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Memories of the Past, Perceptions of the Present, and Visions of the Future

Introduction and Purpose

This research is a means of highlighting the lives of the students I have met through my internship at The Center for Human Services, a social service agency in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The adult learners I worked with are participating in English as a Second Language {ESL} classes and preparatory classes for the GED {high school equivalency} exam. The students are Hispanic immigrants, most hailing from Mexico, and most without proper documentation. As a teaching assistant at Human Services, I personally established friendly relationships with many of these students. Through my friendships, I was brought into these people=s personal worlds. I learned about their families, their lives in Mexico, their experiences here, and their hopes for the future. These personal narratives touched my heart. It was not easy to separate myself from the lives of the people I worked with. I tried to research and make generalizations about concrete topics, like their economic situations or their reasons for leaving Mexico, but I could not keep from viewing each narrative as an individualized story. I tried to ask questions about specific, tangible aspects of their lives, but I found the additional data I received as well was too difficult to ignore. I had studied books and done preliminary research on the subject of Mexican migration, but the feelings and emotions that were proclaimed to me, were real, humanistic examples of the theories and information I had read about.

I realized that though these people rarely have their voices heard, they have rich, intriguing life stories to share. How often do they have a chance to speak as individuals, to tell their story, to tell their views? I once helped with an ESL class in which we talked about the American states and their capitals. In the discussion, the students began to talk about the states and capitals of Mexico. They were all very anxious to teach me where they were from, and the intricate pronunciations of each city=s name. One student, Andres, suggested that I memorize the 35 Mexican states and capitals. At first, I was bewildered at the thought of learning something meaningless to my immediate life. But as I thought about the issue more, I soon realized that it was an issue of respect and cultural sensitivity. As Americans, we often demand that immigrants learn our culture and assimilate to it, but do we ever take the time to learn from them, to appreciate their culture? Furthermore, how often do we ask them about less tangible concepts, like how they feel in this new country, how they feel about their home country, and how they feel about their futures.

Methods

I wanted to give these people a voice. I wanted them to know that I was genuinely interested in knowing their stories. My data consists of countless informal conversations during my time spent at Human Services, September through December 1998. I also conducted several more formal, structured interview sessions with various other students. I have chosen to present my findings in a manner that highlights the views of three students in very unique life situations. Leticia,

Gabriel, and Andres have arrived in Adams County through varying sets of circumstances, have lived in the U.S. for varying amounts of time, have a varying extent of family settings here and have varying levels of English skills. These factors contribute to the students' very different outlooks on their lives and their unique memories of their pasts, perceptions of their present situations, and their hopes and visions of the future. These perceptions become the constant and continuous dialogue of their lives. The following are brief preliminary introductions and backgrounds to the three students I have selected to highlight.

Leticia was born in Zacango, in the Mexican state of Guerrero. Out of the three students, she has lived in the United States the longest. Eight years ago, at age 19, she immigrated to North Carolina alone, following a couple of brothers and sisters who settled in the area before her. There she met an American citizen of Mexican descent who soon became her husband. After marrying, the couple moved to south central Pennsylvania to be with the husband's family and to find work. Here, they are raising their young daughter Odette. In part from the help of her husband, the amount of time she has been in the U.S., and her studies at Human Services, Leticia has strong command of English{1}.

Andres and his wife Teresa are planning to work here temporarily to raise enough capital to return to Mexico and start a business. They have two children who live in Mexico with relatives. Andres has lived here for almost two years. In Mexico, Andres studied engineering, architecture, and construction. He came to Adams County to do farmwork with a brother who immigrated here twelve years ago. He not only studies ESL at Human Services, but also teaches several GED classes in Spanish. Andres seems inhibited from practicing his English skills. Though he seems to know many vocabulary words, he is not confident enough to communicate in English{2}.

Gabriel is a single 26 year old from Mexico City working as an apple washer at Knouse Foods. Three years ago, he originally came to New Jersey but recently moved to Central Pennsylvania. When I first met Gabriel he worked at a wood manufacturing plant, but was forced to find his current job because the paint fumes there damaged his eyes. He also picked apples in the Adams County orchards for a couple weeks this fall. Gabriel diligently attends ESL classes at Human services, even coming to class first thing in the morning after his night shift. His English is improving everyday and he speaks and understands English very well. He seems idealistic about what the future holds for him{3}.

Many previous studies have researched the Mexican immigration experience, but very few have asked the personal opinions and views of the actual immigrants on their own lives. A 1996 study was conducted to assess attitudes among Mexican women married to documented and undocumented immigrant workers in California toward the U.S. and Americans and toward Mexico and Mexicans{4}. Given the apparent anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican climate currently seeming to prevail, it was argued that attitudes toward the U.S. and Americans would be an important issue to investigate among family members whose survival in Mexico depends on remittances from both documented and undocumented workers in the U.S. The results demonstrated that women hold more favorable attitudes toward Mexico and Mexicans than toward the U.S. and Americans. Although they acknowledge and are grateful to the U.S. for the job opportunities that their husbands have in this country, they regard their husband's migration as an unwanted but necessary situation. They regard Mexico as their country and the place where

they belong and place high value on the traditions, customs, and morals of the Mexican culture. This study and its results demonstrate how very necessary it is to question the actual participants before making conclusions about their life situations. For example, many people mistakenly generalize that Mexican families would be gracious to have free access to American citizenship and lead Asuccessful@ Americanized lifestyles. In reality, as the results of this study demonstrate, most people seek work in the United States as a last resort against economic hardship. In my own research at Human Services, this study prompted me to keep a discriminating mind as I collected concrete data, and a more open and sensitive mind when collecting data concerning personal attitudes and emotions

Because each individual has their own story that is in some ways similar and in some ways different than the life stories of others, I have attempted to avoid making generalizations or categorizations about abstract concepts like emotions and feelings. I did however hypothesize the general direction that the immigrants= opinions of their lives and situations might take. I predicted that the way a person views their past, present, and future situation is in accordance to the person=s English level, acculturation level, length of time spent in the U.S., and amount of time they plan on staying in the U.S. I hypothesize that a personal life dialogue is created when memories from Mexico, evaluations of present situations, and possible aspirations for the future interact dynamically.

Findings and Analysis

Memories of the Past

The running dialogue of one=s life begins with childhood experiences and the understanding of one=s heritage and ethnic background. An individual=s past is the basis for all present and future experiences. I predicted that eyes would light up when I asked students about their lives in Mexico. But some did more so than others. Everyone smiled as they told me the memories of how beautiful their homeland is and most generally had a very positive opinion of their country. But the extent of the positivism ranged in degrees of idealism to degrees of almost indifference. When asked about the negatives of their country, all students cited the poor *situacion economica* as the main reason they decided to leave their country. But the range of other criticisms varied. Generally, I concluded that the people who have spent the least amount of time here, who are planning to return to Mexico at some point, and who have the least amount of English skills and acculturation level seemed to have the most idealized image of Mexico. These people often have a large number of immediate family members living in Mexico. They cling to its memories as it is what they have known all their life, and all that they are certain of when they first arrive in the United States. If there was not an economic crisis, these people feel that life in Mexico would be very acceptable.

Andres seemed to fit in this first category. In comparison to Leticia and Gabriel, Andres appears to be the most vulnerable, with the lowest levels of English and understanding of American culture. Out of the three, he has spent the most time in his homeland, and the least time away from it. It is therefore not surprising that his motherland is very much a topic of concern and focus for him. Furthermore, his teenage children, his parents, and most of his immediate family still lives there. When Andres mentions his family, his eyes get sorrowful. He says he misses his

family more than anything. Permanently returning to Mexico in a year and a half is still very much part of his life plans. He is still actively interested in Mexican politics and current events. He is eager to mention his town which is in the state of Hidalgo and proudly explained that its name, Tecozaulta, means *lugar donde abunda el ocre amarillos* {land of yellow minerals} and *lugar de mucha agua* {land of much water}. In his country, Andres is a very educated man. He speaks of his three years of engineering studying in Mexico City with pride. He loves to study and teach mathematics and worked with construction Mexico. Perhaps these proud memories are what haunt and shape Andres= mixed attitude about learning English. Perhaps because he considers himself an intellectual in his home country, he finds it difficult to humble himself and begin learning the basics of something he is unknowledgeable about. By refraining from making a clear effort to learn English, Andres is subconsciously promising himself that he will return to his homeland. It is possible that he trying to prevent new memories from replacing his old ones. Andres= memories of his life in Mexico are very clear, sharp, and real. They are memories he definitely hopes to relive soon.

The more time spent in the United States, the more a person begins to think about permanently settling here, and the more English one uses in communication, the less positive their memories of Mexico seemed to be. These students seem to be the ones that feel their lives here in the United States are generally economically successful, much more successful than their lives in Mexico might be. They also have positive memories of home, but not nearly as lofty as those who have recently arrived here. In fact, sometimes as their economic status increases dramatically in the U.S., their memories of Mexico begin to tend toward indifference and sometimes even negativity. They are able to quickly point out more negative aspects of life in Mexico, like the corrupt government that is responsible for the economic problems and the way that Mexico is behind other countries in levels of technology. Perhaps by acknowledging these negative aspects, these immigrants are reassuring themselves that their success is real and permanent, that they made the right decision to settle here, and that their new life truly is better and more successful than their previous one. Although these people have made the decision to begin a permanent life in the U.S., they are able to remember the beauty of their homeland, miss their families and friends, and perhaps when they are financially able.

Gabriel seems to be at this level in his memories and recollections of life in Mexico. He has been in the U.S. for over three years and still speaks of Mexico City very positively, but he seems to describe it more in terms of a wonderful place to visit. He tells of his city=s climate and its surrounding mountains. He excitedly describes the famous volcano outside the city, *ALa Mujer Dormida- The Sleeping Woman.*@ He has fond memories of his previous life, but he describes his recollections mainly by pointing out the differences in the city he was raised in and the area he lives in now. Because he has had the time and opportunity to sincerely experience this new country, Gabriel is able to construct rational, reason-founded conclusions. His memories are not glorified or idealized in comparison to his life here. He has made an effort to become accustomed to the new language and understand the new culture of south central Pennsylvania, U.S.A. Unlike most of the other students at Human Services, Gabriel grew up in the largest urban area in Mexico. Because he has not lived in any major metropolitan areas of the U.S., many of the differences he cites between his life here and in Mexico are contrasts between urban and country life. He says that Mexico City is a busy bustling metropolis home to a very diverse population of English and Spanish speakers as well as Japanese, Russian, and people of other

nationalities. Gabriel says that in Mexico City there are trains that speed commuters all over the city, unlike here where one relies on a personal car for transportation. Gabriel also points out that in Pennsylvania there is none of the extreme pollution and over crowding that plagues his city. In his area of the city, Gabriel studied electricity at night school. He remembers deciding to come to the United States after the factory he worked for closed down, and he could not find another job. He says that he misses his family in Mexico, but he stays in contact with his parents by telephone. Gabriel came here mainly seeking to better himself economically, but as a single young man, his memories of home reflect the adventurous outlook that he seems to have on his life and each place where the wind seems to blow him.

Because she came here when she was relatively young, and has been here for a relatively lengthy duration, Leticia seems to have achieved the level of near indifference when recalling memories of Mexico. She has been here for eight years, has married a man who is a U.S. citizen, has learned to communicate almost fluently in English, had a child here and is planning on raising her family in American society. Though she says her country is beautiful, she seems ambivalent about the details of her life in Mexico and does not seem interested in sharing much about the customs or character of her small town. Perhaps she cannot not recall them, perhaps she is afraid to, or perhaps she simply doesn't want to. If she allows herself to acknowledge her past way of life, she is risking the ideal life she has tried to create here. If she recalls her traditional culture, she would be acknowledging that she has left a part of her heritage behind. If she recalls the economic hardship in Mexico, she might question whether her economic situation here is really as stable as she hopes. Aside from her parents, Leticia says she does not miss much from her country. Her memories of Mexico are frightening ghosts she would like to dodge.

A fourth group of people I found, that consists mainly of bilingual teachers of ESL and GED and immigrants who have resided permanently in the U.S. for an extended amount of time seem to have returned to the idealized range with the memories of the country where they were born {6}. These people, who speak both English and Spanish fluently, now consider the United States their permanent home. They feel satisfied with their lives here, and now look back to their home country with fond, glorious and proud memories. Because their lives here are stable and successful and because they have been away for so long, it is sometimes easy for them to overlook the flaws they had once seen in their home country. They realize that life the U.S. has its own set of difficulties including racism and discrimination. Now they feel a romantic longing for their homeland and may regret a lack of connection to their ethnic heritage. For them, memories of home are old photographs to dust off to recall how far they have come.

Crutches for Andres, pictures in Gabriel's life adventure biography, Leticia's ghosts, and the dusty old photographs of nostalgia, one's roots begin a lifetime dialogue, in which memories of the past are in constant conversation with one's present and future.

Perceptions of the Present

An individual's current situation is based upon past encounters and knowledge and eventually become the basis for future interactions and views. For the students at Human Services, their current life situations in the United States are, in part, a reflection of their past in Mexico, and in part a mark along the journey to reach future aspirations and goals. There are many factors that

make up the students' perception of their lives here such as the work they choose, the amount of contact they have with the rest of American society, their level of acculturation, and what life activities and what type of involvement they are pursuing. After I understood these self-perceptions, I asked students various introspective questions, asking them to self evaluate their lives here. I questioned whether each individual felt satisfied here, and if their life in the U.S., is what they expected it to be like. I found that most students were accepting of their lives in the United States but were not necessarily content with the status of their lives. Leticia seemed to be very content with her life here, while Andres seemed to feel that he would be happier if he could live in Mexico. Gabriel, though happy with his current life status feels that he has other options available to him. Again, the amount of time the person here and the level of English they are able to use and understand, seem to be key components in the level of each person's satisfaction with their lives in the United States. Both Leticia and Gabriel credit their learning of English as the factor that determine their life here more acceptable and satisfactory. This and the general level of permanency each student has created or allowed in their life here also seem to be key factors in determining self satisfaction.

Andres' perception of his present life is that living in Adams County is a temporary, three year position. He is adamant in his desire to return to Mexico in one and a half years, when hopefully he has earned enough money to start his own business. Originally, he followed the path of his older brother, coming to central Pennsylvania to labor at a pine farm and fruit orchard. In the past few months, Andres has become involved as both a student and a teacher at Human Services. Because he had a firm educational background in Mexico and because the GED exam is given entirely in Spanish, Andres was easily able to pass the Human Services' preparation program and gain the equivalent of a U.S. high school diploma. Recently he has been hired by Human Services to teach GED preparation classes in Spanish to other students. He works six days a week, days and evenings, at the Gettysburg, York Springs, and Chambersburg classes. With the long drive from his home in York City, it is no wonder that he says his only day of rest is Sunday. Clearly, Andres is trying to make the most of his temporary time and work in the U.S. so that he can better his family's economic situation in Mexico.

What is most strikingly different between Andres and the other students at Human Services is that he is extremely reluctant to speak English. I have several theories as to why Andres, who is so intelligent and passionate about education, working hard, and bettering himself, does not put forth the effort and the time to learn the language. Indeed, his situation must feel difficult and awkward. To be so learned in his own country and then, solely out of economic necessity, to arrive here, knowing nothing of the language, the technology, or the culture. One woman I spoke to compared it to being born again as a baby as one is forced to learn to the most basic necessities in a new way. I imagine it must be a humbling experience for Andres, as his wife tells me behind his back that he knows many English vocabulary words, but he is afraid to use them, because he cannot pronounce them correctly. When I directly ask Andres why he is not learning English, he vaguely replies that he would love to learn, but he does not have the time. It is true, I often see him skip out on the Human Services ESL classes to prepare his GED math and science teaching lessons. But at a greater level, I think that Andres means that he does not have enough time in general. He is a grown man with his wife here and children in Mexico to support. He planned to come to the U.S. to make money to take back to Mexico. In his mind, every minute he is not working must feel like sand slipping through an hourglass. It is more restless

time that he and his wife are separated from their two children and their homeland. In connection to this, I feel that there is a deeper, more sub-conscious reason why Andres refrains from learning the language of this country. All around him, he sees men in similar positions to himself. He sees his brother who planned to work in the United States for one year, but has been living here now permanently for over twelve years. I feel that Andres is somewhat afraid to learn English, because it would symbolize the possibility of not returning to Mexico. If he would learn English, he would be assimilating to American culture, and thus making his life here more permanent. I feel that by refraining from putting forth an effort to learn English, Andres is vowing his return to Mexico. I asked Andres if he is satisfied with his life here, if it was what he expected it to be. He laughs and says his life is happy here, but he will be happier when he is in Mexico. He said that like him, many immigrants here are unhappy because they don't understand the differences in language and culture. Of course they do realize specific differences, that it is uncustomary to play loud music outside in the neighborhood, but they don't *understand why*. He also said that in his general opinion, he feels that Americans come across as less open and welcoming than people in Mexico. Andres' life is a double edged sword. In Mexico he has a rich familial life, but lacks material wealth; here he is economically stable, but he is separated from his family and his culture. It is a difficult paradoxical life situation to deal with. Furthermore, there are always technical difficulties that prevent him from having the best of both worlds. He says if he did in fact bring his teenage son here, the son would refuse to go to American schools and would only want to work in the fields. Should he give up his son's education to have the family united? Andres must always carefully weigh and balance each life choice. There is never a simple solution.

Unlike Andres, Leticia finds the life she has created here very satisfying and rewarding. She has lived in the United States for over eight years and now considers Gettysburg her permanent home. Her husband is an American citizen, whose extensive family is well settled in south central Pennsylvania. The young couple moved here from North Carolina, welcomed by the strong community of Mexican relatives that was already fully acculturated to the American lifestyle. Leticia credits her strong command English to the practice she receives when she communicates to her bilingual husband and his family. She is at a high level in her ESL and GED classes at Human Services. Although she remembers experiencing some apprehension, loneliness, and depression in her first few months in the U.S., she says that the turning point came when she became more confident and comfortable with her English skills. Leticia says that her life here is all that she dreamed of. She seems very proud of her role as a mother and a wife and says she is happy to have such a good husband and a beautiful daughter. Her husband has a stable job at a nearby turkey farm, and the family's economic situation appears relatively stable. Leticia is a homemaker and she hopes to have other children and to continue raise a family in Gettysburg. Her husband is encouraging her to learn English and receive her GED. It seems that his support is very important to her. Leticia also seems to have a relatively high level of acculturation and assimilation to American lifestyle and culture. She seems to have strong contact and interaction with mainstream American society. She speaks often of going to the mall, taking her daughter to Disneyworld, and cooking American food. She also seems to dress herself and her daughter in clothes of American name brands and designers. Furthermore, as a permanent resident, she is not just a fitting the American image, she is actually living it. These details seem to suggest that Leticia feels comfortable with, and part of, mainstream American culture. Leticia's supportive family community, her husband's successful economic

situation, her high level of English and high level of acculturation seem to be key factors in determining her high level of satisfaction with her life.

Gabriel also seems content with his life here, but sees various other possibilities for opportunity. He is living the life of an adventurous, idealistic single man. Though his main motive for crossing the border was to find work and better himself economically, he speaks of his journeys thus far as an adventure. He is always one to joke around, and likes to recall the first time he saw snow in Pennsylvania, the way an adventurer tells a tall tale. With no immediate family to support, Gabriel's primary concern is to earn enough money to finance his personal needs and lifestyle. Unlike other students, Gabriel says he is not obligated to send money to his parents in Mexico, although he tries to send as much as possible. Gabriel feels that his life here is fairly successful. He has a U.S. social security number and Pennsylvania drivers licence that have been accepted by his employers. Earlier this autumn, he worked in a wood processing factory. Apparently, the work was very dangerous as Gabriel showed the many scars on his hands from using the sharp saws and equipment. He also has serious eye irritations from the paint fumes in the plant. For one week in September, Gabriel took time off from his factory job to work picking apples at a local orchard. He said that he was satisfied with the cash he made after picking sixteen bins and points out that he made more money picking apples than he would have made working for a week at his factory. He also points out however, that the work was very difficult and strenuous and he would not be able to do it for an extended amount of time, or would he want to. Because of the medical problems Gabriel experienced at the wood processing plant, he eventually quit and found a safer job at Knouse Foods, a fruit processing plant. There he works with the machines that wash and clean the apples. Gabriel lives here with his eighteen year old nephew and they are financially well off enough to live in a single farm house on few acres of land. Gabriel seems to be relatively enthusiastic about his life here in the United States. He rarely misses a GED or ESL class, even when he must come in the morning after a long night shift. He always attempts to practice his English and has adequate speaking skills. He is also attempting to improve his English reading and writing skills. He says he gets frustrated because native English speakers often tell him that they cannot understand what he is saying. Gabriel said that in Mexico he went to a night school to learn electronic skills and imagined that in the United States he would work with construction. Unfortunately he says that there are very few opportunities for construction work in Adams County, and so he finds himself in factory type jobs. Although Gabriel is happy with his life here, he says that he is a young man and anxious for changes and new experiences. He declares that the necessity of money is the key factor in determining his plans for both the immediate and distant future. Gabriel has very lofty aspirations for his future, and feels that his work in Adams County is a temporary stop in the adventurous life he hopes to lead.

Visions of the Future

The students' dreams and hopes for the future are largely shaped by past experiences and the direction that their present lives are taking them. Most of the students agreed that they are in the United States with the goal of bettering themselves economically and saw that money is the key factor in determining whether future life goals will be accomplished. But students vary in what their aspirations are beyond the time they hope they will feel financially secure. Leticia, who holds the higher level of acculturation and English skills, definitely wants to live permanently in

the U.S. Gabriel, with his ever increasing language skills, also declares that it is likely for him to stay and settle here permanently. Meanwhile, Andres who avoids learning English and assimilating to American culture, seems the most set in his goal of returning to Mexico. For the most part it seems that the more time a student spends in this country, the more likely they will lose sight of plans to return to their homeland, and the easier and more likelier they will decide to stay here permanently. However, that does not necessarily mean that the transition is a simple or unemotional process.

Gabriel has several possible dream scenarios for his future life he hopes to live. The first time I met him, he said that he wants to learn Japanese, so he can live in Japan and do work with electronics. Some of his other aspirations are not quite so idealistic. He would like to temporarily visit Mexico in nine months to visit his family, but says that will depend on whether he has enough money for traveling and expenses. He wants to finish his GED requirement, and perhaps go to college in the United States. He suggested that maybe he will someday be a teacher at Gettysburg College. He would like to travel around the United States and see cities like Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Eventually he would like to get married and have a family. He dreams of owning a brick house and living outside of south Philadelphia. When asked if he would ever return to Mexico permanently, he half jokingly said, possibly, if the American government allows him to work in the U.S. and live in Mexico. Though his command of English is relatively solid, Gabriel feels that his lack of English skills is what prevents him from achieving his immediate goals. Though the direction his next life decision will take him will be determined by his financial situation, it is clear that Gabriel is positive about his choices for the future. Furthermore, he is optimistic about his opportunities in the United States. Because he is single, he has only his personal situation to be concerned with. He is willing and eager to learn English and feels it may be the key to the possibility of a successful future. Gabriel feels prepared to carve a life path for himself.

Leticia's future aspirations include further cementing and settling her family life in Gettysburg, Adams County. She hopes to have more children and hopes to raise them in accordance to American culture and society. When asked what language she wants her daughter to learn, Leticia says that it is important for Odette to learn English first. She said that her daughter will learn Spanish from her relatives and her home life. I also asked Leticia if she hopes to be able to carry on traditional Mexican customs and teach them to her daughter. In her opinion, it is difficult to celebrate Mexican customs in the United States, and she does not consider it important to teach them to her daughter. These opinions suggest that Leticia feels the struggle of learning English and acculturating to the United States, perhaps she is attempting to defend her daughter from the same difficulties. Leticia has no plans to return to Mexico, except to occasionally visit her parents. She is eager to receive her GED and continue her English education. She is very hopeful that her and her husband will have one or two more children and continue to lead a prosperous life in the United States. Much the way Leticia avoids the topic of her previous culture, it is possible that she refrains from passing on traditions because they may be reminders of the negative aspects of her life in Mexico. To Leticia, folk customs and traditions may symbolize the old-fashioned, un-developed images she associates with her life in a small town in Mexico. It is unfortunate that Leticia sees little reason for her daughter to learn and understand the culture of her mother's homeland. Her attempts to bolster her daughter's acculturation, and shield her from the cultural differences of her heritage may be well intended,

but it is predicted that their results may be in fact detrimental. Ignoring Odette=s ethnic heritage will not guarantee Leticia=s daughter=s success in American culture, and will only leave a hole of uncertainty as she attempts to understand her own identity. By disregarding her ethnicity, Leticia is sending an untrue message that it is wrong or shameful to be of Mexican decent and is perpetuating negative stereotypes about her people. Instead, if she would celebrate both her successful new American identity and her rich ethnic past in a careful balance, Leticia would be sending her daughter a much more positive image to follow. As she matures, Odette would be more likely to navigate herself successfully through complex questions of identity in her cross-cultural world. She would have the image of a strong, proud, Mexican and American female figure for inspiration.

Andres confided that if he were a single man, he would live permanently in the United States. In his dreams he would open his own construction business. He cites the prosperous economic condition and the high level of technology here as inspirations. But because Andres is older and is responsible for a family, his immediate goals seem to be much more solid and realistic than Gabriel=s. Realistically, Andres wants to work in the United States for one and a half more years. At that time he hopes to return to Mexico with his earnings, reunite with his children, and open a construction business in his hometown. When I first met Andres, he mapped out these plans in a confident voice. But now several months have passed from our first encounter and I notice slight unspecific differences in his description of his future hopes; a slight change of tone, a different look in his eyes. Perhaps with this passage of time, he has inevitably become further acculturated, or more comfortable and accepting of his situation here. Or perhaps with this passage of time he feels that he can be more open and trusting with the feelings he shares with me. I am surprised when Andres recently admits that his goals are subject to change in accordance with his economic situation. He despairingly repeats, *ATodo depende en el dinero, todo depende en el dinero-* It all depends on money, it all depends on money@. He points out that his brother came to the United States and planned to work for only one year. Today, the same brother has been a resident of Adams County for over twelve years. I feel that it must be unsettling and frightening for Andres to have witnessed his brother lose sight of his ideals. By refraining from learning English and from becoming part of American culture, Andres is attempting to hold firm to his temporary status and ensure that he will return to Mexico.

As time goes by however, I feel that Andres is finding it more difficult to keep himself from naturally assimilating to American culture. Simply by living in the United States, Andres is surrounded by American culture and society on all accounts. There is an inevitable extent to what he can avoid and what he can separate himself from. In his association with Human Services, Andres is surrounded by the educational atmosphere he is fascinated by. He has the slow, patient voice of a natural teacher and the appreciation for intelligence and knowledge. As American college students, he is intrigued by our presence at Human Services and has taken it upon himself to teach us Spanish and Mexican culture. Although he always refers to our part there by using the term *Aintercambio-* interchange@ as he interlocks his fingers, disappointingly, he rarely brings himself to take the humble step down into the student position. Clearly, Andres craves the knowledge and has the capacity to learn much about the culture and the technology of the United States. He is only hindered by his reluctance to learn English. Ironically, I found him skipping an ESL class the other day to read a book written in Spanish about American history.

I really cannot predict if Andres and his wife will return to their family in Mexico at their planned time. It is a question that I find extremely difficult to answer. I see such strength in their will and convictions, and I really wish that they are able to realize their dreams. But through this experience, I have lost the naive belief that wanting something bad enough will guarantee that it will happen. The students at Human Services taught me many uplifting and positive lessons, but one negativity rang all too true. I tried to ignore, avoid, and deny the fact, but Andres is right—everything really does rely on money. More economically feasible, I see Andres and Teresa deciding to bring their children to the United States. Many changes are possible in the next one and a half years. Inevitably, the couple will learn more English, will become more acculturated, will become more economically stable, and will become more a part of the Hispanic community in Adams County. If the lives of Leticia and Gabriel are indications, these factors will make the decision to return home more difficult. In addition, there are countless other variables and possible scenarios that might affect the life Andres and Odette will lead. Perhaps Andres will hear of an fantastic job offer in Mexico and return, or maybe he will become fluent in English and enroll in night school here. Perhaps more relatives will join the couple, moving the family base from Tecozaulta, Hidalgo to York, PA. The list of possible results is truly infinite. I really can only hope that the couple remains as loving and as dedicated to each other as they are now. Everything may depend on money, but money is not everything.

Problems and Limitations

Initially I felt morally obligated to refrain from making general conclusions that could be applied to all of the students that I interviewed. I felt that by making sweeping generalizations, I would be ignoring the rich individualistic details that gave the stories I heard realistic credibility. I felt that I had gotten to know these individuals too well to lump them into an impersonal group. But after this written attempt to analyze the lives of three individuals, I have realized that this type of presentation is not without its own set of flaws. Firstly, it is impossible to analyze and sum up three entire personae in a short research paper. Feelings, emotions, and opinions are all relative to an infinite number of variables. At times I felt like an uncertified psychiatrist, making conclusions about people I really did not know well enough to do so for. Or perhaps I knew them too well. I knew these individuals on a multitude of levels. They were simultaneously my students, my teachers, my subjects to be studied, and my friends. I saw them as complex, three dimensional characters, and I found it impossible to present them from just one perspective.

I also felt somewhat out of place or unauthorized to ask students about such personal issues as individual aspirations, and their satisfactions or dissatisfactions with their lives. It is difficult for most individuals to make reflections on their pasts, give a complete personal evaluation of their current life status, or admit to future aspirations in even their own minds. This type of information is often difficult to express in words, especially in a casual conversation. Furthermore, it is difficult for me as a native English speaker to translate complete ideas and thoughts spoken in native Spanish. Some emotions like those felt by a student for his family and his homeland are too enormously abstract and meaningful to put in any language.

I have every intention of continuing the relationships I forged and I would take hold of any opportunity to do further research with the Hispanic community of Adams County. If I were to re-do my experiences and encounters I would be sure to pay even closer attention to details and

make more careful observations. I would especially take more notice in every-day situations which seem to be goldmines of cultural richness. I would also make sure that I had a greater understanding of Spanish, so that I would be able to spend less time comprehending the mere language and more time comprehending the meaning of what is being communicated. I also would attempt to be more self-aware of my personal biases and how they affect my observations. Often my idealism and naivety prevented me from fully understanding accepting the magnitude of the life stories I heard. Ideally, I would continue to exhibit sensitivity to what I hear, but I'd later distance myself slightly to be able to analyze them in a more pragmatic manner. Sometimes my emotional attachment to my sources became a distraction and a hindrance to my ability to gain a wide perspective. Other times my personal connections gave me intense insight that I would never encounter if I kept myself emotionally detached from the students. I was able to have the opportunity to learn from the students, not just about the students. Through them, I learned not just about their lives and their mind sets, I learned about my own. Each day as I asked them endless cultural and personal questions, they in turn challenged me to look at my own life and beliefs. When I once asked Andres how he sees his life in the United States, he looked at me at one point and asked me a question I found very difficult to answer, *A Que piensas acerca de mi vida?* What do you think about my life?@

Even if I was a fluent Spanish speaker, I would still have had a loss for words. It was then that I realized just how similar we both are.

Sources

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Please note: all names have been changed to protect the privacy of the sources