes of the immigrants and Americans? Using the participant observer approach and a survey, this study compares first impressions Latino immigrants and Caucasians in a US suburban community have about each other and investigates their comfort levels of living together. It examines communicative adaptability, language acquisition, and cultural knowledge as constructs for negotiating community coercion and diversity in the semi-urban locale. Analysis of data from separate questionnaires administered to Latino and Caucasian American respondents show a correlation between the American value of equal to opportunity and Caucasian Americans' view of Latino immigrants. Data also reveal that both groups are comfortable living together, but auto-and hetero-stereotypes persist among both groups. The study further offers steps for strengthening intercultural understanding between both groups.*

**Key words:** *Caucasian American, Latino, comfort level, interaction, social cohesiveness, suburban, stereotypes,*

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### Introduction

This study compared the first impressions between Latino immigrants, that is people of Latin American descent; also anyone of Latin American origin or ancestry, including Brazilians, Guatemalans, Mexicans, Venezuelans, Uruguayans, etc, and Caucasian Americans living together in a US suburban community, and then investigated their comfort levels of living together. We looked at the communicative adaptability, language, acculturation, and cultural knowledge of both groups as constructs for negotiating community cohesiveness among Caucasian Americans and Latinos in the suburban locale. The main objective is to identify steps for strengthening intercultural understanding between both groups, and, thus, construct a more open-minded, amicable suburban community. Data analysis has discovered that both groups are comfortable staying in the same community, but auto- and hetero-stereotypes persist among them—bringing to light Bennett's (1986; 1993b) ethnocentric perspective that we consider our own worldviews as central to reality. The study also looked at Latino immigrants' knowledge of English, and assessed whether this

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knowledge has in any way acculturated the Latino immigrants to a predominantly White society, or has helped them in understanding Caucasian Americans. Other relevant research questions central to the thesis of this study include:

- 1.) What is fueling the auto- and hetero-stereotypes of Latino immigrants and Americans, if at all?
- 2.) How comfortable are Latino immigrants and Caucasian Americans living within the same community?

### **Cultural Relationships between US and Latino Groups**

Within the framework of intercultural sensitivity—which we used to measure orientations towards cultural differences—it can be said that Caucasian Americans and Latinos in US suburban communities have struggled to accept each other, making it difficult to integrate, or adapt to each other's cultural values. The current relationships between Latinos and Caucasians in the US focus mostly on satisfying commercial needs, rather than strengthening peaceful intercultural relations. Companies that sell consumer products seek cultural values that motivate Latino consumer behavior (Lopez, 2003; Padilla, 2002; and Korzenny, 2006). A report conducted by the Hispanic Research Inc. (2003) revealed that companies all over the world want to tap into the skyrocketing US-based Latino population's purchasing power because they spend more money on consumer goods than clients in most Spanish-speaking countries (Lopez, 2003:1). This seems to make sense when we learn from the University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth that between 1990 and 2002 Latino buying power increased by 118% to \$452.4 billion.

On the administrative level, the US justice system has been seeking ways of engaging Hispanics in public policy. Liberal and conservative media have joined forces with US Democrats and Republicans in debating which policies are best suited for American interests, as more immigrants from Spanish-speaking nations continue to infiltrate American rural communities, both legally and illegally.

### **Differences between Latino Immigrants and the American Suburban Community**

Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones (2006) have argued that immigrants who adopt the values and beliefs of the receiving society may have access to a greater array of potential personal identity elements than those who do not adopt their receiving culture's values and beliefs (p. 17). Within this context, formal and informal social institutions within a given society or culture offer the most support to individuals who hold the ideals that characterize the larger society (Côté, 1993). For example, in the United States, immigrants who value competition and believe that success comes as a reward for tireless work may be most likely to acquire prestigious jobs, be elected to a political office and earn high salaries.

Padilla (2002), a leading scholar in Hispano-American relations, has argued that Hispanic culture promotes a strong sense of familism, a preference for intra-familial relationships, and a cultural script that calls for positive interpersonal relationships. Lopez (2002) also claimed that Hispanics in America consider themselves as one family, share several common traits, tend to be conservative, and desire to belong to the group which they use as part of their identity (p. 32). Even if we were to consider one's loyalty to the group as the maxim for determining self-identification, as Lopez suggests, or that non-accultured

Latinos and Latinas think as a group and protect each other's interests, we must not expect them to be candid when sharing their views of Caucasian Americans by simply using one measuring tool—the survey. Conversely, perceptions of threats by an outside group may affect race relations and members of an in-group (Blumer, 1958). Bobo & Kluegel (1993), as well as Bobo and Hutchings (1996), also stated that perceptions could be driven by the group's feelings of racial alienation. Bobo and Hutchings (1996) hypothesized that individualistic thinking is consistently more important than structural thinking, and that the former model tends to encourage Whites to view Asian Americans and Latinos as competitive threats (p. 967). To support their claim, they cited Blumer's group-position model published in 1958, which emphasizes that identity, stereotypes, values, and assessments of interests are shaped historically and involve a collective and relational dimension between groups. This powerfully engages emergent normative ideas about appropriate group statuses and entitlements (p. 986). Baca (2011) and Lopez (2002) saw US Latinos as a group that does not typically support activities requiring its input on general matters related to the public, but they have the capacity to trust members of their own cultural group (irrespective of their social status) than members of an outside group.

Nevertheless, family values and the desire to maintain friendships are important for US Latinos (Korzenny, 1999, p. 3). Latino culture scholar Padilla (1995) explained in his study that Latinos prefer ethnic labels reflecting shared cultural values rather than a US national identity. These shared values and traditions include Spanish language usage, Catholicism, traditional male-female roles, celebrations of Latin national holidays, and visual, performing, and musical forms.

A survey published in the Albemarle Report (2008) revealed that Latino workers tend to identify with fellow compatriots and show more loyalty to their in-group than to their bosses. However, problems with communication could be preventing the immigrants from making cultural and economic contributions to the community as some do not speak English. The language barrier itself might create a sense of mistrust and exclusion among linguistically handicap co-workers afraid of being misunderstood.

American existentialism's concept of freewill—the drive for the individual to exercise liberties in space and time—is guided by a set of specific, traditional, and fundamental principles, the foremost of which is the right to preserve and enjoy life. The desire to protect personal interests and pursue happiness are not germane to Americans; it is universal value, however, the American way of life culls from the premise that life ought to be approached with objectivity and that the government ought to act only as a policing force to protect a man's rights (Rand, 1964). This renowned American philosopher (Rand, 1964a, 1964b) also argued that American values are based on the idea that life is the standard of morality and the individual must choose his/her actions, values and goals by the standard of that which he/she considers appropriate. If by objectivity Rand means rational and evidence-based reasoning, he leaves us doubting the extent to which cracks in government laws and its interpretation of the law mitigate rationality. Further, some court rulings have, over the years, reflected a lack of objectivity in the judicial system, due in part to other laws that govern individual liberties and religious rights. While the typical American approaches life with Rand's ruling that it is a morality of joy, and that individual success, happiness, and fulfillment come through self application (1959, 1965), other external variables such as an

immigrant's social way of life have affected the American way of life. For example Americans in cities and suburban areas have participated in cultural events such as Cinco de Mayo— which was introduced by immigrants from Latino countries. Americans' impressions of themselves and the impressions about Americans in other nations show that auto stereotypes do not differ from international stereotypes (Harris & Karafa, 1999: 5-8). On the interpersonal level, Americans tend to convey their inner feelings and intentions in a cross-cultural setting. A recent investigation of the differences in self-disclosure and emotional closeness in intra-cultural friendships in the U.S. and Eastern Europeans finds Americans having a greater intent to disclose personal issues to their friends than other Anglo cultures, but with a smaller level of emotional closeness in intra-cultural friendships (Maier, Zhang & Clark (2012).

### **The Latino's Cultural Space within the US Community**

Newcomers, particularly immigrants, eventually change their behavior and attitudes toward those of the host society. Whether this sort of acculturation has a positive or negative impact on the mental health status of the indigenes is not yet clear. However, acculturation remains a fundamental part of migration-induced adaptations to new sociocultural environments among Hispanics in the US. Rogler, Cortes and Malgady (1991, p. 585-597) found that Hispanics are more likely to acculturate, or become bicultural, than they are to assimilate and thus abandon their original culture, but they find value in preserving their culture despite having been in the United States for a long time. A market survey conducted in 1999 obtained insights from US Hispanics regarding their own acculturation or assimilation experience in the US. It showed that the longer Hispanics stay in the US, the more they prefer to preserve their culture (Korzenny, 1999).

Other studies in social psychology reveal that elements of both the original cultures from which immigrants hail and the cultures to which they migrate must be taken into consideration when considering an individual's psychological acculturation (Kramer, 2000b). Within that framework, it is understood that personal identity can help the immigrant during cultural transition and adaptation (Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, 2006).

This study is inspired by the notion that culturally different groups have what it takes to develop a program that allows them to coexist in a peaceful way. It is expected that cultural appropriation—the adoption of some specific elements of one culture by a different cultural group (which includes the introduction of forms of dress or personal adornment, music and art, religion, language, or behavior)—would have an impact in the way the subjects in this study (Caucasian Americans and Latino immigrants) think of each other. In other words, their answers are expected to reflect appreciation of each other's worldview. Further, acculturated Latinos and American interpersonal communication traits could present a context for assessing a suitable climate aimed at sharing cultural space.

Some questions seek Caucasians' opinions about Latinos and Latinas sharing space in the same community, assuming that they are more likely to have reservations, like any other indigenous group. Besides, after the September 11, 2001 tragedy, some media reports and congressional debates have continued to challenge immigration policies, raising the potential for racial tensions and suspicion of immigrants and their legality on US soil.

Based on the U.S. Constitution, especially the First Amendment, it is assumed that most answers provided by Caucasian subjects would reflect a democratic/liberal attitude toward immigrants in the community.

It is within the present study's limits to find out how well Latino immigrants' presence in the community has been accepted. Being accepted is a desired experience learned from childhood. "People have learned to do everything to make others develop an interest in them"<sup>1</sup>. The need to be understood and appreciated is a common expectation for people sharing space, irrespective of their cultural, social, or economic background.

### **Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Dimensions**

In this study, the terms 'space' and 'neighborhood' refer to the place where an ethnic group puts to use its cultural, linguistic and social interests. These terms also refer to a group's ability to coexist with another group without yielding to the political and psychosocial persuasions of the other. In the same way, a community of ethnic groups coexisting in peace is one that acknowledges and tolerates different cultural practices and beliefs.

To find the right context for measuring the quality of answers provided by the Caucasian American and Hispanic respondents, this paper will review perceptions and theoretical frameworks related to race relations and interpersonal exchange, including adaptation, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), and social exchange.

### **Literature Review on Human Perception**

People form strikingly powerful impressions about one another and their environment with very little information available to them. In the same way, a community can act in favor of or against a particular individual group based on accent, whom the individual reminds that person of, and the ethnic group or country where he/she thinks the individual originates. Impressions formed about a group depend on previous experience and perceptions (Asch, 1943, p. 289) just as an immigrant's impression of an indigene may later influence positive or negative impressions of that indigene elsewhere. Within this framework, a newcomer is conceived as someone capable of falsely distorting what is meaningful and functional to other people through his/her own life experience (Gudykunst, 1991, 1998; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Thus, it is impossible to willfully unlearn one's self within a community, and even if it were possible it would not aid in the newcomer's adjustment process—the newcomer needs to integrate new information, making sense of new experiences in accordance with their pre-understanding (Kramer, 2000c, 2003).

Further studies have also alluded to a similar situation wherein the indigenous group views itself as civilized and considers the external cultural group as uncultured or less than human (Min-Sun, Kim & Hubbard, 2007). The tendency for people to see their own culture as the "center of the world," first identified by William Graham Sumner early in the twentieth century, actualizes the naïve perceptions of immigrants by indigenes. Ethnocentrism is a biological reality, and as such it has to be considered in determining the acceptance or rejection of a foreign ethnic group by the local group. Carsten De Drew's

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.pickthebrain.com/blog/how-to-get-unstuck-in-life-fixed-versus-a-growth-mindset/>.

experiment (2010) explained that ethnocentrism is not an acquired or learned experience but a biological reality, wherein oxytocin creates intergroup bias by motivating in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. This is consistent with Kramer's (2000) view that members of a group favor behavioral patterns and traits that are identical to their own beliefs and worldview because they trust each other. The presence of a minority group constitutes an organic aspect of a social system, and as a newcomer enters a community both the individual and the community are changed (Kramer, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2003, 2009). Newcomers have the capacity to change the way they are perceived by the indigenes. This position is consistent with results of a recent experiment conducted by German behavioral scientists (Kurschilgen, Engel & Kube, 2011) who have advanced the ways in which individuals are perceived, influencing future behavior and cooperation.

Persons within a group can rationalize their own overt behaviors in the same way that they attempt to explain others' behaviors (Ward & Ostaloza, 2010) based on pre-existing knowledge of others. So there exists a correlation between interpersonal and intergroup formation of impressions and the formation of impressions about different countries (Tims & Miller, 1986; Harris & Karafa, 1999). There is also the expectation that a sociocultural group living in one community may choose to communicate its own views differently about the outside group based on its own circumstance. Minorities concentrated in one place are more likely to develop a strong identity that supersedes a national sense of identification by trusting people who are different from them (Uslaner, 2012).

Indeed, the extent to which a group adapts to another group's values or integrates itself into the community depends on the amount of experience and exposure it has to that culture. According to Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman's framework (2003, p. 423), experience does not occur simply by being in the vicinity of events as they occur; rather, it is a function of how one construes the events after the event has taken place. A group staying in a new community can alter its own attitudes to adjust to the psychological, political, and cultural circumstances of the host environment. It should be noted, however, that the processes that underlie communication between people from different ethnicities are the same processes underlying communication between people from the same culture who are strangers (Neuliep, 2012:1-16). Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) provided an important framework for understanding the lived experiences of a different cultural group. They have claimed that a group is said to adapt to another culture when its experience yields a perception or behavior that is appropriate to that culture. During adaptation, one group's worldview is expanded to include relevant constructs from other cultural worldviews (pp. 421-443).

People are able to express their alternative cultural experience in culturally appropriate feelings and behaviors. Psychological changes include alterations in individuals' attitudes toward their cultural identities and their social behaviors in relation to the groups in contact (Phinney, 1992; Neto, 2002). And, as Muwanguzi and Musambira (2012) recently discovered, some immigrants have pursued a strategy of cultural integration as opposed to marginalization, assimilation, or separation. Eventual adaptations include the individuals' well-being and social skills needed to function in their culturally complex daily world (Yu & Wang, 2011, pp. 191-192).

But cultural adaptability is an inter-subjective phenomenon—the belief that contact with cultures automatically leads to intercultural learning and to the development of positive attitudes toward the dominant culture has already been rejected by many scholars (Allport, 1979; Coleman, 1998). The impact of external information sources and channels (like the media) on an ethnic group’s views of another group can lead to prejudiced perceptions about each other. Indeed, people have formed impressions of other nations and ethnic groups based on meager knowledge delivered by the media (Harris and Karafa, 1999, p. 3, 5-15). A group that relies heavily on media coverage as its main source of knowledge about another group is most likely to maintain stereotypical views about that group. This is because the media set their own news agendas and select information that they believe their target audience wants to receive. This approach usually persuades the audience to see the group or nation as presented through the media’s subjective lens. But as Robert Putnam (1993) has indicated, integrated and diverse neighborhoods bring about higher levels of trust if people also have diverse social networks. The maturity level of trust can also be measured by the extent to which people from different cultural backgrounds tolerate each other in a defined relationship and for a considerable length of time. For example, the number of marriages between Latinos and Americans has increased in the last few decades, fostering cross-cultural understanding among Latinos and Americans and Latino-American relations. However, Hispanics and Latinos frequently differ markedly from the majority group who, because of privilege and status, are defined as the normative group (Padilla, 2002).

### Demographics and Economic Variables

The Albemarle Business Report (January, 2008) found that the population of Hispanics in North Carolina has grown exponentially between 1995 and 2008. In 2008, the Pew Hispanic Center recorded more than 700,000 Hispanics in North Carolina among whom more than 300,000 were reportedly unauthorized (see Box 1).

#### Box 1: Population Distribution of Elizabeth City versus North Carolina by race

People Quick Facts	Elizabeth North	
	City	Carolina
Population, 2011 estimate	18,698	9,656,401
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	18,683	9,535,475
Population, percent change, April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2011	0.1%	1.3%
Population, 2010	18,683	9,535,483
Persons under 5 years, percent, 2010	7.5%	6.6%
Persons under 18 years, percent, 2010	22.4%	23.9%
Persons 65 years and over, percent, 2010	13.9%	12.9%
Female persons, percent, 2010	54.2%	51.3%
White persons, percent, 2010 (a)	39.5%	68.5%

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<b>i</b> Black persons, percent, 2010 (a)	54.0%	21.5%
<b>i</b> American Indian and Alaska Native persons, %, 2010 (a)	0.4%	1.3%
<b>i</b> Asian persons, percent, 2010 (a)	1.2%	2.2%
<b>i</b> Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, percent, 2010 (a)	0.1%	0.1%
<b>i</b> Persons reporting two or more races, percent, 2010	2.3%	2.2%
<b>i</b> Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2010 (b)	5.0%	8.4%
<b>i</b> White persons (Caucasians) not Hispanic, percent, 2010	37.6%	65.3%
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<b>i</b> Living in same house 1 year & over, 2006-2010	78.9%	83.4%
<b>i</b> Foreign born persons, percent, 2006-2010	4.1%	7.4%
<b>i</b> Language other than English spoken at home, pct. age 5+, 2006-2010	8.7%	10.4%
<b>i</b> High school graduates, % of persons age 25+, 2006-2010	79.3%	83.6%
<b>i</b> Bachelor's or higher, pct. of persons age 25+, 2006-2010	20.9%	26.1%
<b>i</b> Mean travel time to work (mins.), workers age 16+, 2006-2010	19.2	23.4
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<b>i</b> Housing units, 2010	8,167	4,327,528
<b>i</b> Homeownership rate, 2006-2010	47.0%	68.1%
<b>i</b> Housing units in multi-unit structures, percent, 2006-2010	28.5%	16.9%
<b>i</b> Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2006-2010	\$152,200	\$149,100
<b>i</b> Households, 2006-2010	7,114	3,626,179
<b>i</b> Persons per household, 2006-2010	2.45	2.49
<b>i</b> Per capita money income in past 12 months (2010 dollars) 2006-2010	\$17,592	\$24,745
<b>i</b> Median household income 2006-2010	\$34,532	\$45,570
<b>i</b> Persons below poverty level, percent, 2006-2010	28.1%	15.5%

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau: *State and County Quick Facts*. Edited for relevance: Thursday, 16-Aug-2012

Elizabeth City, where the two ethnic groups have been sampled, is situated in northeastern North Carolina. A suburban community with a population of 18,683 (2001 est.), and with a metropolitan center bordered by agrarian counties such as Camden, Hertford, Halifax, and Currituck, Elizabeth City enjoys a relatively high degree of economic integration with its neighboring counties. According to the city's official website, the community does not discriminate against people from different ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds. The county tax rate valuation for fiscal year 2012–2013 is \$0.62 per \$100. Other general factors also responsible for the growth of its population are its coastline location; a Coast Guard Base; sixteen K-12 public schools; three universities; over 15 worship sites for Christians of various denominations; a settlement for retired persons, and low crime rates. The Elizabeth City Chamber of Commerce Report (2012, p. 19) states that the per capita income of the city is at \$17,253, and the median household income for Latino race householders is \$27,744 in 2009, contrasted with an overall median household income of \$38,882, while the average annual wage is \$28,132. The city's relatively low cost of living makes it a good place for immigrants from low income countries. The Albemarle (region's) Economic Development Commission publication for 2012 presented the cost of living index in northeast North Carolina as 94.7, compared to 140 in Boston, Massachusetts, and 151.5 in Newark, New Jersey, which makes the region a better place to live for immigrants from poor countries and retired persons in America.

Income-based farming, construction, and home-cleaning jobs are considered the greatest factors attracting Hispanic immigrants to Elizabeth City. Throughout the year, charity organizations like the Food Bank, Salvation Army, Catholic Relief Services, and other religious groups in the county conduct outreach campaigns to support such immigrant families in the community. Their efforts are meant to reduce economic hardship of those families, and from the Catholic perspective, help alleviate the suffering of people. Local restaurants, Laundromats, convenient stores (owned by Latinos), farms, soccer fields, and other locations where the Spanish language is spoken also offer a community spirit among Hispanic immigrants. Such milieus are less threatening to the immigrants than those that require them to speak English. They also offer immigrants a context to discuss their condition, interact, and mobilize their own resources to support each other and their families within the community. The number of convenient stores, restaurants and home cleaning services owned by Hispanics, along with more than six hotels and 37 full service restaurants hiring low-skilled labor may also have accounted for the surge in the Hispanic population from 685 out of 18,000 in 2009 (3.5%), to 1,666 in 2012, with about 87% being adults. Only 1.6% Hispanics have moved to a different state since 2009 but there is no available data on the movement of Caucasian Americans in or out of the City.

Caucasians historically control the political and legislative system and they maintain economic control over other ethnic groups in the state of North Carolina. Although they make up 39.5% of Elizabeth City's population, they own the majority of land property in the northeast, are among the wealthiest, and have the propensity to allow immigrants to enjoy social welfare privileges reserved for low income, struggling Americans. Caucasian American families in Elizabeth City who served in the US military programs abroad may have amassed

cultural experiences that they could use in dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds.

### Research Methods

**Participants.** Seventy (70) subjects took part in the study on the weekend of July 31–August 2, 2012<sup>2</sup>. Participants were Caucasian American and Hispanic immigrant male and female adults from all social and economic backgrounds living in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. There were 30 Caucasian American subjects and 40 Latino subjects. Eight questions (A1) were prepared for Caucasian Americans; 15 for Latinos. The questions were administered when many families and workers in public institutions were on holidays.

The Caucasian Americans sampled for this study were mainly persons of Irish heritage—Anglo-Saxon descendants who settled in Elizabeth City in 1791, and to a small extent descendants of Western and Eastern Europeans living in Elizabeth City in North Carolina. The sample design corresponds to purposive sampling.

To ensure greater consistency in their democratic view of immigrants and determine whether their social class, education, and quality of life affect Caucasians' views of persons they suspect to be illegal, the study compared the income levels of the respondents, with their educational levels and their initial impression of Hispanic immigrants. The previous assumptions were: the more educated the individual, the less intense his phobia against the immigrant, and higher income earners (the wealthy) were more likely to hold a condescending view of low income earners, delineated in the Hispanic questionnaire as self employed; retired; \$6,000-\$15,000; \$18,000-\$25,000 per year, respectively. The study also aimed to know whether high income made Caucasians less threatened about the growing presence of Latinos in the community by asking them, *Do you feel too many Latinos live in this community?*

**Procedures.** Questionnaire A1 was personally distributed at the YMCA in Elizabeth City, frequented by Caucasian families of Coast Guard personnel, retired persons, students, doctors, lawyers, and instructors. Questions were also distributed at the McDonald's restaurant, also visited by Caucasian American retired couples, construction workers, and families. The location was selected to ensure a proper representative sample for the study.

Hispanic immigrants who visit the local grocery shop (La Tiendita), Mamasitas restaurant, and the Holy Family Catholic Church were contacted to fill out the questionnaire. The questionnaire for that group, prepared in English, was given to a popular Spanish school teacher, an educated Spanish-English interpreter<sup>3</sup>, and to the restaurant and grocery store owners who speak fluent English and Spanish. To ensure that the questionnaire was well understood by the Latino subjects, the interpreter transliterated the questionnaires and offered to mark the corresponding response.

The questionnaire asked subjects to rank their experience with the language using the following variables: *fluent; Americans understand my accent and pronunciations; not comfortable-don't*

<sup>2</sup> This was the holiday and vacation period and many people were out of town, accounting for the low response rate.

<sup>3</sup> The interpreter, Johanna A. Broyles teaches Spanish at Northside Elementary School in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. She is also a North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) Spanish Instructor and certified Zumba Dance Instructor.

*speak English at all; don't understand English; worried about my accent; I fear Americans may not understand.* By asking them to describe the extent to which they learned English, indicating their comfort levels in interacting with Caucasians, the study sought to determine which group felt less threatened by the other in the community—Caucasian Americans or African Americans.

### **Instruments and justification**

Both questionnaires instructed subjects not to identify themselves and contained a directive message to guide them accordingly: “This study is prepared to help people understand cultural relationships in the community. Results are to be used only for analytical purposes.”

Income levels were scaled using the socioeconomic variables—self employed, retired; \$6,000-\$15,000; \$18,000-\$25,000 per year representing the lower class; \$35,000-50,000 per year representing the lower middle class; and \$60,000 and above representing the middle and upper class.

The educational levels for both groups were ranked as follows: *None; below high school; high school; college degree; professional.*

Questionnaire A1 (QA1) asked subjects to answer the questions “completely and with honesty, and to not include names.” Although Questionnaire A2 (QA2) had seven more questions than QA1, both instruments solicited answers to education and income level, indicating the degree of comfort with each other in one community. Some key close-ended questions for Caucasian subjects were the following:

- *The moment you see a Latino adult in the community, what immediately goes through your mind?*
- *Are you more afraid of Hispanics and Latinos than African-Americans in this community? If so, give your reasons.*
- *Should social welfare privileges be made available to Latinos in this community? If so, give your reasons.*
- *Do you feel too many Latinos live in this community?*
- *What percentage of Latinos do you think are living in this community illegally?*
- *How comfortable are you interacting with Hispanics and Latinos?*

The study wanted to gauge the degree of consistency with which Caucasian Americans tolerated the presence of foreigners in their midst, assuming that Caucasian subjects might show consistent attitudes toward the American Dream which specifies that all peoples are born equal and deserve equal opportunity to achieve their goals. It therefore asked them to respond to several concomitant questions—*Do you think Latinos are comfortable living in this community; Do you want them to continue to stay in this community?* The questions required an affirmative response—*Yes; No; I don't know; It doesn't matter to me.*

QA2 had the following questions:

- How long have you lived in this community?*
- *How comfortable are you with speaking English?*
- *How comfortable are you interacting with non-Hispanics and Latinos?*
- *How comfortable are you staying in this community?*
- *Are you more afraid of Caucasians (Whites) or African-Americans (Blacks) in this community? Give your reasons:*

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- *The moment you meet an American, describe what goes through your mind.*
- *What do you think Americans here think about you?*
- *How would you like Americans to see you? Give your reasons*
- *Whom do you trust more to protect you in this community?*
- *How familiar are you with American culture?*
- *Do you think Americans are happy with you living in this community next to them?*

QA2 measured what Latino subjects thought of Caucasian Americans, to see if there would be a correlation between their sentiments and those of Caucasian Americans. If both groups held the same views about each other, especially negative stereotypes, a concrete long-term plan, with achievable goals and timelines, would be strongly recommended for the promotion of greater intercultural exchanges among Caucasian Americans and Latinos.

Like any minority group operating in a broader social context, Latinos are said to be more at ease in interacting in familiar surroundings (like in Latino stores, church, farm and Spanish cultural events, where others speak the same language). Hence, the data collected may not be fully representative since most Hispanic immigrants work on construction sites, plantations, and farms and they do not frequently travel to public places due to lack of transportation, and fear of arrest, as some respondents indicated.

*“How familiar are you with American culture?”* aimed to know whether the respondents’ fear of, or confidence dealing with, Caucasians might have a bearing on how well they understand the American way of life.

The study tested their first impressions of Hispanic immigrants with the American principle of ‘Justice for all,’ to determine the seriousness with which Americans apply their First Amendment rights. The expectation was that the free-spirited American would care less if the immigrant did not understand American culture and did not speak English. In response to the question, *How comfortable are you interacting with Hispanics and Latinos?* those who questioned the legal status and *raison d’être* of Hispanics in Elizabeth City said they were very comfortable interacting with the latter and were not afraid of sharing space with Hispanics, when asked if they were more afraid of Hispanics or African-Americans.

## Results

The findings in this study should be placed within the contextual framework of intercultural communication scholarship, which maintains that opinions are formed based on previous experiences (contact, treatment, interaction, etc.), and reactions may confirm or negate the previous notions and assumptions. The interpreter reported that the subjects first hesitated to reveal their annual income and their first impressions of Caucasian Americans. Some subjects were also quoted as saying that by sharing their true opinions of American culture might endanger their stay in the community.

## Caucasian Subjects

Only 16 of the 30 subjects answered the first question about their initial views of Hispanics—a test of positive or negative stereotypical perceptions.

Box 3: Summary of Caucasian Subjects’ Initial Views of Latinos :

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Another border jumper  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Are they legal?  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | They are probably working on a farm                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Immigrant  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Thankful to see some diversity in the community                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Hardworking, large families  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | This is a free country and everyone is exceptional in this country |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Money or illegal   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Thankful for diversity in our community                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I love seeing a mix of people                                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Really nothing   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I come from New York that has many cultures and races              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I see a person   |

Some 37% of Caucasian subjects saw the presence of Latinos as a sign of diversity in Elizabeth City, 20% questioned their presence. They called them ‘fence jumper,’ immigrant,’ ‘illegal alien;’ 33% were indifferent. 10% believed Latinos were staying illegally in their community. For the latter group, they believed a Latino is a human being, so there was ‘really nothing’ to prompt any bias thoughts.

An overwhelming 28 of the 30 subjects stated that though they were comfortable with Latinos living in Elizabeth City, it did not bother them if Latinos continued living among them. But would they support the idea of those immigrants breaking the law—receiving Social Service benefits normally reserved for Americans and legal immigrants? The study found a significant contrast between their positive first impressions of Hispanics and the need to help them.

Of the 30 respondents, 18 agreed to social welfare privileges for Latino immigrants while 10 categorically rejected the idea; several said, *“It depends on whether they pay taxes.”* Those who wanted welfare services for Latinos (18) gave provisions: *“As long as they work and pay taxes;”* and *“They are citizens.”* Two respondents shared the most liberal perspective: one said, *“Many who don’t work get welfare and at least most Hispanics I know have a great work ethic.”* *“This country should care for all persons who truly struggle.”* Clearly, the principals of freedom, justice and equality for all, the positive auto-stereotype that distinguishes Americans from other nations, is upheld.

The respondents’ response to questions about Latinos’ access to public services was a reminder that Americans still value the First and Thirteenth Amendments, particularly the individual’s rights to live for his/her own sake, rather than for the sake of society. An immigrant has the right to live comfortably, irrespective of the amount of local cultural knowledge he/she may possess about the host community.

### **Latino subjects**

The study measured Hispanics’ initial impressions of Caucasian Americans, to see if there would be a correlation between their sentiments and those of people in the host country. Of the 40 subjects, 14 stated they had no prejudice against Caucasian Americans; and 20 considered Caucasian Americans as ‘friendly,’ ‘stronger than blacks,’ ‘good persons to meet,’ ‘caring,’ and ‘helpful.’ 6 Latino subjects stated that Americans were ‘stupid’ and ‘unfriendly’

To know if linguistic interference—foreign accent and ability to speak/think in English—positively or negatively affected interactions with Americans, the study asked if they thought Americans were happy living together. 30 subjects were comfortable communicating in English; 6 said they were worried about their accent and feared Americans might not understand their pronunciations, and 4 did not understand English at all.

Subjects were asked to indicate how they thought Americans viewed them by choosing one of the following statements: *I am not from here; I don't belong in this community; I am illegal here; I am too dependent on them; I do not know what they think.* 32 of the respondents did not know what Americans were thinking, while 8 felt that Americans saw them as immigrants. Curiously, none thought Americans considered them as dependents on public welfare. This positive self-portrayal is consistent with that of some Caucasian Americans whose first impression of Latinos is that of hard-working people.

### Correlation Analysis

Bearing in mind that some Caucasians expressed a condescending attitude toward the immigrants by calling them 'fence jumper,' 'immigrant,' large family,' the study wanted to know if Latinos had the same stereotypes about themselves; also if there was a correlation between Caucasian disdain and Latinos' negative auto-stereotype. And if they had any negative stereotypes about Caucasians it would be necessary to find their motives for staying in the same community. Ten percent of the subjects who questioned the rationale behind Latinos' stay in Elizabeth City worried about their foreign accent; the rest indicated they did not care to know what Americans thought about their linguistic/communication skills. These results bolster the Beacco's (1992) argument that the mere acquisition of a new language is not enough to build intercultural competence.

28 of the 40 subjects declared their fear of Blacks and made scathing comments  
(See Box 3).

<b>Box 3: Latino subjects' comments about why they fear Blacks more than Whites</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Their English is very hard to understand sometimes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing stereotypes about Blacks</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are more serious</li> <li>• They try to steal my money and beer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience in High School</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• They have robbed me</li> <li>• They will steal my bike</li> <li>• They are scary looking</li> <li>• (They are) Racist</li> <li>• They will shoot me</li> </ul>

The study's quest to learn the extent of Latinos' familiarity with American culture was to determine if length of stay had any bearing on their impressions of Caucasians. This yielded no surprising reactions. Of the 22 respondents who had lived three years and beyond in the community, none indicated they were 'afraid of Caucasians' and all were so comfortable they wanted to raise their children there.

A comparison of the immigrants' income levels with their responses about which local community group they trusted for their protection revealed that 34 of the 36 subjects representing the lower class said they trusted the police to protect them over

charity organizations, social welfare authorities, and their fellow Hispanics. Only 4% of middle-class participants also relied on police and fellow group members.

However, those with a set of values practicing specific customs are likely to be perceived and treated differently by persons outside that group. The concept had to be tested by asking Hispanics which Americans they were more afraid of—Caucasians or African Americans.

Of the 40 respondents, 34 indicated they were more afraid of African Americans with only 2 stating they were more afraid of Caucasians; 2 were impartial, and 2 did not answer the question.

A cross tabulation of income level, social class, and degree of comfort interacting with non-Hispanics revealed a startling response. 90% of the respondents representing the lower and lower-middle class said they were most comfortable around Caucasian Americans.

**Table 2: Latino Subjects' Income Distribution versus Comfort Level in the Community**

Employment status	Total #of Subjects Total: 40	Social class	Fear of Caucasians(percentage)
Self employed and retired	12	Lower	30%
\$6,000-\$15,000	18	Lower	45%
\$18,000-\$25,000	6	Lower middle	15%
\$35,000-\$55,000	4	Middle	10%
\$60,000-up	0	Upper	0%

Since social status had no bearing on their views of Americans, the study wanted to know whether education level had any impact on their comfort levels within the community, so it compared their education standard with their annual income earnings.

Indeed, Latinos want Americans to know that they are hardworking people, determined to fulfill the American dream, as 80% of the total number of respondents indicated on the questionnaire.

### Discussion

Although the study did not take into account the importance of the Civil Rights Movement (which led to the enactment of laws advocating equal treatment of all persons in the US) in defining community wellness, the negative view held by some Americans toward other minority groups cannot be ignored.

Overall, the positive stereotypes of Hispanics outweigh the negative ones—they are not threatened by Latino immigrants' presence in Elizabeth City and can cohabit with them as long as they follow American laws. They can receive social welfare assistance if they have legal status in the community, no matter how temporal it may be. Among the respondents belonging to the middle and upper class with an annual salary of \$60,000 and above, totaling

30% of all subjects, there was a split about their first impressions of Hispanics. 10% did not answer the question; 15% were “thankful for the diversity in our community—loved seeing a mix of people;” and 5% were bias. One said, “They are probably working on a farm.” The others wrote, “illegal immigrant.”

Negative stereotypes are based on some form of past experience, but the comments about African Americans appear to be based on fear alone, as no particular reason for such stereotypes was ever indicated. But it is not immediately clear whether Latino stereotyping of African Americans is based on external variables such as limited knowledge, racial hatred, or degree of contact with that minority group.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

Despite concerns about the Latino’s immigration status in the American suburban social milieu, Americans have always struggled with putting their democratic principles to good practice. However, the freedom of undertaking exemplified by Caucasians’ willingness to cohabit with Latinos, and the latter’s embrace of Caucasians in the community enhances the notion of the US as the land of opportunity, one that is open to people of different racial backgrounds. But there still exist misunderstandings between Americans and Latinos that must be addressed if Americans continue to allow Latinos to migrate to suburban communities. Though the amount of negative first impressions held by Caucasian Americans about Latinos and vice versa are relatively lower than previously expected, those stereotypes—if internalized for too long—could culminate in animosity or bias behavior toward members of each group. Similarly, local authorities and civil rights groups should realize that while Blacks still consider Hispanic immigrants as another minority group, Hispanics are more uncomfortable around Blacks than Whites.

Whereas African Americans make up 54% of the local population against 39.5% Caucasian, it makes sense to conduct a study on existing relationships between Black and Hispanic groups in order to have a better understanding of race relations in American suburban communities.

More investigation is needed to know why Hispanic immigrants, akin to trusting their own people, rely on the forces of law and order for their protection rather than on philanthropic organizations like Catholic Relief Services and the Food Bank, which typically provide them technical and financial support without questioning their cultural relevance or immigration status.

Based on its findings, the current study posits several recommendations to increase awareness and understanding among Latino immigrant and Caucasian American groups, including:

1. Cultural groups from both communities in the US—Caucasian and Hispanic—should organize events and training where knowledge on socio-cultural values of each group can be shared.
2. More Hispano-American cultural conferences on myths and stereotypes should be organized to allow scholars, program managers and experts on foreign relations and multicultural communication exchange ideas and develop plans to better understand the culture of the American suburban community.

3. Local leaders should mobilize their constituents to manage activities and events that promote international understanding.
4. Learning institutions, K-12 schools to universities, should enhance their curricula with instruction on cultural exchange and community livelihood.

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