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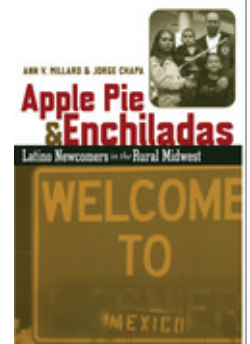
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Ten Myths about Latinos

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Ten myths about Latinos, widely held and strongly believed by Anglos, shape interactions in daily life in Midwestern small towns.

Ten Myths Held by Many Rural Midwestern Anglos about Latino Newcomers

1. Latino newcomers to Midwestern towns have just arrived from Mexico and are “illegal.”
 2. Migration from Mexico to the Midwest started in recent years.
 3. Latino newcomers do not speak English and do not want to learn it.
 4. They are the poorest of the poor; their living conditions at home are worse than those in the Midwest.
 5. They want to stay separate from Anglos.
 6. They love hard physical labor.
 7. They love moving from place to place, producing high rates of turnover at factories.
 8. They come to live on welfare and are a drain on the economy.
 9. They do not experience racism because Midwesterners are not racist, and certainly not against “Mexicans.”
 10. They are grateful for whatever they get and uncritical of their conditions and treatment.
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These stereotypes are widespread among Anglos in many parts of the United States, though not subscribed to by all. In the rural Midwest, they enter into most decisions that affect Latinos, as we found in our study.

1. Latino newcomers to Midwestern towns have just arrived from Mexico and are “illegal.”

Some Latinos come directly from Mexico to the Midwest, but many were born in the United States or have spent many years in south Texas, Florida, and other states while working on farms and in other physically taxing labor.

For example, in meatpacking plants in Nebraska, Gouveia and Stull (1997) found that 41 percent of people came from California. Of all Latinos in the United States, according to the Current Population Survey in 2000, 61 per-

cent had been born in this country and 74 percent of those born abroad had become naturalized citizens (Therrien and Ramirez 2001; see also Rosenbaum 1997 on Latinos in Michigan).

The Midwestern use of the term “Mexican” to apply to all Latinos reinforces the stereotype that all Latinos are immigrants, all of whom come from Mexico. The notion that they have no government authorization to work in the United States is closely tied to the assumption about their nationality. These notions form a basis for Anglo exploitation and denial of rights to Latinos.

2. Migration from Mexico to the Midwest started in recent years.

To the contrary, at the end of World War I, Midwestern beet sugar factories and other industries recruited workers in large numbers from Mexico (Valdés 1991:8, 2000a,b; see also García 1996 and Vargas 1993 on Latino migration to the Midwest). The sugar beet migration to the Midwest occurred from 1917 to 1929, with a brief hiatus during this period, and was followed by an anti-Mexican immigrant era throughout the 1930s, when immigrants were actually deported to Mexico, in many cases illegally. The Bracero Program followed, recruiting workers from Mexico for agricultural work throughout the United States (1943–1964); then another era began in which unskilled workers from Mexico could not obtain official permission to enter the country. Most recently, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 offered legal residency to some of those workers living and working in the United States without official permission. During part of the 1990s, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service was commanded not to deport Latinos who lacked authorization as long as they held jobs. Mexican migration to the Midwest thus has continued for over a century, has usually occurred as a result of vigorous recruitment by employers, and has often contributed to economic growth in the region.

3. Latino newcomers do not speak English and do not want to learn it.

Most Anglos think that all Latinos speak only Spanish; some, however, speak no Spanish and many are bilingual. The view that Spanish monolinguals do not want to learn English is part of the ideology of some organizations, such as U.S. English, Inc., that have great credibility among the Anglo public. On the other hand, research shows that with more exposure to the United States, immigrants from Mexico improve English skills (Espinosa and Massey 1997), implying their willingness to learn the language.

Cole notes that the accusation that “aliens refuse to assimilate” has been made about “every new group of immigrants to arrive on U.S. shores” (1998:14). We have found consistently that Latino immigrants all want to learn English; however, they usually lack an effective way to do so. Latino immigrants all see learning English as a way to obtain better jobs and to deal more effectively with various situations in daily life.

4. They are the poorest of the poor; their living conditions at home are worse than those in the Midwest.

Those who arrive in the Midwest are not the poorest of the poor; the poorest cannot afford to travel (see Massey 1998 and Massey and Espinosa 1997 on those from Mexico). The newcomers tend to be members of the working poor if they are from south Texas, and some from Mexico are from better-off families who can afford to send them north. In some cases, their parents’ homes in Mexico are considerably nicer and safer than the run-down Midwestern trailer parks catering to Latino newcomers. Latinos come to the rural Midwest with some resources and a strategy for survival; they usually have jobs waiting and a place to stay with relatives. To get to the Midwest, most Mexican Americans have to obtain a car that runs well enough to travel 1,700 miles and enough money to provide for some days without pay. Workers who come directly from Mexico usually pay their passage to travel directly to the town where they will work.

5. They want to stay separate from Anglos.

Anglo organizations do not invite Latinos to join (see Vargas 1993 on discrimination against Latino religious and social participation in community organizations by Midwestern Anglos). The exceptions are the few churches that have established separate Latino congregations. The language of Latino congregations is usually Spanish, making language a symbol and rationale for separation. Some Anglos have commented that they would not refuse Latinos membership in their organizations; however, they recruit new members through their social networks, which always exclude Latinos. Latinos thus have few ways of entering the Anglo social universe.

6. They love hard physical labor.

The Latinos in this study work hard and take pride in supporting themselves; however, they do not regard hard physical labor as ideal. Historically, they are known as very hard workers (Vargas 1993). The current high turnover in meat-

packing plants (Gouveia and Stull 1997; Gouveia, Sanchez, and Saenz 2001) suggests that they move out of the most physically difficult and dangerous jobs when they can. They regard their jobs as backbreaking (“Se acaba uno” [You get worn out]), and they want their children to have less arduous jobs.

7. They love moving from place to place, producing high rates of turnover in factories.

Although Latino newcomers speak of the benefits of getting to know new places and people, many miss faraway family and home communities, whether in the United States or Mexico. They prefer not to live on the move; when they have an opportunity to work in one place year-round for decent wages, most tend to settle down, as seen in this study.

8. They come to live on welfare and are a drain on the economy.

In this study, we did not find people moving to the Midwest to live on welfare. Many Latino newcomers do not apply for all the services for which they are eligible. Recent analyses show that undocumented immigrants from Mexico pay more in taxes than they gain in benefits at the federal level, but the reverse is true for local government budgets (see Chapter 3; on southern California, see Chavez 1992:143, who reports that over half of the workers from Mexico and Central America interviewed in 1986 had taxes withheld, did not file federal tax forms, and thus forfeited refunds). Historically, immigrants from Mexico were the last to receive aid during the Great Depression (Vargas 1993).

9. They do not experience racism because Midwesterners are not racist, and certainly not against “Mexicans.”

In this study, we found that many rural Midwesterners are people of goodwill, but some are not. We did not find one Latino who had not experienced racism in the Midwest, whether it was having “beans” yelled at them on the street (seen as silly by study participants) or being told, “Go back to Mexico.” (See Burke and Goudy 1999; Vargas 1993.)

10. They are grateful for whatever they get and uncritical of their conditions and treatment.

The statements from Latinos in this study show that many have sophisticated, sociologically sound criticisms of the way the local society and economy work in their new communities. They are quite critical of power structures in the Midwest, south Texas, Florida, and Mexico.