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## Mobility Trajectories among Middle-class Latinx Immigrants

In the current political climate, upwardly mobile Latino immigrants are pulled between two opposing forces. On one pole, this group is experiencing growing economic opportunities, with a 14% rise in their income and a 44% increase in the Latino-owned businesses over the decade<sup>i</sup>. On the other, Latino immigrants face political and social conditions that are constricting opportunity and possibly reversing mobility gains; in the past 10 years, states enacted a total of 1,352 laws targeting immigrants – with at least one law enacted in every state<sup>ii</sup>.

The election of Donald Trump appears to have intensified the hostile context of reception for Latino immigrants across all sectors of US society. As President, Trump has enacted policies to increase deportations of non-authorized immigrants while defending the crackdown with a rhetoric that criminalizes and dehumanizes all people of Latino heritage regardless of social class, educational attainment or legal status<sup>iii</sup>. Understanding how these conditions have affected the mobility strategies of authorized middle-class Latino immigrants addresses a central question about race and democracy: do policies targeted at a politically excluded out-group systematically disadvantage a purported in-group? . Using qualitative key informant interviews, we will interrogate the degree to which increasingly stringent immigration policies affect the incorporation strategies of a group who are beyond the scope of these policies, namely, middle-class Latino immigrants who are legally present in the U.S. (“authorized”).

The social and economic dynamics surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic may have worked to distill these conditions. With the border closings, travel restrictions, and new reliance on government competence that have come as a result of this public health crisis, relationships between individuals in already-marginalized communities and the larger society have likely become increasingly tenuous. Further, the rapid decline of the economy resulting from “shelter in place” orders could be eroding the protections that “middle class” status afford immigrant families. These restrictions are placing a particularly large economic burden on small business owners, who are shutting their doors entirely or must re-tool to provide “essential services” such as food preparation.

Research indicates that the current U.S. context of reception has created a “climate of fear” and has reversed the gains of upwardly mobile unauthorized Latino immigrants<sup>iv</sup>. However, we do not know whether authorized immigrants have faced a similar downward mobility trajectory. Leveraging a cohort of middle-class authorized Mexican and Dominican immigrants previously interviewed, we will ascertain how these denizens are now navigating potential mobility opportunities and barriers generated by: 1) Trump’s policies and rhetoric and 2) the novel coronavirus pandemic. Through re-interviews with these respondents, we can investigate the degree to which legal status, labor market position, and professional credentials have produced an incentive for Latino immigrants to create physical, social, and symbolic distance from working-class co-ethnics, or the degree to which stigmatized ethnic identity has acted to bind Latino immigrants together, irrespective of class status or legal position<sup>v</sup>. We will also see whether and how these tendencies changed before and after the election of Donald Trump, and before and after the social distancing policies imposed as a response to the pandemic.

Just before the 2016 election, we completed a study of this group’s integration approaches with the support of two NSF grants.<sup>vi</sup> In the project, we investigated the question of whether and how discrimination influenced mobility decisions among authorized middle-class Dominican and Mexican immigrants in Atlanta. We operationalized “mobility decisions” as decisions regarding where to live, where to send children to school, and which social and/or civic organizations to join. Our research question was concerned with the multi-generational transmission of class position, and we focused on parents who possessed the resources to live in their preferred neighborhood and garner social and cultural capital for their children. We used the same criteria as Lacy<sup>vii</sup> for determining middle-class status, applying these criteria to the respondent or the spouse: holding a post-secondary degree; working in a professional occupation; or owning a business. Participants were recruited through multiple avenues, including solicitations via a Spanish-language radio program, flyers and direct appeals in Dominican-owned and Mexican-owned restaurants, and snowball sampling from multiple starting points. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, depending on the respondent’s preference. In person or over the phone interviews lasted anywhere between 30 minutes to two hours, with most lasting about one hour. We succeeded in obtaining a final sample of 88 interviews covering five politically and demographically diverse counties, including the two counties in Georgia covered by a 287(g) agreement between the local sheriff’s office to detain suspected

unauthorized immigrants for ICE, and three counties without a 287(g) agreement.

We were interested in discrimination directed towards our respondents from US-born Atlantans, and also in discrimination practiced by our respondents towards lower-status groups, specifically African Americans and working-class Latinos. Our first round of interviews yielded mobility strategies that were not captured adequately by then-current immigration theories. We concluded that, while some of these findings were unique to the specific demographic and historical context of Atlanta, they also spoke to the realities of mobility in the United States for our respondents' class, national origin, and legal status positions.

Extending Lacy's theory of "strategic assimilation," we developed three new concepts to capture these previously unexamined patterns of immigrant incorporation: "one-up assimilation;" "color-frustrated racial ideology," and "intersectional typicality." In our publications, we challenged the assumption in the literature that proximity to the native-born White middle class is the goal of successful assimilation. Rather, we found that authorized, middle-class Latino immigrants in Atlanta drew upon their middle-class status and national origin to position themselves as *above* the native-born white middle-class in terms of social and human capital<sup>viii</sup>. Simultaneously, they deployed strategies to distance themselves from co-ethnics they understood as typical Latinos, stereotyped in Atlanta as unauthorized, working-class Mexicans<sup>ix</sup>. We found that respondents recognized discriminatory treatment towards working-class Mexicans, but explained that they themselves had not experienced discrimination<sup>x</sup>. They couched any negative interactions with non-Latino people they understood as native-born Atlantans to be idiosyncratic ("just that one time," "there's always someone who will be negative").

The recognition of discrimination towards working-class Latino immigrants was particularly salient among the seven respondents who worked in jobs in which the majority of workers, patrons, or clients were working-class Mexicans; this was most notable amongst the restaurant owners we interviewed. We will augment the findings from this group by conducting new interviews with Dominican and Mexican restaurant owners from a random sample of establishments. Because of their unique vantage point as entrepreneurs working with co-ethnic colleagues whose customer base spans Latino, whites, and Blacks (depending upon their location), these respondents will be particularly important in understanding strategic assimilation. For those middle-class immigrants who have the daily option to cross lines of class or of ethnicity in developing social networks, does a rapidly changing context of reception change the decision-making paradigm?

## Research Objectives

In this project, we will investigate whether and the ways in which Atlanta's middle-class Dominican and Mexican immigrants navigate the changing social, economic, and political environment in Trump's America. Specifically, we ask: **"What strategies do authorized middle-class Dominican and Mexican immigrants employ to protect and maintain their middle-class status? What types of encounters with native-born Atlantans influence these strategies? How have these experiences and strategies changed since Trump's election? How have these experiences and strategies changed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?"** We include questions about behavioral mobility strategies – decisions about jobs, schooling, and organizations, social interaction strategies through which individuals signal their "in-group" and "out-groups," and responses to the pandemic.

We will re-interview the earlier cohort of respondents to investigate whether the heightened anti-Latino sentiment under Trump has changed the perceived discriminatory experiences of these respondents, and query the strategies they deploy to navigate these experiences. In the current administration, do respondents report more negative encounters for themselves and their children than they did before Trump? Will respondents be more likely to label these encounters as "discrimination?" Do they socialize differently, choose to live in different neighborhoods, or join different organizations now and, if so, do these choices encourage more or less proximity to the native-born White middle class? Will respondents deploy the same strategies to symbolically position themselves above native-born white middle class Atlantans and away from unauthorized, working-class Mexicans?

We will also include new interview questions in this round to investigate how our respondents understand and communicate their authorized status in an effort to maintain their middle-class status, or conversely lean into their *Latinidad* as a protective status during xenophobic times. We will investigate the question of whether

respondents in mixed-status families report different experiences and different identity work strategies compared to respondents who do not have unauthorized family members<sup>xi</sup>.

Since the time of our previous study in 2015, the dramatic changes in immigration policy under the Trump Administration have created a natural experiment in which we can use the earlier interviews as a baseline for comparison. Building on our previous study provides us with a unique opportunity to answer questions about how the Trump Administration immigration rhetoric and policies are affecting authorized, middle-class Latino immigrants, a group that is ostensibly not the target of those policies. Our re-interviews also will provide us with rare longitudinal data to investigate the rapidly changing circumstances among these difficult-to-locate immigrant groups. Finally, our re-interviews make a contribution to the literature on qualitative methods where we hope to demonstrate a “proof of concept” about whether and how many re-interviews are possible, under what conditions.

We also propose to interview new respondents in order to better understand the dynamics of distancing and inclusion among Latino immigrants given the rapidly changing context of reception and the economic strain rendered by the pandemic. Conducting new interviews with a new sample of 30 restaurant owners will provide systematic information about self-employed Latino immigrants in an important industry that hires and serves authorized and unauthorized Latino immigrants. By interviewing these entrepreneurs, we will gain a much greater understanding of middle-class Latino immigrants who exist in a Latino-dominated social and economic space and we will be able to discern the ways in which the identities of these immigrants have shifted to accommodate differing modes of assimilation, or do they reject assimilation entirely. Further, restaurant owners are in a unique position to respond to creatively navigate the pandemic. Although they have ended indoor dining, they can still remain open by providing take-out meals. Our study will allow us to investigate the strategies that they develop and the role of Latino immigrant clientele in maintaining solvency.

*Why interviews?* Processes of minority vulnerability to discrimination and everyday harassment are difficult to capture with quantitative methods<sup>xii</sup>. Negotiation of middle-class status involves processes at the level of ongoing social interaction. Indeed, our previous study showed that respondents’ identities and negotiation strategies emerged across a wide range of interview questions and topics. In fact, the Dominican racial identity, including their perception that Americans are “obsessed” with race, emerged when they explained why they didn’t enjoy or appreciate our questions about race. A more quantitatively focused methodology would simply not have yielded this data. Participant observation, or ethnographic methods, would not have allowed us to explicitly probe in the manner that interviews did. Semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate methodology to interrogate the question of how middle-class Latino are responding to the rapidly changing context of reception.

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