Pereira, Gabriela: Kinship in Brazilian Immigrants

Research Proposal:

For my final video, I will look at how immigrants from Brazil create new familial and kinship ties to friends and other Brazilian immigrants as a substitute for their extended family that remains in Brazil. From there, I will compare these new ties to the immigrants’ own feelings about extended family and kinship from before they immigrated, however, I might instead compare to American non-immigrants and their feelings about extended family and kinship if further research reveals this to be the better route. To accomplish this, I will conduct an interview with my mother who is a Brazilian immigrant as well as send out a survey to a Facebook group of other Brazilian immigrants. If I end up doing a comparison to non-immigrants, I will send out a survey to the Geneseo campus and potentially conduct an interview with a friend.

Potential questions are:

Who would you consider your extended family?

Would you say you have non-relatives that you are closer to, or as close to, than your relatives?

When you first immigrated to the United States, was it difficult to adjust without having the support of all your family?

Do you feel as though the close friends you have now are a good alternative for not having your extended family nearby?

How has not being around your extended family affected your experience in the United States?

Do you feel as though you are missing out on experiences with your Brazilian relatives because you are in the United States?

Some References:

Rae-Espinoza, Heather

2016 Transnational Ties: Children's Reactions to Parental Emigration in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Ethos 44(1):32-49

Goza, Franklin


This is a reasonable start but now immerse yourself in research and reading to hone the topic and your questions etc!

Scholarly Background

In 1991, Brazilians were in the top four recipients of US visas and as of 2015, there are an estimated 360,000 Brazilians in the United States (Goza 1994, US Census Bureau 2015). The high number of reasons that Brazilians have for migrating to America are discussed in Marcus (2009). These include financial reasons, curiosity, perceptions of American culture, family, education, and escape. Marcus makes sure to point out that all of these reasons are multifaceted and the likelihood that individuals immigrate due to just one single reason is slim. The reason that the Pereira family moved to the United States was because of Tarcisio’s job. Marcus (2009) would categorize this as a financial reason for migration. Marcus states that those who leave Brazil for reasons of education, family, and escape are much less likely to return than those who left for financial and curiosity reasons. During the interview, Alessandra emphasized that although the main reason for migration was her husband’s job offer, they had never seriously considered leaving the United States. This is contrary to what Marcus (2009) found but the likely explanation is that regardless of a job offer, a main reason that the Pereira family chose to migrate to the United States was to try and provide a better life for their children.

Once arriving in the United States, immigrants have quite a few things to face. The process of acculturation is not easy and can be made even harder if immigrants do not have a support network in their new environment. Social capital, which can be defined as “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks and other social structures,” is incredibly helpful for immigrants adjusting to a new way of life (McGrath 2010; Takenoshita 2015). Social capital particularly emphasizes solidarity, reciprocity, and trust as ways for immigrants to form a community and have support (McGrath 2010). Bridging social capital is a connection formed with individuals of the new culture and bonding social capital involves other immigrants from the same home country. While bridging social capital does occur, it is far less common, especially early on, than bonding social capital (Takenoshita 2015).

I asked Alessandra a few times throughout the interview about the people we became friends with when first arriving in America. She made sure to point out that while knowing and befriending other Brazilians was helpful in terms of practicality, simply the fact of being a Brazilian immigrant in the United States was not enough to form close friendships due to within-group differences. This is similar to what happened is described in the McGrath (2010) article in regards to bounded solidarity sometimes leading to a feeling of being an outsider. The concept of fictive kin is also very important for immigrants, especially those that did not have relatives in the new country prior to their arrival (Foner 1997). Alessandra mentions that today, she is only friends with a handful of her initial Brazilian contacts, one of which is mentioned: Bettina. This is because Alessandra and Bettina chose to connect their families as fictive kin. By doing this, they were not only expanding their connection with others like them, they were replicating the social institution of the family, often considered the most important social institution in Brazil (Green 2010).
Children have been cited by several sources as an asset to the acculturation of their parents. Because young children tend to have more direct interaction with Americans, they provide a role as linking sources of social capital for their parents (Green 2010; McGrath 2010; Foner 1997). Due to the elastic nature of their young minds, children not only adapt to cultural changes more quickly, they also learn the new language very rapidly. Whenever I discuss our initial adjustment to American culture, my mother always brings up the example of birthday parties. The concepts of RSVPing, thank you notes, strict start and end times for parties, and giving money as gifts were all very foreign to my parents. As the years went by and I attended more and more birthday parties, my parents began to understand the norms and expectations that came with this part of American life.

In part of the recorded interview that did not make it to the final video, Alessandra describes herself as “lost”. Because she is an immigrant, she does not fully ‘fit in’ in American culture, but on the other hand, after 15 years of living away from Brazil, she does not feel completely comfortable there either. This echoes Green’s (2010) findings that although Brazil provides a source of self-identification, for many Brazilian immigrants, the sense of attachment they feel to Brazil is that of a homeland rather than a home. While social capital and fictive kin can be sources of relief for this disparity felt by many immigrants, Alessandra brought up a good, albeit sad, point. It is very hard to adjust to life in a new county no matter how many different resources and Brazilian friends you have. But, after spending an extended amount of time in a new country, your old country can change so much it becomes just as foreign. I really enjoyed this (rather sad) conclusion, perhaps because as an immigrant I can relate to it.

Sources

Foner, Nancy


Goza, Franklin


Green, Paul


Marcus, Alan P.


Marcus, Alan Patrick


McGrath, Brian


Takenoshita, Hirohsa


United States Census Bureau
Written Reflection on Final Video

In my original proposal for the video, I had planned to conduct an interview with my mother, Alessandra, as well as distribute a survey to a community of Brazilian immigrants on Long Island to get my own statistics and additional data. My original topic was focused more on comparing immigrant’s biological family to their new, created family. Early on, I also gave myself the option of comparing immigrants’ feelings about their family in their home country and non-immigrants feelings about their extended family if that was what the research led me to.

In the end, the research I found ended up being focused on how immigrants network when arriving in a new country and how a community of immigrants from the same country and similar backgrounds was beneficial. Due to the nature of the questions I wanted to ask, I struggled to put together a cohesive survey so I decided to remove this aspect of the project. I had considered interviewing some more Brazilian immigrants but after conducting the interview with my mother, I decided to only focus on her and make the video a life history with a focus on kinship between immigrants. By having a video about only one person, I may have been able to provide less context, but after taking into account the written component, the video becomes less two-dimensional (Loizos 1993).

The video itself was a lot less anthropological than I’d have liked it to be, but that was expected because my subject is not familiar with anthropological methods. Because this film is in the format of an interview, Nichols (1991) would consider it a reflexive documentary. Overall, I felt my written component was a good representation of the research that I encountered and the conclusions drawn from the video. Alessandra made some points that contradicted the majority of the research. This was a good reminder that every individual’s experience is different and unique and while generalizations can be made for the purpose of research, you cannot expect every immigrant’s experience to reflect that generalization.