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Being Welcoming: Community Engaged Research on Immigration to Bloomington-Normal

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Introduction

This project is part of a collaborative effort between Illinois State University (via the Center for Civic Engagement) and BN Welcoming (BNW), a local non-profit organization working to make Bloomington-Normal a safe and supporting community for immigrants and refugees (BN Welcoming). Conversations between BNW and an interdisciplinary group of faculty began in Spring 2023. As part of the collaboration, Dr. Gina Hunter proposed to involve students in her Fall 2023 Anthropology 302/402 (Ethnography/Advanced Ethnographic Methods) course in a community-engaged research project to document the stories of recent immigrants to our community. In conversation with BNW, we began with the guiding research question: "What have recent immigrants learned that they wish they had known when they first arrived?" The objective of the research was to guide future inquiry and help BNW determine what kinds of information and resources should be including in a "living resource package" given to new immigrants. Because this Anthropology course is just one of hopefully several future courses working in partnership with BNW, this document outlines the content and structure of the course as well as the findings of the students' research.

The student researchers and co-authors are graduate and undergraduate students in anthropology. Ethnography is the hallmark research methodology of cultural anthropology. It generally includes direct and sustained interaction with members of a community in the context of their daily lives (O'Reilly, 2012). Ethnographic data collection typically relies on participant observation and interviewing but may include a whole host of research techniques. Because ethnographic research requires long-term, in-depth engagement with community members, it is not easy to pursue in the context of traditional campus courses and semesters. The ANT 302/402 course is therefore structured to provide an overview of the history and key concerns of ethnographic writing as well as a "taste" of ethnographic research through a small, hands-on research project.[1]

Ethnography as Methodology and as a Course

The field of socio-cultural anthropology and its methodologies emerged out of Western attempts to understand non-Western cultures. Colonialism shaped the relationship between anthropologists and the people they studied and influenced anthropology's key concepts and methods. Calls to decolonize anthropology are therefore not only about reckoning with the discipline's past but about addressing the inherent "coloniality" of anthropological thought and methods (Bejarano et al, 2019). Coloniality in this sense refers to "the entire structure of racialized and gendered power and social inequality within which ethnographic research has been, and continues to be, conducted" (2019, 20). Efforts to "decolonize" ethnography include native ethnography and various forms of collaborative research.

Before we started the research project, our class learned about the historical background of ethnography (e.g. Malinowski, 1932) and read excerpts from several contemporary ethnographies to understand how the field has changed (e.g., Holmes, 2013; Manalansan, 2003). We read Bejarano et al.'s *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrant and New Directions in Social Science* (2019) for its methodological considerations as well as its relevance to our project. From the Center for Civic Engagement, we learned about community-engaged research (CER). CER can be defined as "the creation of new knowledge in collaboration with or on behalf of a community partner that contributes to student learning within the academic discipline while also strengthening the well-being of the community by working to solve or understand an issue of public concern" (Center for Civic Engagement, 2023). Also known as community-based research or participatory action research, CER provides an opportunity to serve community needs while guiding students in authentic research experiences. CER centers the mutual construction of a research project between researchers and community partners at every stage from conception to final product. Such projects are therefore similar to decolonized ethnography, in that they have the potential to transform academic and ethnographic practice by upending traditional hierarchies between researcher and subject.

Despite the many benefits of CER, these projects confront numerous challenges. Students often have limited research experience and background knowledge of the topic at hand. They may have little experience with the community in which their college is located. University-community partnerships depend on mutual trust that requires regular communication and long-term effort. CER also often involves working with vulnerable populations who can be further marginalized in the research process through cultural insensitivity. Gina attempted to mitigate some of these challenges through in-course activity and reflection. Readings and guest speakers were selected to help sensitize students to immigrant experiences. Classroom exercises, such as the interviewing practice and critique described below, helped students to develop thoughtful interview questions and techniques.

Background: Immigration to McLean County

Like the American Midwest in general, McLean County was settled predominantly by descendants of European immigrants who arrived in the late 1800s. In Bloomington-Normal, some of the most prominent immigrants were Germans who found an abundance of work opportunities and rich farmland. These German immigrants created community spaces and resources that reflected their values and culture. A German-language newspaper was established in Bloomington in 1877 called *The Bloomington Journal*. German churches and parochial schools were also formed allowing residents to engage in fellowship, worship, and learning in their native language. German residents themselves stated that "Language keeps faith," which became a mantra of non-English speaking immigrants in the community. German residents also established a *Turnverein,* an exercise center and social hall. At the beginning of World War 1, German language education and German resources were abandoned and the German heritage that once invoked celebration was then hidden (Wyman, 2023).

This history reminds us that our population has always been multicultural but can also mislead us to thinking of the region as hegemonically white, rather than the multiracial and

diverse community that it is. After the Civil War, many African Americans came North to McLean County and as early as 1910 Mexicans came to the region.

Today the population of McLean County is 78% White and 9% African American (U.S. Census Bureau). As of 2019, there are 11,874 immigrants (foreign-born persons) living in McLean County which makes up for 6.9% of the total population. While 12.6% of the immigrant population are university students, 87.4% are long-term residents of McLean County. Other than English, there are 39 languages spoken in the community including Spanish, Tegulu, Tamil, Hindi, Chinese, and French (Beck, 2019). Recently, there has been a rise in immigrants from Latin America, the Congo, and India. Each of these individuals bring with them special skills that directly contribute to the community.

To learn about the history of immigration to the region and the experiences of recent immigrants, students visited exhibits at the McLean County Museum of History, and Yolanda Alonso's "Latinos En Blono" exhibit at the Illinois Art Station. Students also attended a presentation by the Immigration Project, the principal provider of immigration legal services in downstate Illinois (The Immigration Project), to learn about immigration policy, visa types, the process of applying for asylum, permanent residency, and citizenship; and learned about the lack of legal channels for the vast majority of immigrants living here without authorization (American Immigration Council, 2021).

Immigrants in the Heartland

Much of the literature on recent immigration to the Midwest centers Latin American (especially Mexican) migration. A large proportion of this literature focuses on urban areas, especially Chicago. Contributors to *The Latina/o Midwest Reader* (Valerio-Jimenez, et.al 2017), however, assist our understanding of Latin American immigration to smaller towns and rural areas. In particular, these authors help us understand the long history of Latinos in the Midwest, the impact of national immigration policies, and the ways in which Latinos (and by extension, other immigrant groups) are "reshaping the heartland" (Acosta and Aparicio 2017). One valuable concept they introduce for this project is "placemaking." Place-making refers to the everyday, collective practices of "communication and community formation," the "diverse self-representational strategies" (performances, arts, storytelling), and the physical presence of Latinx people in community organizations (Valerio-Jimenez, 2017, 12). Acosta and Aparicio describe four decades of Mexican immigration to the small-town of "Lorraine" Illinois, where Mexican knowledge and labor have maintained the town's nineteenth-century designation as "broomcorm capital of the world." The heart of the Amish settlements in the late 1800s, Lorraine is now 20% Hispanic which is reflected in the presence of Mexican restaurants, businesses, and events such as *quinceanera* celebrations (2017, 64-65).

Such examples of immigrant placemaking in the Midwest can also be seen among more recent African immigrants to the Midwest. These include the African Celebration Day organized by West African immigrants in Beardstown, IL (Spearie, 2014), and the Selfie Museum, a business established by a Congolese immigrant couple in Galesburg (Henderson, 2017). These spaces and events help immigrants create a sense of identity and community, help community members form friendships, and are places for exchanging information and resources. As Acosta and Aparicio (2017) show for Lorraine, however, a long history of immigrant presence and

place-making does not mean that those immigrants are regularly imagined (by the majority) as part of the vital social fabric of small-town America. Bloomington-Normal is perhaps unique, in this case, for the various ways that immigration *is* recognized and celebrated as part of the community, partly due to presence of the McLean County Museum of History, an American Alliance of Museums accredited institution, whose robust exhibits, research, and programming document and display immigrant stories.

We benefitted also from previous research conducted by the Illinois State University's Stevenson Center showing the economic contributions of immigrants to McLean County. Recognizing the work and tax income generated by immigrants helps to counter national narratives of immigrants as a draw upon public resources.

Additionally, our research considers wealth in the form of cultural capital that immigrants bring and share with the larger community. For this, we drew upon Tara Yosso's model of community cultural wealth (2005). Community cultural wealth refers to six forms of wealth (aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familiar and resistant capital) earned and shared by socially marginalized groups. Yosso developed her model to explain the array of skills and strengths that students of color bring to college. The model has been used to counter "deficit models" of addressing the needs of historically marginalized groups in higher education. We found the model useful for thinking about the immigrant experience and found ample evidence of these kinds of cultural wealth among immigrant communities as they work together to pass information, exchange goods and services, and create social networks of support.

Methods

To practice participant observation and fieldnote-taking, and to learn about the diverse population in Bloomington-Normal, students were tasked with shopping at a local ethnic grocery store. Each student visited a store featuring Indian, African, Hispanic, or Asian foods and spent forty minutes to an hour at the location, observing and jotting notes. They then turned these notes into reflection papers. Although this exercise was not contemplated as a research method, it ended up providing some meaningful observations and informed the development of interview questions.

Most of our data comes from interviews. To prepare to conduct interviews, students first practiced interviewing each other. On a second occasion, Dr. Hunter invited several international faculty and graduate sociology students to the class to serve as volunteer interviewees. Being international, these faculty and students could respond to the real research interview questions the students had developed. They were also all experienced qualitative researchers who could provide students with feedback on their interviewing skills. For this exercise, students paired up to conduct the interviews. One student started the interview while the second observed and took notes, then the interviewers swapped roles. Afterward, all students gathered to debrief and receive critiques and pointers from the "interviewees." Students liked having an interview partner and decided they would continue to pair up for actual interviews whenever possible.

We recruited participants via the Immigration Project, outreach coordinators at the local school districts, and other members of BN Welcoming, offering a $25 gift card as a research

incentive. Our initial goal was to recruit participants who recently immigrated to the community, and who would be most in need of the immigration services that BN Welcoming and other community partners are striving to establish. We aimed to have participants who were not so unsettled as to be vulnerable, but whose early and ongoing challenges might still be fresh in memory. Although Gina wanted to students to have direct interviewing experience, many potential interviewees in our target population are French and Spanish speakers. Only one student (Ryleigh) possessed Spanish language skills. While Gina worked to locate interpreters, Yolanda Alonso, a recent immigrant from Mexico and professional journalist who has done much to highlight Latinos in the community, offered to post our call for participants on her blog. Those who responded to the blog post were usual part of the emerging network of Latin Americans who had been recruited to work at Rivian Automotive. Others who responded to our call were the American children of immigrants or people who have been in the community for many years. These individuals now work in social agencies and nonprofits with more recent immigrants and therefore could speak indirectly of recent immigrants' experiences.

In total we interviewed 12 people (see Table 1 and Appendix). Interviews were conducted on campus, at a public library or on Zoom, as chosen by the participant. They lasted 30 minutes to one hour and were audio recorded. Interviews conducted in English were transcribed with the assistance of Otter AI. Three interviews were completed with the help of a French or Spanish language interpreter. These interviews were not transcribed, rather the interviewer took detailed notes from the recording.

Table 1. Interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender/Age	Time in BN (US)	Country of Origin
Alejandra	F/20s	NA	US (child of Mexican immigrants)
Alina	F/20s	3 years	Mexico
Erika	F/30s	6 months	Ecuador
Francesca	F/30s	5 (6) years	Venezuela
Gabriela	F/30s	2 years	Venezuela
Isaiah	M/30s	4 (10) years	Congo
Julia	F/20s	2 years	Peru
Lucas	M/30s	2 years	Mexico
Paula	F/20s	2 years	Mexico
Sophia	F/30s	2.5 (3) years	Mexico
Uzo	M/30s	4 months	Angola
Ximena	F/20s	8 (18)	Ecuador

An ethnographic interview is different from other kinds of interview techniques used in the social sciences. At their best, ethnographic interviews are a series of conversations that take place in the context of a larger set of interactions between interviewer and interviewee (O'Reilly, 2012, 118). While we lacked the ongoing interactions of true ethnographic interview, such as interviewing individual participants and participating in their everyday lives, we did employ many aspects of an ethnographic interview. We began with a list of open-ended

conversational questions that we, as a class, worked to write and revise. (See interview guide in Appendix). In the interview process, we usually found that we did not need to rely on the questions. Instead, interviews were set up to naturally flow and evolve like a conversation. We allowed participants to lead the discussion and to decide what to share.

We started off with the question "tell me about yourself" but the answer to this question changed the trajectory of the interview. What participants felt was important became highlighted in their answer to this question, and they shared whatever they believed was relevant. We then asked follow-up or clarifying questions based on their responses. This opened the door to additional topics of conversation that proved important to our project. We paid careful attention to specific words and phrases that interviewees repeated, to the connections they pointed out, to the issues they described, and how they described life in Bloomington-Normal. All of the above contributed significantly to our findings and helped us gain a new lens through which to look at our community.

Once initial interviews were completed and transcribed, we exchanged transcripts, read them in class, and sought to identify themes in each. As further interviews were completed, these transcripts were added to our Canvas course site discussion board and student interviewers shared key points and highlights. As a class, we then analyzed emergent themes and stories and constructed an outline for this report. Students were assigned sections of the report to write and Gina assembled the disparate parts into this final report, which was co-edited by students (especially Sierra and Laura). The order of the authors roughly reflects contributions to the final report.

Findings: Immigrant Perspectives on Life in Bloomington-Normal

The journey and transition to life in Bloomington-Normal poses many challenges for immigrants. For this study, we talked to immigrants recruited for work for local industries and their accompanying spouses, immigrant family members seeking reunification, and refugees seeking asylum. Despite their diverse demographics and histories, we heard, for example, consistently about the difficulties of renting an apartment, finding adequate work appropriate to their level of training, finding bi-lingual resources, and facing discrimination. This was usually true even for those who arrived with substantial education and work experience. We also heard many stories of resilience and resourcefulness.

Our interviewees who did not land in Bloomington-Normal due to work or school, arrived via "chain migration" (Acosta, 2017) following friends and family. In some cases, these existing social and kin networks made it easier for them to find their footing here. Nearly every interviewee mentioned appreciation for the calm and slow-paced environment of Bloomington-Normal compared to much larger urban cities. For many, Bloomington-Normal was not their first place of residence in the United States. Often they arrived in larger, coastal, or border cities before arriving here.

While the immigrant community members we interviewed vary demographically and ethnically as individuals, language, identity, community, discrimination, and mental health struggles consistently emerged as important themes of shared experience. These findings relate significantly to the resources and organizations immigrants have sought out, created, and leveraged in the community, as well as the resources the community can better provide to

ensure immigrants feel welcomed to Bloomington-Normal. Collectively, the interviews provide important insight into the many assets immigrant community members possess and the obstacles they face as newcomers to the area. A list of interviewees is in the Appendix. All names are pseudonyms unless permission to use the interviewee's first name was granted.

Language & Identity

As interviewees reflected on their experience immigrating to the United States, adjusting to the English language was cited as a significant barrier for those for whom English is a second language. This is because there are significant positive and negative implications for immigrants depending on their level of English proficiency. For example, Isaiah, a proficient English speaker and native French-Congolese speaker, was able to apply to college in the area, earn his degree, and more easily seek out financial aid along the way. Erika, a native Spanish speaker from Ecuador, recognized early on as an exchange student to the United States in high school how impactful learning English could be:

> *So I came here and I started studying English. And then when I come back to my country I was like, 'What should I do?' Because I just graduated from high school when I came back to saying like, I already knew some English. So, I will have a career in English. So that's why I became an English teacher in my country. Because it's very nice. Yeah, but you know, here is kind of difficult because my vocabulary is not that good. Yeah, but I think good enough for conversation. - Erika*

Erika's experience as an English teacher enabled her to immigrate to the United States more easily in her mid-20s and locate employment as an au pair as well as apply successfully for college in the area. Beyond the experiences of Isaiah and Erika related to work and education, interviewees included numerous other reasons why English proficiency is critical to their integration into the community, from the ability to seek out resources like Link EBT to understanding the law and how to build credit.

For those who immigrate here without English language skills adjusting to life in Bloomington-Normal can be especially difficult. They experience feelings of embarrassment and fear regarding their actual inability or perceived inability to speak English. For Sofia, who hails originally from Mexico, the fear of being misunderstood has kept her from connecting with others at community events:

> *I was thinking maybe being at an event I'd meet someone there. But no, but maybe it's because, you know, I think that the language sometimes is like a barrier. And sometimes I like to go with someone but I'm afraid that that person is not going to understand me or something like that.*

Sofia only recently learned that she could take her Illinois Drivers License exam in Spanish,

> *Because of my language I was so afraid to get the license here... I think [only] two weeks ago I [learned] that they have like people that speak Spanish and that you can also take the drive test in Spanish.*

For many interviewees, experiences of identity are complicated by their status as immigrants. Paula, a native of Mexico, described this struggle as having two personalities:

> *I think sometimes I have two personalities when I'm speaking English is one personality because I don't know vocabulary and I my answer is only very short because I don't-I*

can't explain the - all things, but in Spanish, it's easy for me because it's my first language and it's my native language and I can explain all I feel.

Despite this, Paula believes in the value of cultural exchange, stating that living in the US is an opportunity to live "a different way", and has dedicated herself to acclimating to the community.

Uzo had only been in Bloomington-Normal for six months when we interviewed him. He fled political persecution in Angola, making a circuitous and arduous journey before arriving at a relative's home in Bloomington-Normal. He noted that people here are personable but that his limited English and lack of work authorization prevent him from interacting with many community members. Like Paula, this compromises his independence and keeps him from exploring the community unless he has an English-speaker with him, an odd experience he says especially for an adult at his age. Uzo reflects on how this has changed his identity, shifting from an outgoing, independent person who was able to provide for himself in Angola to a shy individual forced to lean on others for help.

A lack of English skills hinders immigrants' ability to find work even if they are otherwise professionally qualified. For example, Julia worked as an accountant in her home country of Venezuela but cannot work here due to challenges related to language as well as specific certification requirements. Similarly, Uzo, who speaks Portuguese and French, is a qualified pharmacist but has not yet mastered English enough to feel comfortable pursuing work authorization.

The immigrants we interviewed who did not yet speak English, and with limited fluency, were taking or had previously taken English language classes at Heartland Community College or through Regional Office of Education #17 STAR Literacy program. One person was also taking one-on-one English classes as Calvary Baptist Church. All of these interviewees described their deep desire to gain language skills as quickly as possible to be able to gain independence, meet new people, find work, or care for their families. As Francesca, a refugee from Venezuela told us:

when I moved here it was so, so hard. The first year was a disaster for me. … But I feel very grateful, I found amazing people here. They've, you know, supported me and helped me a lot…Another thing that helped me a lot was my professional experience, you know. I understand that if I wasn't to fit into this community I need t learn about the rules, about the law. I need to be ready to learn the language….. I used to have two different classes with a STAR program and at Heartland.

Immigrants to Bloomington-Normal work hard to learn English taking classes on top of work and other responsibilities. Non-immigrant community members can reciprocate this effort by learning a second language themselves, like Spanish or French which are spoken by many Bloomington-Normal community members, or at least, by seeking to connect with immigrants and having patience even when communication is difficult.

Ximena told a different kind of story about language, identity, and community. Ximena, who immigrated to the US from Ecuador as a child, speaks English fluently. But described her experience growing up in a bilingual family and now working with recent immigrants. As a teen, she told us, she stopped speaking Spanish because she thought it would be safer to just "fit in with the crowd", a battle of identity and assimilation she says most immigrants are confronted with. As a young adult, she reclaimed her immigrant identity by rebuilding her Spanish-speaking

skills, now working in the community as a translator. Ximena reflected on times she struggled with Spanish but was met with grace and understanding of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the community:

> *…I'm trying. And I think they recognize that as like, strength. And also, they're battling with language, right? Like they're trying to learn English and they're struggling, and they feel embarrassed, and they don't know the words. So I feel like it was a sign of like strength and also, like a type of leadership to say, let's struggle together, like this is embarrassing, and this is hard. But let's struggle together until we get to a place where we feel comfortable…*

Ximena's reflection highlights how, with empathy and courage, human connection can transcend language and cultural barriers. How else might Bloomington as a community celebrate immigrant identity and facilitate belonging despite language barriers?

Finding Community through Work and Churches

Finding and creating community were key issues for immigrants, but difficult to achieve even for those who were recruited to work at local companies with diverse workforces. For example, Yolanda Alonso, who is originally from Mexico, accompanied her husband to Bloomington-Normal when he relocated here for a work opportunity. He, like hundreds of other recent immigrants to the community, had been recruited by Rivian. For Yolanda, the combination of being a new arrival to the community, a new mother, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic left her feeling isolated. She countered these feelings and experiences in two ways. First, she helped to organize a WhatsApp group of Hispanic women, many of whom were spouses of Rivian and associated companies. This "sorority," which now has over 100 members, provides connection, community, and networking. Secondly, Yolanda used her professional expertise in journalism to create a Facebook blog called *Latinos en BloNo*. Yolanda noticed that many of her colleagues were not aware of the numerous resources and events (often free) in the community. There was no central place to go for information about these events in Spanish. She began posting about community events and then writing profiles of Latinos in the community, especially Latinx professionals, who could be bilingual resources for the community.

The workplace is also a space where some immigrants can find community. After arriving in the USA from Mexico City, Lucas started working in industrial automation at Rivian. There, he developed friendships with others who also immigrated from Mexico. After switching companies, he enjoyed his work more but found himself missing the opportunity to socialize with coworkers in Spanish. Outside of work, he finds the community in Bloomington-Normal to be much friendlier than Mexico City and he enjoys being in a small town, even though he had to get used to stores, restaurants and offices closing much earlier that he was used to in Mexico. He says he never felt out of place after moving here.

Alina, who like Sofia, is the spouse of a Rivian employee, pointed this out as well, but found that the community created by Rivian helped her to know about events and find needed resources, such as a Spanish-speaking landlord. Alina thought she had an easier time adjusting to life in Bloomington-Normal than many of her peers in part because she and her husband had already experienced living far from their families while in Mexico. She noted that Mexican

families tend to be tight-knit and moving away can be hard. Some of her peers struggled with this homesickness in addition to the other adjustments.

Several of our interviewees mentioned the importance of their churches when discussing community. For example, Isaiah immigrated from the Congo to Champaign, IL in 2013. During that time, he commuted every Sunday to Bloomington, IL to attend church services at Everlasting Gospel Mission Center. This nearly 2-hour weekly commute demonstrates the importance of Everlasting Gospel Mission Center to Isaiah. Eventually, Isaiah relocated to Bloomington to be closer to his church and to attend Illinois State University. He describes his community as solely his church and his family. Beyond that, he stated in our interview that he didn't have many friends in Bloomington because he'd met a lot of ignorant people in the city. In particular, he often feels shut down by others because of his accent.

Julia mentioned in her interview that she found her Latina community at church. In particular, she mentioned churchgoers' kindness even going so far as to provide her with necessities for cold weather. However, for someone without a car, church is difficult for Julia to attend during the Winter. Bloomington-Normal is harder for her to navigate with snow and cold weather because her home country doesn't typically reach temperatures below 70°F.

Francesca fled political turmoil in Venezuela to seek asylum in the US. Although she was a college-educated business owner in Venezuela, she could only find work in construction when she arrived first in Florida. Francesca found it easier to get by as a Spanish speaker in Florida. When her husband, also a Venezuelan refugee, moved to Bloomington-Normal, he asked her to join him, saying, "If you want to learn English, it will be better for you here." Despite having her husband and children with her, she found her first years in this community to be very isolating:

> *It is hard to fit into this community because we don't have big diversity. You know, the Indian community is the Indian community, the Hispanic community is the Hispanic community. So, there are good people, but they don't intermingle. No. But it's different in Florida. You know, because people [there] connect with other communities. It's not only [the case that] because I am African American, I can only talk with African Americans…so here, it was hard. It was so hard.*

In addition to these ethnic and racial barriers, Francesca described experiences of class segregation. After arriving in Bloomington-Normal her first job was in a restaurant where she met working-class Hispanic people who assumed she was European (due to her name) and "fancy" because she was college-educated. Francesca recognizes that, despite being a refugee, her immigration story is a relatively privileged one. She notes, "I arrived by air," in contrast to other immigrants who came into the US at the southern US border. Through immigrants she met working in the restaurants and cleaning services here, she says she began to *"learn everything about the immigrant life,"* including arduous travel to the United States, fear of deportation, inability to find work, and difficulty in supporting one's family in minimum-wage jobs.

As the interviewee who had most recently arrived in Bloomington, Uzo lacked many connections. While he is religious, he does not attend church because the closest church of his denomination is in Chicago, 3-4 hours away by car. While he has a driver's license from Angola, his license is not valid in the USA and the DMV does not offer French language services. Uzo

does not want to be a burden on his family or the community and wants to be able to work. In Uzo's words, shared with us through a translator:

> *[Translator] …if he gets a job, then there is no burden on the community to give because what happens is, the thing is if you have about 1000 people who come in your community, those people and you say you can't work, you can't do anything the community will have to give and so the burden is on the community to give. But if the system makes it easy for those people to come to be able to get something to… even if they get a $10 out of the job they do at least they feel a little independent and the community doesn't have to give too much because then the burden is not on the community.*

Once immigrants find community they can support themselves and each other through odd jobs. Alina noted that many of her friends who are learning English or do not have work authorization generate income by cooking/catering for each other, babysitting, or exchanging other services. This informal economy is another example of the immigrants' resourcefulness and resilience.

Dealing with Discrimination

Every interviewee mentioned that people in Bloomington-Normal are generally "nice" and friendly—at least on the surface. At the same time, as described above, many immigrants noted the lack of empathy for English language learners and the discrimination immigrants with accents face. Sofia found Bloomington-Normal easier to navigate and more connected than her first US residence in Alabama. Yet, she also met local residents who were unwilling to communicate with her and her friends because of their accents.

> *It's been happening to me, some friends that they are at…. I don't know Walmart (for instance) and they speak the English that they know or because the pronunciation is different. And sometimes the people are like, 'No, I don't understand you.' So maybe* [if locals could] *be more, what is the word to understand or to try to put* [yourself] *in the other people or person's shoes?*

This lack of empathy for English learners gave Sophia anxiety and made her adjustment harder than it might have been.

Lucas, who was recruited to work for Rivian, felt a subtle discrimination when he was put in a position that did not match his expertise:

> *I was thrown into daily operation . . . My days were from 6:30 to 6:30 [and] I was supposed to do the exact same thing I was doing in Mexico, like managerial level work, designing the system, getting projects done, deploying new solutions . . . But then I was just sitting there . . . waiting for something to happen. If nothing happened, I did nothing . . . I felt I was underused.*

He eventually left for another company and position that better utilized his talents.

Other examples of discrimination were blatantly racist and xenophobic. For instance, Isaiah is a proficient English speaker, and native French-Congolese speaker, with a college degree from Illinois State who works as a banking professional in Bloomington. He attributed

his ability to navigate institutions to his language skills and "hustler" attitude. However, he noted that he still experienced discrimination due to his accent:

> *So, what I'm saying to you, you see people closing doors because you have an accent. So back in the day, they trying to… I'm not saying they are, but you see what I mean? Minority of people, they try to measure your intelligence, they try to measure how you think according to your language. That was the problem. Or the level of me speaking does not exactly say like, correlates like, there's no relation between my accent and my level thinking or my intelligence. - Isaiah*

Isaiah commented that his experiences with discrimination are likely different from other immigrants because for him, as a black person, they are compounded by racism. He referred to this as an "issue with faces". When asked to share such an experience, Isaiah revealed that a customer recently said to him "Oh, you don't know what you're saying. Go back to Kenya" when he was attempting to explain why interest had accrued on their credit card. This particularly offensive encounter demonstrates that, even as a qualified professional, Isaiah experiences racist and discriminatory attitudes. Still, he remains a self-described optimist. In his words "I only see things on the positive side. Negative is useless for me".

Francesca's experience with discrimination involved a misunderstanding between her high school daughter and another student. When her daughter was threatened by an older girl, she (her daughter) retreated to the principal's office seeking guidance and assistance. Instead, she was dismissed, the principal claiming that they did not have the time to address the issue. So, she brought up the circumstance to her mother, Francesca. Francesca went to the principal's office and was told by the assistant principal that she "didn't know the whole story" and that she didn't have time for a meeting and would send her an email later. The next day the principal required Francesca's daughter to sign an agreement not to talk to and to keep away from the older girl who had confronted her. She felt targeted, wrongly accused of initiating the conflict, and unjustly punished.

Francesca interpreted the situation as a clear example of discrimination as both she and her daughter's attempts to clarify the situation had been dismissed, and the older girl ignored. Francesca explained that she knows many Hispanic kids who find school very difficult, she said, it is "really, really hard for young people in my community to try to adapt… they hate school." This problem could be addressed, Francesca suggests, by involving more members of the Hispanic community into educational programs and staffing.

Mental Health

Our interviewees faced a variety of stressors and challenges and expressed the emotional toll these stressors took on their mental health. As seen in the some of the passages quoted above, arriving in Bloomington-Normal without English language proficiency can lead to social isolation and depression, even for people with family and friends in the community. Another struggle for several interviewees was the loss of professional identity or income earning potential.

Paula is a young woman in her twenties who immigrated with her husband from Mexico after he was offered a job at Rivian. They have lived in Bloomington-Normal for about two years. Despite having several years of experience in the electronics and automotive industries,

Paula is currently unable to work due to the restrictions of her visa. Her case shows how the language barrier, loss of work opportunities, and lack of close friends compound each other.

"I feel like a zero," Paula stated as she was describing her mental health challenges upon arriving to the United States. As a former business owner in Mexico, Paula's inability to work led her to feel purposeless:

> *For many people, it's easy to stay here because in America, it's a good opportunity to grow in your money and something like that for your kids, but for me..... I think I was different because I stopped working. And I hear I can't work because my type of visa. I feel like a zero. Because I don't, I don't know that I can study and this my only activity, but [it's hard to adjust to this] after seven years working. It was so complicated.*

The language barrier led her to staying home most of the time:

> *And I think that for me, the principal barrier was language. It's, it's the principal item. And in the second it's I don't have friends here yet.*
>
> *Because in the beginning I didn't communicate with other people and when I tried to [go out to] buy something, it was so hard for me and I don't know, it was not easy.*

The multi-faceted challenges Paula was facing led her to living a life mostly at home and with limited connections. The reality she was facing led her to abandon things she really enjoyed, such as doing her makeup.

> *I enjoy [applying] makeup. I really spend time to make up myself or some friends. And because I don't know, but in Mexico, it's.. I [took a] master class for the makeup. But here, of the seven days of the week, one day only I [put on] makeup. And this is big change because why [do] I want to [put on] make up if I stay in my home? And I prefer not.*
>
> New social connections were further hindered by her depression:
>
> *And many people don't understand [because I] feel bad all the time. Because people say "you are only sad and it's not good for me and prefer don't to join our meeting with you". And I have two or three friends but when the time [comes] they prefer not to join me or to meet with me because they say "hey you always are sad."*

Because Bloomington-Normal has limited resources when it comes to mental health professionals who speak Spanish, Paula turned to using remoted mental health resources in Mexico, a resource that would be prohibitively expensive for many immigrants.

Refugees have often experienced trauma in their homelands that they have not been able to address and that impacts their wellbeing. As Uzo expressed (via translator), "*"[…] it will be very, very, very important... it's needful to have […] services put in place to help people overcome those kinds of trauma that [I] went through."*

Resources and Needs

After interviewing several members of the immigrant community in Bloomington-Normal, coding, and analyzing these interviews, we identified several trends indicating that existing resources are being utilized and that there is a need for additional resources.

Although Lucas came to the community via Rivian and settling in was relatively easy, Lucas commented:

> *There should be like, an [unknown] or someone to tell you about all this. That you'll, have to navigate by yourself because there's no one that can do it for you. I agree. And*

that's okay. You have to do it. Because it's your social security number. It's your driver's license. It's, it's my... it's things I need, but there should be like, I'm not gonna say even if an awareness or an assistance I'm not sure how to call it but it would be nice if... there was something someplace you could reach or that could set you up, "okay, we can help you get this appointment here." Like make it faster, make it easier here. It would be so nice. Like a checklist?

Resources already being utilized include Heartland Community College's Adult Education program and the STAR program for English language classes, friend and family networks, community centers, and the Immigration Project. Resources identified as lacking in the community were affordable mental health services offered in other languages, Spanish-(and presumably French) speaking accountants or banking associates, Spanish-speaking representatives from the school districts, and assistance navigating public health mandates such as required vaccinations for school children.

Many of these resources were used by some members of the community but identified as needs by others. This suggests that information is shared in some circles but may not cross into others. Information about existing resources usually came via family and social networks or via a person's employer. The main difficulty in navigating the community and accessing resources seems to be due to language barriers. There are several places in Bloomington-Normal that offer translation services for free or on a "pay what you can" basis for individuals. These places include Western Avenue, the Immigration Project, and Sigma Delta Pi, an academic society on campus for Hispanic students.

Western Avenue accepts requests for translation services through phone call or email listed on their website under "Community Outreach." They offer mostly Spanish translation services but have recently added a French-speaking person to their team to assist with French-speaking immigrants. Western Avenue also offers individualized support as well as adult education and GED prep classes in partnership with Heartland Community College. Individualized support is listed on their website as "individualized support for limited English speakers through brokerage, referrals, resources, advocacy, and other supplemental services that aid and support the client in navigating the community" (westernavenuecc.org). For this, they accept walk-ins but prefer appointments made ahead of time through phone call or email. Western Avenue also offers various services, including food, youth, and senior programs in effort to meet as many of the needs of the community as they can.

The Immigration Project offers many different services for the immigrant community, including legal services, translation, education, navigation, etc. Their legal services include support for naturalization for Legal Permanent Residents, Green Card renewal, family-based immigration petitions, immigrant survivors of crime and trauma, removal defense, deferred action for childhood arrivals, and other special programs (immigrationproject.org). The Immigration Project's social services include a Welcome Center, housing programs, public benefits assistance, and educational presentations about immigration law, higher education, tax information, and more (immigrationproject.org). One of the most useful resources for the community we interviewed would potentially be the Welcome Center. Many of our interviewees expressed that they struggled to figure out what they needed to do when they first arrived here, such as acquiring an ITIN or SSN, apply for housing, registering children for school, determining what vaccinations are required and where to get them, etc. The Welcome

Center works in partnership with the Illinois Department of Human Services "with the goal of being a one-stop shop where immigrants, refugees, and new Americans can connect with services in their community" (immigrationproject.org). The Welcome Center offers walk-ins at their office located in Normal on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. They also offer emergency financial assistance of up to $2,000 via prepaid debit card.

Francesca who now works at an agency supporting minority business owners explained that:

> *financial literacy is not easy, you know, and [Hispanic] people feel very shy, you know, intimidated about taxes and all this stuff. So, now, I think that we have a big number of members of the community that they started to, you know, feel curious, try to be more interested in learning.*

She noted that Illinois Wesleyan University's Small Business Development Center invited a Spanish-speaking accountant from Chicago*," because we don't have any accountants that really speak Spanish*" to provide a workshop on, *"all that you need to consider for your business about taxes."* It drew over 20 Spanish-speaking business owners. Francesca generalized that the Hispanic community in Bloomington-Normal, *"does not have big problems with money because they work every day, all the time, you know, and they are saving money. So, it's more about language and resources,"* such as bi-lingual banking assistance and financial education.

One of the most notable themes in the interviews was the need for affordable mental health services offered in other languages, most prevalently Spanish. None of our interviewees expressed knowledge of such resources available in the community. Some were receiving therapy and counseling online or outside of the community. There *are* two places in the community that offer "pay what you can" mental health services in Spanish, one of which also works with a confidential third-party translation service to meet the needs of speakers of other languages.

INtegRIty Counseling in Bloomington offers "pay what you can" counseling services and may offer referrals for more specialized issues involving "sexual abuse/trauma, legal issues, ongoing addiction, or a need for mental health assessments or evaluations" (integrityhelps.org). They have a page on their website in Spanish detailing information about their services. Prices for their counseling services are under $50 per hour, and most clients contribute between $5 and $50 an hour. For payment, they accept cash, check, credit card or debit card. They also offer telehealth counseling for those who are unable to make it to their office. INtegRIty Counseling accepts new patients via the phone number listed on their website.

Chestnut Health Systems is another organization that offers "pay what you can" counseling services. Chestnut is a larger organization that can address more specialized issues that INtegRIty may not be able to, such as sexual abuse/trauma and addiction. They also offer mental health evaluations as a routine process for taking on new patients. Chestnut Health Systems in Bloomington currently has one Spanish-speaking therapist who is seeking more Spanish-speaking clients, and they work with a confidential translation service that operates in serval additional languages. An employee of Chestnut Health Systems stated that they have been having trouble getting the word out about this relatively newly offered service. The

process for being admitted as a new patient at Chestnut Health Systems is more complicated than INtegRIty's. This process starts by visiting the clinic at 1003 Martin Luther King Jr Drive for a walk-in mental health assessment and from there, the on-site staff will guide the client through the next steps.

These resources seem to be left out of the word-of-mouth networks that share the other resources already accessed by the community. BN Welcoming can help spread the word about these mental health resources for the immigrant community and advocate for expanding these services.

Conclusion

Interviewing immigrants in Bloomington-Normal highlighted the many challenges immigrants face acclimating to our community from language barriers to finding community to locating resources. Our study was limited to a small sample of young adults, most with steady household income, and who ALL have some form of higher education. If their experience is this difficult, then how much more difficult must it be for those who arrive with fewer educational, economic, or social resources.

Employers in our community recruit and benefit from skills of migrant labor, but it appears that they do not provide sufficient infrastructure and resources in a variety of languages to facilitate the health, well-being, and social integration of these employees. Bloomington-Normal, as a whole community benefits from immigrant labor and cultural capital and could better serve its residents with multilingual resources.

Our universities are also resources that can be harnessed to serve the community. Alejandra, a US born child of Mexican immigrants is a currently a student at Illinois State. She belongs to an honor society Sigma Delta Pi, the National Collegiate Spanish Honor Society (Sigma Delta Pi, 2023). Members offer interpreting services to the community. They also hold events such as on called Chatting with the Community, as Alejandra explains:

> *[…] we do this thing called Charlando Con La Comunidad […] where we like, host a little event where like people from like, all different countries- well, Spanish speaking countries, but like any like Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Spain, like as much as we can think of, and we host everybody there. And we just like talk. It's all like kind of just like mingling and stuff and knowing people like outside of your own Spanish-speaking country and what you're used to. But that is also really nice, because we learn a lot about like people and then those people... since they [speak] Spanish and they're living in Bloomington-Normal, they know more resources, and they know all the other things.*

Other language clubs and social organizations could also offer community services and engagement if they are not doing so already.

Finally, BN Welcoming is and can be a bridge and resource hub. Our community already has many services of which our interviewees were not aware; this is perhaps due to a lack of communication among institutions that offer resources for the immigrant community. Through the BN Welcoming website and network, BN Welcoming can a conduit of information.

We are happy to see the work of many faculty and students through the ISU-BN Welcoming partnership. Students in the ANT 302/402 course unanimously appreciated the opportunity to work on this project. In their comments on the course many students noted that

despite initial nervousness they found the interviews rewarding. They commented that they gained concrete research skills that they would use in future qualitative research projects. Students wrote that the most important part of the project was its grounding in empathy.

At the conclusion of our project, students reflected on one of the initial questions we started with: What do immigrants need to know to fit in here? We decided that this question presumes a correct way of belonging and that the burden rests with immigrants to adjust. Our interviews, however, showed that immigrants are unanimously working to "fit in." What is needed is appreciation from the broader community for the resourcefulness, diversity, and resilience of the immigrant community. Such appreciation is the first step toward a being a welcoming community.

ENDNOTES

1. Gina Hunter, with co-PIs, Reecia Orzeck, Associate Professor of Geography, and Ian Murphy-Pociask, Sociology graduate student, submitted the project to the Institutional Review Board prior to the beginning of the semester. The project was approved under Protocol 2023-177.

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Appendix 1. Recruitment Text

Invitation to participate in a research study

We are faculty and students at Illinois State University who are interested in learning how newcomers have experienced their making a home in Bloomington-Normal. We are seeking participants for a research study of immigrants' experiences. We will ask participants to tell us their own stories, reflect on their experiences arriving here and the challenges they faced. We hope to be able to identify needed resources so that we can help future newcomers. If you are willing to participate, we will want to set up a time for an informal interview about your experience settling into this community. We will also answer any questions or concerns you have about our project; we will give you a copy of a consent form which will tell you what we are asking you to do, and how we will protect your privacy and confidentiality. We know that your time is valuable and can offer you a small compensation (a $25 gift card) for taking the time to participate.

If you would like to learn more or to participate, please contact us by providing your first name and a contact number or email.

We can be reached at: [addresses omitted]

Appendix 2. Interview Guide

Preliminaries

Researchers will introduce themselves self and thank the interviewee for considering your request for an interview.
Researchers will ask for their name and how they would like to be addressed.
Researchers will discuss consent form and answer any questions. If they agree to participate, researcher will leave a copy of form with them.
Researchers will also request permission to audio record.

Conversation Guide

Tell me a bit about yourself?
(Where are you from? How long have you been in Bloomington-Normal?)
Tell me about your experience living in Bloomington-Normal.
Listen carefully. Follow up questions might ask more regarding work, schooling, family life
How would you describe your community here?
Follow Up:
How has your experience changed over time?
Tell me about the things you enjoy about living here.
What are some of the things you find difficult about this community?
What changes would you like to see in this community?
What do you know now that you wish you had known when you first got here?
Follow Up: Can you tell me about any ways you had to adjust to living here?
What advice would you give to someone who was thinking about coming here to live?
[What would you want the general population of BN to know about your community?]
Is there anything I didn't ask you about that you think I should know?
[Who else should I talk to really understand immigrants' experiences here?]
May I follow up with you if I have any additional questions or need clarification?

Appendix 3. List of Interviewee Biographies (names are pseudonyms, or used with permission)

Alejandra is a 21-year-old woman who was born in Chicago to immigrant parents from Mexico. She has two older siblings who were born in Mexico and younger siblings who were born in the US. She is a student at ISU. Her major is Spanish Teacher Studies with a minor in Latino Studies and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Alina is in her late 20s and arrived two years ago in Bloomington-Normal from a suburb of Mexico City. She came with her husband who works for Rivian. She is an engineer but does not have a work visa. She is using this opportunity learn English.

Erika is a young woman in her 20s who came from Quito, Ecuador to the United States. She is a student at Heartland Community College who is working to get her English teaching degree so that she can be an English teacher back in her hometown. This is her second time coming to the United States, the first was through a high school exchange program. She came to Heartland Community College through an au pair program and is equivalent to a live-in nanny for her host family.

Francesca is a Venezuelan refugee in her late 30s. She has been in the US for six years and in Bloomington-Normal for five years. She is married and has two children and work for a local non-profit.

Gabriella is a woman in her 30s who emigrated from a small village in Venezuela. She is an activities coordinator associated with Wesleyan University. Her role with this university is to set up and help people who want to use the campus for various activities such as weddings, receptions, or conferences. She came to the United States in 2018 and was in New York City at the time. Gabriella and her husband moved to the Bloomington-Normal area about two years later for her husband to work at Rivian.

Isaiah is an outgoing, bilingual professional and well-connected, active community member in Bloomington-Normal. Isaiah is in his mid-to-late thirties, hails originally from the Congo and has resided in the United States for 10 years, having relocated to Bloomington-Normal 4 years ago. Throughout this span of time Isaiah has earned his bachelor's degree from Illinois State in accounting and information systems, transitioned from a part-time cleaner and Uber driver to full-time banking professional, and is now married with 2 kids. He describes himself as an optimist and hustler and credits his church, Everlasting Gospel Mission Center, and family as his community.

Julia is a 26-year-old from Venezuela who first immigrated to Peru in 2018 before coming to the U.S. in 2021. She was accompanied to the U.S. with her husband and brother. She began her immigration journey in Florida before deciding to leave for Illinois due to the high cost of living as well as having some family already established in Bloomington-Normal. She was able to come to the U.S. under the Temporary Protection Status mandate. She mentions that she was

an accountant in Venezuela but does not perform that job here due to language, certification, and expense factors. She has found a community here among fellow Latinos through St. Mary's Church, a Latina Fiesta, events on Facebook, in addition to a conference held by the Immigration project. In all, she notes that she loves living here because of the relative peace and quiet, but it still has a community of Latinos and she can travel to Chicago too if she needs.

Lucas is an industrial engineer in his 30s, from Mexico. He lives in Normal with his wife and dog. He speaks Spanish and English, and enjoys attending concerts, both local and in Chicago. His connection to a past ISU student helped him and his family settle in, and he's found community in his workplace and with friends he's made at a local brewery.

Paula is a young woman in her twenties who immigrated with her husband from Mexico after he was offered a job at Rivian. They have lived in Bloomington-Normal for about two years. Despite having several years of experience in the electronics and automotive industries, Paula is currently unable to work due to her visa. She currently studies small business management at Heartland Community College and takes Star Literacy classes to improve her English.

Sofia is a 32-year-old woman with two children. She immigrated to the United States from Mexico and spent six months in Birmingham, Alabama. She then relocated to Bloomington-Normal so her husband could begin a job with Rivian and has been here for about two and a half years.

Uzo is a man in his 30s who fled Angola and arrived in Bloomington-Normal after a long and perilous journey through many. Currently, he lives with a friend and his friend's family. He speaks Portuguese and French. Like many others he appreciates the general friendliness in the community but is not able to engage much or make friends yet with them because he does not speak English fluently. He laments that he does not have papers yet to get a job. In Angola he was employed as a pharmacist while at the same time he helping to run a family business.

Ximena: is a 26-year-old woman born in Quito, Ecuador, who moved to the US with her family when she was 9 years old. She has been living in Bloomington-Normal since he was 18 years old, originally moving here for school. Ximena works at a local non-profit and studies Social Work at Illinois State.