Changing Times: A Case Study of Hispanic-Americans in Southwest Michigan

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Based on results of the 2000 census, Hispanics are now the largest, and fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S. Historically, the Hispanic population in the state of Michigan has been very modest in size and spatially concentrated in the Detroit metro area. Starting in 1980 but with a much faster rate growth in the last decade, Hispanics have increasingly selected Southwest Michigan for relocation from other parts of the U.S. Grand Rapids is now second only to Detroit in the absolute number of Hispanics. Many other cities and towns in Southwestern Michigan have experienced similar growth. With the rapid pace of demographic change in Southwest Michigan, there has been a lag in social services for these recent arrivals as well as some tensions among the region’s ethnic groups. In this case study based on over 10 hours of interviews with three focus groups targeting three distinct socio-economic levels, we summarize the major economic problems, social concerns and issues associated with the maintenance of culture for over 30 Hispanic residents who participated in the project.

Keywords: Hispanics, Michigan, Latinos/Latinas

Results of the 2000 United States Census reflect the steady growth of the Hispanic population of Michigan—a pattern typical of all the Great Lakes States. The 35 million self-identified Hispanics (recognizing some prefer Latinos/as—see Gratton and Gutmann 2000) represent the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States and are playing an increasingly important role in the country’s politics, economy, and culture (Cavalcanti and Schleef 2001; Flesher 2001a; Rodriguez 2002 1). The Hispanic population of the US is expected to double by 2025, and then double again by 2070 when almost 30% of Americans will be Hispanic (Velez-Ibanez and Sampaio 2002). Michigan’s self-reporting Hispanic population increased from 162,440 persons in 1980 to 323,877 persons in 2000—essentially doubling in these twenty years (1.99 times), and increasing by 60% in the last decade (Collins 2001, US Bureau of the Census 2001). Currently, 3.3% of Michigan’s population are Hispanic (U.S. Census 2001). In sharp contrast, for the same time period, Michigan’s total population
increased by only 7.3%. Hispanics will play an increasingly important role in Michigan and the region as a whole in the coming years.

Whites and blacks continue to dominate Michigan’s population, and will continue to do so for some time. However, the concentration of smaller minority groups in specific regions of the state magnifies their importance in political, economic, and cultural arenas. This is particularly true with respect to persons of Latina/o or Hispanic cultures in largely white Southwest Michigan (Flesher 2001b; Rodriguez 2002; US Census 2001). Traditionally, most Hispanics have tended to live in and around two of Michigan’s largest cities, Detroit and Lansing (the state capital). Since 1980, however, a third “center” has emerged, incorporating Michigan’s second largest city of Grand Rapids but extending southward to the Indiana state line (Figure 1). Southwest Michigan is now home to the second greatest concentration of Hispanics in the state after metro Detroit and the adjacent suburban counties.

Commercial firms in Southwest Michigan such as First Third Bank, Meijer’s (large multi-service store with groceries), and K-Mart have been quick to recognize the important potential of the growing regional Hispanic presence in Michigan. These firms, and many like them, not only provide bi-lingual services and signs at banks and retail venues in the region, but also are also quickly expanding services and products specifically targeting these increasingly important consumers (Dennis 2002; Janei 2002; Weyr 1988 168-171). Government-provided services and medical facilities have lagged behind, and most agree that public agencies are not meeting the current needs of the Hispanic population (Bullough and Bullough 1982; Trueba 1999). This is particularly true in Southwest Michigan where Hispanic population growth has been very rapid, but where county and city budgets have already been stretched tight by a declining farm economy and the loss of jobs and tax base associated with global consolidation of major industrial employers (auto parts, paper products, furniture). Tensions and/or conflicts have emerged in many locations for a variety of social, economic, and cultural reasons as this part of Michigan continues its inevitable transformation to a multi-cultural society. Often largely overlooked by the dominant white society, the legacy of cultural hegemony—as in all times and places—has left frustration, confusion, and sometimes anger in its wake. Michigan’s cultural transformation, as is the case for the United States in general, has not always been easy, especially for the newest groups. Consider the following:

“For Latinos, the 1990s were a nightmare of national anti-Latino sentiment in America that was represented in the English Only! Movement, California’s Proposition 187 anti-immigrant legislation, the anti-affirmative action “California Civil Rights Initiative”, and various anti-bi-lingual initiatives and legislation. Moreover, America experienced a resurgence of racism that was found in militia groups and in the persistence of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations and various skinhead affiliates. Coupled with the bombing of black churches, Latinos and other minority groups experienced great racial anxieties and fears in America” (Rodriguez 2002 1).

In addition to racism and indifference to special needs, conflicts with government agency personnel such as the police, INS, and social service providers are common (Deposada 2000; Trueba 2002; Weyr 1988). Recent research by Elvira and Zatzick (2002), Trueba (2002), Rodriguez (2002) and Shorey, Cowan,

Figure 1: Southwest Michigan
and Sullivan (2002) identify a considerable list of Hispanic frustrations with mainstream American culture nation-wide, issues that frequently resonate with many Michigan Hispanics. Concerns with racism, racial profiling, a lack of social services, and little political representation are hardly new or unique to Hispanics. There will always be room for improvement in social and economic community relations between majority and minorities. Many white or African-American residents of Southwest Michigan are all but unaware of problems facing people of Hispanic culture. However, given the rapid growth of this population in the US and Michigan, greater efforts must be taken to address immediate issues and perceptions. Beyond social justice, Michigan residents are slowly coming to realize the growing importance of this portion of the population in political and economic arenas (Eastlick and Lotz 2000). “Between 1990 and 2001, Hispanic purchasing power in Michigan doubled from about $2.1 billion to almost $4.4 billion. From 1987 to 1992, Hispanic business ownership nationwide significantly outpaced the average, going from about 400,000 operating firms to just under 800,000 firms” (Hennes 2001:1). In Southwest Michigan, hundreds of Hispanic-owned and operated businesses have opened in the past decade, including at least three weekly newspapers.

This growing ethnic complexity represents both promise and challenge, and the situation in Southwest Michigan reflects similar issues throughout the Great Lakes Region of the US and Canada (Arreola 2000; Minogue 2002; Health Canada 2003). Greater diversity in ethnicity and culture in Michigan, represented only in part by the growing Hispanic population, provides opportunities for citizens to experience and understand different perspectives, traditions, music, languages, food, and other aspects of life that help prepare all citizens for an increasingly global economy and society. New commercial opportunities have invariably emerged to meet the needs of these more diverse populations, already providing new and increasingly important sources of employment and tax revenues as the state’s economy enters a new era (Collins 2002, Mosisa 2002). The growing ethnic complexity also represents an opportunity to rethink the equity of our society in terms of the distribution of goods, services, and political representation (Rodriguez 2002, Santa Ana 2002, Seplow 2001, Yang 2000).

At the same time, the growing diversity reflected in the 2000 Census does indeed represent a challenge. Most advocates argue that Michigan’s people and institutions, particularly public institutions, must commit more thought, time, and resources towards providing additional and sometimes different goods and services for this emerging new mix of residents (Rodriguez 2002 45-50; Ruiz 2002 85-88). While the provision of such services in Michigan’s larger urban areas has improved from “ground zero” in the 1960s, services in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas remain uneven or nonexistent. This is the case for many similar places in the U.S. (Davila and Mora 2000; Pathman, Konrad, and Schwartz 2002).

Methods

This article, exploring these issues as they impact the Hispanics of Southwest Michigan, has two parts. In the first section based on census data, we document changes in the distribution and growth rates of Michigan’s Hispanic population from 1980 to 2000. Our particular focus, however, is on the thirteen counties that comprise Southwest Michigan (Ottawa, Kent, Ionia, Allegan, Barry, Eaton, Van Buren, Kalamazoo, Calhoun, Berrien, Cass, St. Joseph, and Branch) (Figure 2). This portion of Michigan, only thirteen of eighty-three counties, now accounts for 29.3% of the Hispanic population of Michigan—many of whom are persons of Mexican heritage—living in Grand Rapids or the small towns and rural counties of the southwest portion of the state. Beyond mapping county-level distributions, we also provide maps of rates of increase from 1980 to the present at the county level as well. The maps provided in this section underscore the importance of Southwest Michigan as a new center of Hispanic culture.

The second part of the article employs a qualitative research methodology designed to identify specific concerns of Hispanics living in Southwest Michigan at the present time. We wish to give voice to these concerns via the opinions of people facing these problems on a daily basis. Information was collected through intensive interviews with 32 focus group participants attending one of three possible meetings held during the spring of 2002. Given the complexity of the issues and the need for simultaneous translation in several of the meetings, an open-ended focus group design, followed by content analysis of the
transcriptions of the focus group meetings, was selected as most appropriate (Patten 2002 19). The project was selected from a number of possible topics based on faculty discussions at the Lewis Walker Institute for Race and Ethnic Relations of Western Michigan University during the summer of 2001. Previous published research on Hispanic culture and cultural hegemony compiled by our project team was used to develop the questions raised in our focus group sessions (Rodriguez 2002; Santa Ana 2002). Investigators from the Walker Institute, including the authors, organized and conducted the three focus groups held during the spring of 2002 at three different locations in Kalamazoo County, MI. Each focus group had eight to twelve participants. A standard focus group script was developed from previous research and used to stimulate discussion and assure that major questions were all addressed during the course of the meetings. Each meeting ranged from two to three hours. The script was designed to move from specific questions such as those related to education and occupation to more general questions as the meetings progressed. The theme of the meetings, established in advance by a written letter of invitation to all participants, was to collect information on the concerns and seminal issues regarding the maintenance of cultural identity, cultural autonomy, quality of life, emerging needs, and current concerns. Once completed, the audiotapes were transcribed and analyzed with results reported in this article in section IV.

**Michigan’s Hispanics Viewed Through the Census: Change over Two Decades**

In the broadest sense, Michigan’s ethnic history is similar to that of the other Great Lakes States. Traditionally, the greatest diversity of ethnic groups was found in Michigan’s large and medium sized cities, with rural areas remaining largely white and homogeneous. Urban industrial places have always been more ethnically and culturally diverse (McKee 2000; Padilla 1985). What distinguishes the past twenty years is that the proportion of non-white/ non-African-American populations in the small towns...
and rural areas of the southern third of the state have increased in the past twenty years. While most Hispanics of Puerto Rican and Cuban origin tend to live in urban areas, a significant number of Mexican-Americans have recently moved to rural areas or small towns (Moore and Pachon 1985 100-103). In fact, the Hispanic proportions of many predominantly rural or suburban counties have increased at rates higher than those of the major cities for the same time period. While many may assume that most Hispanics in Michigan are employed in agriculture, Aponte and Siles (1994) reported survey results that indicate that in 1990, the vast majority of Hispanic workers were employed in manufacturing and the service sector.

Generally, much of the absolute growth in the eastern part of the state from 1980 to 2000 came from increases in the metro Detroit area, and in the cities of the “Thumb” north of Detroit (Figures 2-4). In western Michigan, the city of Grand Rapids and its suburbs (Kent County) was fifth in absolute numbers of Hispanics in 1980, but second to Wayne County (Detroit) in 2000. In a single decade, Kent County saw its Hispanic population increase 4.6 times. Ottawa and Muskegon Counties along Lake Michigan also had very significant increases, but all of the counties of Southwest Michigan have seen considerable growth (Figures 2-4).

For the 13 counties of Southwest Michigan, the 1980 census records 28,272 self-reporting persons of Hispanic origin. In twenty years, this increased almost 4-fold to 95,050 persons (U.S.Census 2001). In addition, of course, there are many thousand more temporary residents employed in agriculture, as well as an undetermined number of illegal residents. Despite the problems discussed in detail in the second part of this article, Southwest Michigan has become a primary destination for Hispanics from southern states looking to relocate. In 1999, Hispanic Magazine ranked Grand Rapids as the ninth best city in the United States for Hispanics to live. Hispanic Magazine editor Carlos Verdecia reported that the ranking was based on an in-house team’s assessment of data from the Places Rated Almanac.
and “what Hispanics value” (Arellano 1999). Results from our interviews support this perspective as participants from the Kalamazoo area note job opportunities, low cost of living, access to outdoor activities and Lake Michigan, and affordable housing (in some cases) as draws to the region. These often positive opinions are also born out by interviews by Flesher (2001 a,b,c) and Collins (2001), but opinions are clearly contingent on income, educational level, and the personal experiences of respondents.

It is not just the absolute numbers of people, but also the pace of in-migration by Hispanics (vis-à-vis total population change) in Southwest Michigan counties that necessitate a better understanding of the needs of this important group in the changing ethnic mosaic of the region (Figures 5-7). In 1980, Southwest Michigan counties all reported 3% or less Hispanic population, with Ottawa County reporting 3.5% (Figure 5). By 2000, five of Michigan's top ten counties with the greatest proportion of self-reporting Hispanics in Michigan were located in Southwest Michigan (Van Buren 7.39%; Ottawa 7.0%; Kent 7.0%; Allegan 5.72%; and St. Joseph 3.99%) (Figure 7). In contrast to these high proportions, counties north of the “Thumb” in the Lower Peninsula and within the Upper Peninsula report proportions of self-reporting Hispanics ranging from 0.26% to 1.5 percent of the population.

The emergence of a rapidly expanding center of Hispanic population in the Southwest of the state has many ramifications. Politically and economically, the older centers including Detroit, Lansing, and their environs have had time to design and develop businesses, educational institutions, and health and social service programs that meet distinct needs of Hispanics. Certainly complaints about services are not uncommon in these urban and suburban locations, but the presence of more Hispanics living in these locations for longer periods of time has helped make people of all colors and ethnic backgrounds working in social

Figure 4: Distribution of Self Reporting Hispanic-Americans 2000

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001
Cartographic Design by Mary Lee Eggart

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Figure 5: Hispanics as a percentage of Total Population: 1980

Figure 6: Hispanics as a Percentage of Total Population: 1990
**Figure 7:** Hispanics as a Percentage of Total Population: 2000

**Figure 8:** Change in Hispanic Population: 1990-2000
agencies, schools, hospitals and other health care institutions, banks, real estate and retail establishments more aware of needs and desires of Hispanic customers and clients.

The rapid increase in Hispanic residents in Southwest Michigan coupled with the number of respondents citing frustration with local political decisions and community services suggests changes must come sooner rather than later. Political hopefuls would do well to reevaluate their constituencies given awareness that Hispanics are coming to realize their potential in local politics (Trueba 1999; C. Rodriguez 2000, Turner 2002). Considering the growth rates by county of the past decade (Figure 8), there is a sense of urgency to this challenge, as there is every reason to assume that Hispanics will account for ever-increasing percentages of consumer and voters in coming years. Many counties in Southwest Michigan saw increases from 1980 to 2000 of around 300 to 400% while the more traditional Hispanic areas in Southeastern Michigan barely doubled Hispanic population in the same time period. There are some counties in the Upper Peninsula that also exhibit high rates of growth (Figure 8), but in these cases, the absolute numbers (Figures 2-4) are small—limiting local political and economic impacts.

Focus Group Results: Issues and Concerns

As discussed in section II, three focus groups, composed of three different segments of the Hispanic population living in Southwest Michigan, were convened in Kalamazoo County during the spring of 2002. The first focus group (Group 1), which might be called the “professionals”, was composed of leaders of the Southwest Michigan Hispanic community and included a number of members of the Hispanic Council of Kalamazoo County. This group, dedicated to the promotion of Hispanic culture, has recently taken on a more political role, serving as a clearinghouse for the concerns of Hispanic citizens. This first group met at Western Michigan University at the Walker Center. All but two participants were university-educated and many held research or managerial positions. All have lived in Michigan for more than a decade, with some living in Kalamazoo County for more than twenty years.

The second focus group (Group 2) consisted of parishioners of St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Parish in Kalamazoo, who were typically established in the community for a number of years. The parish is located in a middle/ lower middle class neighborhood (Edison), and most participants are employed in manufacturing or services, with one man working as a manager in an agriculture-related business. There were no college graduates, but one woman was expecting to graduate in 2003 and another was a junior at Western Michigan University.

The third focus group (Group 3) consisted of factory or farm workers who were more recent immigrants to the region. The first two of the focus groups were conducted in English (with some translation occasionally required), but the final focus group was conducted in Spanish. As would be expected, this last group had no university experience, with some not having completed high school. Incomes were significantly lower for this group as well.

In all of the focus groups, one or two moderators—authors of this article—started discussions based on the focus group script, but as soon as people were more comfortable with the situation and setting, the moderator allowed the discussion to “open up” to broader issues.

Once the focus groups were competed, audiotapes of the focus groups were transcribed and evaluated by members of the research team. The second author, trained in the technique with twenty years of experience, conducted content analysis on the transcripts. Results were summarized after meetings and discussions with team members. In all, more than nine hours of interviews were conducted and transcribed. As with all research of this type, only some concerns and issues can be presented in this article, with an emphasis on the most representative concerns and issues. In the following sections, all direct quotations of participants are in italics. Consensus opinions are credited to specific focus groups. We report participants’ opinions, not those of the authors—that is the purpose of the research and the justification for the research design.

Common Ground but Diverse Experiences among Hispanics in Southwest Michigan

“If you do not have a firm idea of your roots, [you] are always going to be like a sheep that goes from place to place without knowing why. You do things [only] because someone tells you so or because the TV said it was a better place” (Man Focus Group 3).
There are many very different experiences and concerns represented by the comments of the participants in the three focus groups. As in any summary, some of the richness of these individual comments is lost in generalization, but our purpose here is to summarize the major themes that emerged from the interviews. Some concerns, such as the difficulties related to the maintenance of cultural ties and the problem of children retaining Spanish, are common to all groups. Other issues, i.e. treatment by police, landlords, or public school officials, vary by group and even by individual, based on their own experiences.

From the outset, it became clear that there are sharp differences in the issues and concerns of paramount importance to the participants of our project based on three general factors: economic status, employment type, and duration of residence in Southwest Michigan. For example, while all groups mentioned facing some measure of prejudice or stereotyping in one form or another, comments by the first group, the professionals, centered on covert racism. Participants of the third group, the recent arrivals, cited numerous examples of overt racism and stereotyping, including what they felt was clearly racial profiling by workers in government agencies and law enforcement personnel. Differences in opinions related to services provided by educational and health care institutions also varied by social status, employment, and duration of residence. For Hispanics, as for all people in the United States, economic status, and the physical manifestations of this status such as clothing, cars and dwellings, affect how people are treated. This is an indisputable tenet of life in America for people of all races and ethnic or cultural groups. We recognize that some differences in experience are engendered by socioeconomic status. At the present time, Hispanics may credit difficulties to cultural differences or racism, despite the possibility that some or all of these problems could be credited to differences in class or socioeconomic status.

Based on content analysis, four major types of issues were identified and will be discussed in the following sections:

1) Issues related to the importance of maintaining Hispanic identity in the face of the homogenizing forces of the dominant culture. This includes activities related to maintaining “Hispanic” pride while acknowledging in advance the diverse cultures and heritages imbedded in this common but complex term.

2) Quality of life issues, which consist of economic issues including employment and access to social services as well as the positive and negative aspects of life in Southwest Michigan.

3) Practical concerns and problems related to interactions with the dominant culture including stereotypes, unequal treatment in schools and the workplace.

4) A perceived need for greater activism, political and social, to better represent Hispanic perspectives and unique needs of the community.

### Issues Related to the Importance of Maintaining Hispanic Identity in the Face of the Homogenizing Forces of the Dominant Culture

Virtually all participants strongly emphasized the importance of maintaining Hispanic traditions and culture. As in all places and times, there are significant social forces that, inadvertently or otherwise, “conspire” to make the maintenance of natal culture difficult in America. The ability to speak Spanish, and the maintenance of both written and spoken Spanish, was consistently reported to be a critical aspect of the maintenance of Hispanic culture. Participants in Group 1, the “professionals”, are all quite successful and have lived in the area and in other parts of the US for many years. Many are active in the Hispanic Council and see themselves as role models that individually should promote Hispanic culture in the face of the homogenizing forces of the dominant culture. For busy professionals and their families, already acculturated and accustomed to life in Southwest Michigan, it is often a struggle to maintain Spanish language skills. Frequently, the cost of upward mobility is an embracing of mainstream values. For some of the people in Group 1, their children had to “relearn” Spanish at university, once they realized the importance of their cultural heritage. Others reported using only Spanish at home to assure that their children are able to communicate with older relatives.

“I am constantly reminding my first graders that it is good to be Hispanic, because they don’t want to be. They want to be like everyone else. They are trying to blend in so much that they don’t want to speak their own language…. We had a little kid that came to us in December; already he doesn’t want to speak Spanish.
They [children in school] refuse to talk the language. I tell them speak your language, you can do it” (Woman Focus Group 1—March 2002).

One participant in our professionals group volunteers at Western Michigan University’s radio station and provides the only Hispanic music program on the schedule. He views this as a public service to the Hispanic community, but also as a way of showcasing the diversity of Hispanic music to the WMU student body and the community as a whole while giving Hispanic listeners a chance to hear their language in a positive cultural context. This is a commonly cited aspect of Hispanic cultural maintenance in other research as well (Kampeas 2001).

On the other hand, more recent arrivals (Group 3), that are not bilingual or have limited English language skills, find less comfort in their fluency in Spanish. Ironically perhaps, they are “closer” to the cultures of their native countries but have less reason to celebrate in the face of more immediate and pressing economic issues. Some, but not all, participants in the recent arrival group take their Spanish language skills for granted and focus instead on the need for good English language skills for advancement. Language issues are contingent on tenure in the United States (Davila and Mora 2000).

“In the case of Hispanics, we need to learn English because we are in a country that is not our own…it is very fortunate if one can learn English in order to communicate with his or her boss or anyone else. It is an advantage if you can speak two languages. In this case Americans can only speak one language and so our children have an advantage” (Woman Focus Group 3).

Beyond language, the maintenance of Hispanic identity was closely linked to familiarity and enjoyment of the food, music, holidays, and festivals celebrated by the wide range of Hispanic nations and peoples participating in our project. This includes people from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.

For participants in all three focus groups, it was clear that the promotion of special events and holidays play a central role in establishing positive representations of Hispanic culture. Holidays such as Christmas and Cinco de Mayo were frequently cited as occasions that allow busy people to come together to celebrate Hispanic culture and ideals. These special times are universally seen as a means by which the Hispanic community can share common heritage, and, as importantly, as an important means of passing on traditions to the younger generation. If Grand Rapids is the unofficial center of Hispanic culture in Southwest Michigan, then the Hispanic Festival of Grand Rapids is the patriarch of all festivals (Hispanic Center of Western Michigan 2000). 2004 will be the 24th year for the festival that offers continuous entertainment, including dancing, signing artists, foods from many nations, and many other activities for three days. In 2002, the first annual Tulipanes Holland Latino Film festival was held—the first film festival for Latino films help in Southwest Michigan (Flesher 2001a). Other festivals are linked to the many churches where Hispanics worship. For example, for some Mexican-American participants, ceremonies such as quinceanera—recognizing a young girl coming of age and held at a local Catholic Church, were cited as important links to tradition. The Kalamazoo Diocese also operates an immigration assistance program, as it is home to many of the region’s Hispanic Roman Catholics (Hajec 2001).

Several participants in the study also cited the promotion of Hispanic festivals, such as Cinco de Mayo, by local restaurants and bars, and subsequent acceptance of these holidays by the general public as a sign of potentially positive change. At the same time, it was noted that the general public still often does not know what event is commemorated in this holiday—assuming it has something to do with Mexican independence from Spain! This simple example gets to the heart of the matter. Participants in Group I repeatedly noted that non-Hispanics just don’t seem to know much about Hispanic culture or history. Certainly, given the increasing presence of Hispanics in the region, our informants argued that local school curricula could be changed to incorporate more information that would help foster pride in the history and accomplishments of Hispanics, both in the US and in the countries with which most Michigan Hispanics have cultural linkages.

As in the case for most ethnic groups in America, food also plays a central role in the maintenance of culture. While some people commented that they were too busy to prepare traditional foods on a regular basis, many more said that they were willing to take the time because they thought the link between food and their cultural traditions was worth the sacrifice. Previously, the
ingredients of special dishes were more difficult to purchase in Southwest Michigan, but the recent expansion of “Hispanic” foods sections in local supermarket chains, such as Hardings Markets and Meijer Stores, has helped. Still, choices are limited. Keeping in mind that the focus groups were conducted in Kalamazoo, the opening several years ago of the La Mexicana Market in Kalamazoo was cited as another sign of changing times. Since then, two other Hispanic markets have opened in Kalamazoo. Participants still complained that access to traditional ingredients and prepared foods needed for the preparation of Hispanic food is lacking. Some respondents noted that they frequently went to Grand Rapids to buy “supplies” and wished there was a greater variety of foods used in the preparation of traditional Hispanic dishes, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables.

Music and dance were also cited as important aspects of life, which support the maintenance of Hispanic culture. The diversity imbedded in the term “Hispanic” is well represented by the diversity of tastes in music of our participants: Tex-Mex, Mexicano, Merengue, and Salsa. One of our focus group participants reported that her daughter participates in a Merengue dance troupe that competes regionally, but requires long trips to competitions in cities such as Detroit and Chicago. Many of the participants in the study reported purchases of tapes, CDs, and videos by Hispanic performers. There are only a few venues where such items can be purchased locally.

One respondent (Group III) felt that there is a need for a center or location where people can make traditional instruments and perhaps teach the craft to others. Further, some means of teaching the younger generation how to play these traditional instruments is also needed, as are more places to teach traditional dance. Many of our participants in all three groups felt that the development of community centers would help promote Hispanic culture, but would also help redefine the political interests and actions of the community as well.

In terms of media, a particularly important issue to several participants of Group I was the inclusion of Spanish-language stations in basic cable packages. Several respondents noted that they desired to watch news and other programs in Spanish—not only to get different perspectives and for entertainment, but also as a means of helping their children retain their language skills. Unfortunately, in Southwest Michigan, to have access to these stations, additional monies must be paid for “expanded” service. One participant in Group I even mounted a petition drive to get a Spanish language channel included, but despite acquiring more than 150 signatures was told that there was insufficient demand. Participants in Group 1 contrasted this situation with Chicago where there are numerous radio and television stations catering to the large Hispanic population in that city, which many participants felt really helped people “stay in touch” with Hispanic issues at the regional, national, and international level. There is currently one small FM radio station in southwest Michigan that has regular daily Spanish-language music programs, and another campus radio station has a Sunday evening Hispanic music program, but many in our groups felt more options were needed.

Reflecting the importance of mainstream success for Hispanic performers as a means of legitimizing the contributions of Hispanics to American culture, performers such as Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez were regularly cited, even by older participants in the study who did not “like Rock Music” (Group 2). It was important to several of our participants that Hispanic performers reach this high level of “mainstream” success even if they did not actually care for their music.

Again, socioeconomic status directly impacts how people feel about the maintenance of Hispanic culture and the means of accomplishing this. For the bilingual professionals who have lived and worked in Southwest Michigan for more than ten or twenty years (Group 1), and raised their children in the region, maintaining Hispanic culture is more difficult as these people regularly work and live in situations where mainstream culture is overwhelmingly dominant. On the other hand, more recent arrivals (Group 3) are fluent in Spanish and view their lives as more “traditionally Hispanic”. Their concerns are often more pragmatic, and more gripping, as a lack of English hinders their economic advancement, their access to health care, education, and social services, and, in reality, their perceived status in the larger community (see also Hull and Rhoads 1998).

Quality of Life Issues

Of course, quality of life issues also varied dramatically based on the socioeconomic level of participants. Striking a common theme with most Americans, many participants noted life in the U.S. [as compared to that in their country of origin] is too hectic.
There were clearly both “push” and “pull” factors at work when the decision was made to stay in the United States. Yes, the “American Dream” is in evidence for those who have been in the US and Southwest Michigan for 20 to 30 years, but there is also a clear appreciation that much was sacrificed as well. The following quotations reflect this juxtaposition:

“Here it is all about working. There isn’t time for oneself, just work and at home it is the same. Women work too and the kids go to school. You have to clean all the clothes, have people watch them [the kids while working], and talk to them [kids] to see what is going on. It’s nice because we can give them luxuries which we couldn’t in Mexico” (Man Focus Group 3).

“Exactly, the quality of life is best in our country [Mexico in the speaker’s case], yet we come here. There are problems: inflation and unemployment. These are the things that made us come here” (emphasis ours) (Man Focus Group 3).

Participants reported many problems associated with quality of life related to socioeconomic status. For the more established families, we believe many of these problems mirror the experiences of Whites, Arab-Americans, and African-Americans. Too little time for family and too much work are examples. For more recent arrivals or working class families (Groups 1 and 2), however, more immediate problems were cited. These include access to affordable housing, quality education, and affordable health care. There must be more bilingual employees in hospitals, government agencies, and businesses. Workplace conflicts, and perceptions of racism among non-Hispanics were also cited as sources of stress and frustration. In part, respondents felt that this was due to the fact that they were politically isolated still in Southwestern Michigan.

“Another thing that is lacking is that in our jobs they don’t pay attention to our complaints and they don’t take us seriously. In California, there is an association or group that helps people who have problems at their jobs, but here it is nothing like that. … . . . Who are we supposed to complain to? Here there is nowhere to go” (Woman Focus Group 3).

Educational issues are some of the most important concerns that emerged from our study with the most immediate concerns voiced by members of Group 2 and 3 reflecting a lack of dialog between the Hispanic community and the public and parochial school systems. Topics related to education at all levels from elementary school through university were considered to be of critical importance. For some, the absence of material related to Hispanic culture was an issue. For others, it was the lack of Spanish language classes in middle schools in the community. At present, several respondents noted that certification in bilingual education (via a bilingual education certificate) could only be acquired from Central Michigan University or through Kalamazoo College. Despite the local need, Western Michigan’s large and successful College of Education does not at present offer such a certificate. Certification at Kalamazoo College or Central Michigan represented greater investments than many could afford.

There are also programmatic problems beyond content or certification. Many respondents with school age children believe that there is a clear need to revise local ESL educational opportunities. Many “recent arrivals” (Group 3) expressed frustration or confusion with the placement of their children in a bilingual program at a local elementary school, for while the children can speak Spanish, they are too young to read or write Spanish. This means that once the students are “mainstreamed”, they are behind in both writing and reading. There are, no doubt, many sides to this story, but the concerns taken most broadly reflect a lack of understanding on the part of many in the Hispanic community, and potentially a lack of understanding on the part of the schools as well.

“I met with the social worker from XXX school and all of the teachers and the director and other people from outside the school were there and the mistakes they were making were clear because many of the students were affected negatively and traumatized” (Woman Focus Group 3).

We can hardly determine if strategies and curriculum require revision, and we do not wish to support claims beyond reporting the perceptions and concerns of our participants, but it is certainly clear that more communication is needed. Town hall-style meetings must be initiated to explain how these systems are
supposed to work and to collect community input regarding how programs might be improved. This is not only true for schools that offer bilingual programs, but more importantly for those schools which DO NOT. Whereas once these programs might have been considered a luxury, we believe the rapid increase of Hispanics in the region requires that greater attention be paid to issues related to bilingual education and mainstreaming (again the Hull and Rhoads 1998 study offers an extensive discussion on educational problems).

Interactions with the Dominant Culture

There is considerable frustration reported by all of our participants in interactions with the non-Hispanic community, but particularly among more recent arrivals to Southwest Michigan of Group 3. Poor English speaking skills, low incomes, a lack of familiarity with laws and regulations, stereotyping, and prejudice, either overt or covert, are all common problems or impediments to advancement identified by our participants.

“One of the things that I think we could do better is that there are Latinos that have a lot of entrepreneurship, a lot of ideas. They have really good ideas. They may have had a little shop in the marketplace and are used to being in that position [in their country of origin]. They have lots of skills, but because of the language barrier they cannot apply them here. I talk to many people that have interesting skills that would be marketable here, but they just don’t know how [to go about starting such a business]” (Woman Focus Group 1).

If the maintenance of Spanish language skills is seen as critical for the maintenance of Hispanic culture by a large majority of participants, a lack of fluent English is also seen as an important barrier to both economic advancement and equal treatment beyond the Hispanic community. Respondents are virtually unanimous in their assessment that, at least for Southwest Michigan, Hispanics must be bilingual. This contrasts to respondents’ perceptions that in larger cities, such as Chicago or Detroit, people can advance without English. Participants argued for more opportunities for English (ESL) language courses, especially for adults—in non-threatening environments.

Another common, if related complaint was that much more effort must be made to assure that bilingual workers are available to help navigate financial institutions, schools, health care institutions, and government agencies. Group 1 participants suggested that a premium should be placed on hiring employees with bilingual language skills in schools, hospitals, banks, and other public agencies. The following quotations regarding hospitals reflect this need, but similar comments were made about banks and many other commercial or government agencies.

“There are a lot of people here that don’t speak English and don’t know how to communicate [with the non-Hispanic community]. There is a barrier. They avoid the doctor because the doctors don’t speak Spanish” (Woman Focus Group 2).

“When we go to the hospital, we always look for someone who speaks Spanish because when you go there and you don’t understand, it is scary” Interviewer “And in the hospital, is there always someone who speaks Spanish?” “Yes, that is another thing that we lack in our hospitals, here are not always people who speak Spanish” (Woman Focus Group 3).

“The situation is very serious, we need to have bilingual services. If this report is going to help the authorities or some organization, understand that in reality there are many Latinos and we require services and just because we speak a little English doesn’t mean we don’t need bilingual services. There are certain essential things that one needs to understand. We need people to help us [that can speak Spanish].” (Man Focus Group 3).

Beyond a lack of bilingual services in government agencies, schools, churches, and health care facilities, participants cited other problems felt to be more complex. At present, many participants in our focus groups recognize either covert or overt prejudice that seriously impacts their quality of life. There is considerable mistrust of non-Hispanics, based on reports of unequal treatment in many situations.

“Often they [non-Hispanics] have ideas. If we go to a store to buy something, and if they see a Hispanic, they hide. Why? Because we have a bad reputation, they think we are going to steal something.” (Woman Focus Group 3).
“And it’s like when they see a Latino and think what is he or she doing driving around at midnight” second participant responds: “They think you have drugs like they always think.” (Man Focus Group 3).

A Call to Arms: Greater Activism to Improve Understanding and Maintain Rights

The increase in the Hispanic population has also resulted in awareness that there is a need for greater community-building efforts among Hispanic people. There is explicit recognition that improvements can only come if there is unity and organization across different groups of Hispanics. Our more educated respondents (Group 1) seem to believe that help comes to those who help themselves. There is growing recognition that the time is ripe for better organization and the development of more enduring groups developed within the community that will put forward an agenda which will elicit response from the dominant culture.

“I just think that we as a group are growing. The latest census showed that. In the next five years, [our numbers] are going to be more significant and we better start getting our communities to start moving forward. [For example], we need to think about how to [get schools] to incorporate Latino writers. How can we start to assimilate who we are as part of this community? [This is important because] I look at my daughter’s future, and my future as a member of my community” (Man Focus Group 1).

Some of our participants recognize that within the Hispanic community there is a lack of agreement on the most pressing issues (Groups 1 and 2). Busy lives and the sheer time and effort required for life in this fast-paced society limit the energy needed to establish a more organized and expanded group to present Hispanic concerns to the greater community.

“Hispanics in all honesty do not want to commit themselves to anything. When we have a discussion like this and you have to sign something and they could possibly call you for another meeting, you start to dislike it” (Woman Focus Group 3).

Even the meaning of “being Hispanic” varies across socioeconomic groups, and the issues that are important to various sub-groups are as varied as the groups themselves. Tensions emerging from differences in class and status are part and parcel of the present North American experience—and these tensions were very apparent across our three focus groups. Still, there is important common ground related to social activism that was recognized by at least some of the members of each of the three focus groups. These include: (1) greater political representation; (2) a more active role in educational issues related to the Hispanic community; and (3) the development (or expansion) of an organization such as the Hispanic Council, which will address social equity issues, but also serve as a clearing house for legal and financial issues related to credit and fair housing.

Conclusion

The growing Hispanic population in Southwest Michigan instigates both new opportunities and new challenges to our economy and society. In the broadest sense, the ongoing process of globalization is being played out in miniature in the region—replete with the problems and benefits of ethnic and cultural diversity as in any other region in the world. The diversity of concerns within the Hispanics population in Michigan is underscored even by the opinions of our small sample. While some issues are contingent on socioeconomic status, others are common to all. Respect for Hispanic heritage crosses all groups, as does an interest in passing on a respect and understanding of these values and cultures to the next generation via music, festivals, food, and dance.

The expansion of commercial firms targeting Hispanic tastes in food, music, and entertainment offers clear opportunities, but most seem to feel that commercial activities by larger non-Hispanic firms must be supported by improved access to capital and the provision of related professional training for Hispanics. Development of additional educational programs augmenting traditional educational venues such as colleges (universities) and community colleges is seen as vital. For success, this training must be accessible for adults already in the workforce.

Recognition of the need for greater representation, political and otherwise, was a frequent issue. Hopefully, the Hispanic
Council of Kalamazoo will be able to expand its role in important policy deliberations, but other local forums are needed in the many smaller towns in the region. Certainly, efforts have been made by many local government agencies, school systems, and NGOs to address the needs of the Hispanic community, but virtually all respondents believe more needs to be done especially in rural areas.

Given that Hispanics are the fastest growing population in Michigan and also in Southwest Michigan, it is reasonable that there are lags in social and commercial services. Perceptions of cultural hegemony and racism, valid in particular cases or not, will always be with us. In all probability, there will be misunderstandings, injustices, and inequity as long as there are differences in class and opportunity. While a perfect world is far from our grasp, the promotion of greater understanding and opportunity will benefit everyone.

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References


