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Michelle Clifford
michelle.roseclifford@gmail.com

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Us Versus Them: A Study of the Basis of Varying Perceptions of Immigrants in Border Towns

I lived within ten miles of the United States/Mexico border for eighteen months. During that time, I saw an enormous difference in perceptions of Hispanic immigrants in that community. Some referred to them as “seekers of the American dream, like all of us” while one woman called them “a threat to America as we know it”. Many of them had similar backgrounds and all lived within the same community. I also heard many remarks about how these feelings have gotten stronger since President Trump took office. Did these individuals feel free to express their feelings after he took office, or were they attempting to distance themselves from the new social taboo that was illegal immigrants?

With this research, I hoped to learn more about the impact that an individual’s ethnicity has upon his or her perception of immigrants. I interviewed five women who I suspected would have varying opinions on the topic. My first subject, Riddell, has lived in a border town for three years. This Caucasian woman lives in stark contrast to her heavily Hispanic community and does not speak any Spanish, which often creates a language barrier between herself and those around her. The second, Linares, emigrated from Peru at the age of five, grew up in a Spanish-speaking household in the United States, and lived in border towns for the same eighteen months that I did. The third, Vierra, was a second-generation immigrant and a psychotherapist. The fourth, Blanco, was a third-generation immigrant who helps immigrants to find work. The fifth, Garcia, was a second-generation immigrant and a nurse. The questions I asked were designed to bring any “us versus them” feelings to the surface by asking how the individual fits in with her community. I asked each subject to explain why they think those with opposite opinions feel the

way they do. I also directly asked the respondents if they believed that President Trump's policies and rhetoric have had any effect on their neighbors' feelings towards immigrants.

One of my primary observations from my time living in these communities is that Latinos were generally much more supportive of immigration than the Caucasians I met. The theory I wanted to test with this research was that Latinos related more with immigrants from Latin America—in other words, they see them as an “us” rather than a “them”. Vierra mentioned that even the physical characteristics of Latino immigrants can promote sympathy from Hispanic US citizens. “It's difficult to see the difference between residents, undocumented immigrants, or documented immigrants. You know, we all look the same. Along a similar thread, Garcia added, “really, everyone [around here] is Hispanic. You... stuck out.”

Riddell, on the other hand, admitted that she saw immigrants as others. She defended those who fear of immigrants by saying “you know, they're a different breed of people... and they do things that... we wouldn't consider doing.” Of her experience when she first moved to Utah, Linares said, “people would kind of give you like that look... like you're some kind of gang member or something... I mean, it's obviously not everyone, you know? But you can always find those people who... they have this assumption that... most of us will drop out, that we don't really go to college, or that they'll start fights... instead of just hearing us out.” Linares went as far as assigning a lot of fear of immigrants to the reaction to 9/11. When asked why those who have different viewpoints about immigrants in the US think the way they do, she responded “I think it's more like categorizing the past... take 9/11 for example... it was done, yeah, by people in the Middle East, but it wasn't everybody from the Middle East... after 9/11 they were classified mainly as danger.... People are asking... am I going to foolishly let criminals in?” From these interviews, it was clear to me that many Latinos may see immigrants

as themselves in another life or as they would see a family member. At one point during my interview with Vierra, she cut me off to say, “I wish the government would realize that they are people. They’re just people.”

The responses to the question about the effect of Trump’s rhetoric was especially interesting. Each of the five subjects agreed that there has been a strong impact of attitudes towards immigrants since Trump has taken office. Vierra said, “you know, there really hasn’t been a huge influx of numbers...it’s just been getting so much extra attention”. She also mentioned that in her work as a psychotherapist, she has noticed the term “immigrant” taking a more negative connotation in the last few years. She also said that she has noticed more bias towards her whenever she leaves south Texas and has even heard someone mutter about her, “look, another one who got this far”, despite the fact that she was born in the United States and has lived here for her whole life. Garcia reported a surge in anti-immigrant protests and violence in her community. Blanco said, “there’s just so much more hatred “Riddell, on the other hand, said “you know, I think that focus in DC is helping... I do know there are some people who have received... dual citizenship... and the people who... cheat the system... it makes them mad.” My analysis from these limited interviews is that President Trump may be furthering the “us versus them” mindset. The most telling of this was hearing Riddell’s perspective. She moved from the US/Canada border to the US/Mexico border and had told me in private that the change was “shocking... we got complete whiplash”. She gave perhaps the most compelling “us versus them” narrative as she shared her experiences about first coming to live in her community, which is 94% Hispanic¹.

¹ <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/brownsville-tx/>

A possibly related trend is that of the Hispanic community distancing themselves from their Hispanic background.” There is a significant push to dilute Latino culture in the region and promote American culture. Many wear blue contacts and dye their hair blond. Children will be so strongly urged to speak English both at school and at home that they never learn Spanish and are barely capable of communicating with their parents. Blanco told me about her cousin who, since President Trump took office, has taken a staunchly anti-immigrant stance, despite the fact that his grandmother came to the United States as an illegal immigrant. “He says, “oh, them wetbacks², send them back to Mexico.’ And that’s my own cousin. And I say, ‘Hey, your grandma, she came here as a wetback. So maybe they’ll come and take her, take her to Mexico, and you’ll go back to Mexico.’” I knew two middle-aged sisters who pretended to not speak Spanish (which was their first language). I attempted to speak to them in Spanish when I first met them and was surprised by their sharp rebuke. “Sweetheart, this is America. We speak English.” I found out later that both of their parents came to the United States illegally. These sisters declined my request to interview with them.

This “us versus them” mindset expands to a debate on what is at stake with immigration. Riddell agreed that immigrants are good people, but said “I think that the downsides are the expense that the government takes on to feed them, shelter them, provide health services, that’s where my heart turns because our family for a long time didn’t have health insurance. We didn’t have insurance and all of these immigrants... were getting those services for free from the government, so that, that was hard and, you know... it makes you think a little bit, doesn’t it?”

Linares had a different view. She argued that there is a greater moral value at stake than just the extra cost of resources. “Because that’s one thing that we can’t go against is people’s

² An offensive term used to describe an illegal immigrant (assuming they swam across the Rio Grande River)

freedom. But like we can be civilized. We can learn to love each other without having to let that fear run us. I think it's just a matter of what side you want to be on--if you want to be on the good side or if you want to be on the fear side. That's just how I feel, and you know, you've got to make that choice and you've got to... be true to that, I guess." Linares even seemed to be wary of classifying at all, once saying "excuse me... I don't want to classify... but he was white." She even made a comparison of the detention centers to Hitler's concentration camps on the basis of classification. It was interesting to see the juxtaposition between not wanting to classify immigrants, but on the other hand, creating an emotional space between those with opposing viewpoints by comparing their viewpoints to those of Hitler.

There seems to be a concurrent theme of social stigma shaping opinions toward immigrants in these communities. The Spanish language and Mexican culture are viewed as undesirable and many are therefore distancing themselves from them. There has also seemed to have been an increasing polarization on the topic of immigration since President Trump took office. Although more research is required on the topic, I hypothesize that this social undesirability has an essential role in negative feelings towards immigrants in individuals and communities with similar backgrounds. From these interviews and my own experience, I also theorize that Caucasians are less likely to support immigrants and even dehumanize them by creating an emotional distance between themselves and the immigrants, while Latinos see them as "just people" that are "hard to tell apart from anyone who has lived here their whole lives". This topic merits more research, especially with the impending 2020 US presidential election and the rise of attention given to immigration topics in the last four years.