Social Capital and Survival:
A Look at Trust Among Immigrant Strangers

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It was a cold night in October. The day has been a day like any other for Manuel and his brother Francisco. It is about 11:30 p.m. and they have just finished dinner when there is a knock on the door. Manuel opened the door to find two Hispanic men, dirty and with a look of apprehension in their eyes, standing on his step. Manuel did not know their names, or how they managed to find his apartment, but he knew their story and he had been expecting them.

More than a month before Manuel's mother had phoned from Mexico. She had met two young men who were having a difficult time finding work in Mexico. They had already moved from the countryside to the state capital in search of a better job to no avail. They seemed like good people and were willing to take the risk of crossing the desert to get to America. She had asked Manuel and his brother if they would help them out if they made it to North Carolina. Manuel told his mother that they would help them as best they could so she gave the young men his address.

Now here they were, two strangers who had nothing. They needed clothes, food, shelter, a job. He let them in and provided them with the things they needed until they got on their feet. He let them join his crew of roofers as their first job in the United States. Manuel and his brother were not going to be remunerated for their help. They were paying forward the kindness shown to them when they were in similar situations years before. If there were any expectations it would be that these young men help someone else out in the future.

One of the defining characteristics of human nature is the desire for togetherness, for community. The communities created and the norms and mores that govern them differ from group to group and place to place. At times individuals may move from their original community by choice (voluntary migration) or through displacement (involuntary migration) such as through a natural disaster, famine, or war. Despite a shifting community network, when migration occurs, humans continue to form relationships and networks with others. These networks provide access to resources, tangible and intangible, positive and negative.

Migrants and refugees are groups that have generally been overlooked in the study of social capital. In social sciences such as political science and anthropology the term "social capital" is often employed to try to describe and subsequently define how one utilizes community structures. Social capital itself is a concept with numerous definitions and nuances attributed to it. I feel that looking

at human communities and interaction only through the lens of established groups of civic engagement as Putnam (2000) does provides a view that is too narrow.

Historically, migrants and refugees have moved within their own countries as well as abroad. Those who relocate to a new country are the most disconnected from their established community network. Oftentimes migrants and refugees relocate to a country where they do not speak the predominate native language(s), they may not appear physically similar to the majority and are further distanced by differences in cultural habits. Yet still, migrants and refugees continue to move forward creating new ties and finding access to resources as best they can. I hypothesize that it is the commonality of shared experience including: a shared language, shared culture, or shared societal status (being a migrant or refugee) that will be drawn on in the creation of new capital. Social capital is therefore an infrastructure that leads to the creation of networks and therefore access to resources and not the networks in and of themselves. Trust and reciprocity are key results of social capital. For the purpose of this paper I shall refer to all immigrants and refugees as immigrants.

Social Capital

Engeström (2001) provides a comprehensive list of various definitions of social capital to date. Bourdieu and Wacquant have defined social capital as, "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by a virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relations of mutual acquaintance and recognition." Woolcock has defined social capital as the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively. Herrero (2004) states that social capital is formed of obligations of reciprocity and information derived from membership of social networks. The definition that social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes co-operation between two or more individuals is put forth by Fukuyama (2001). He furthermore states that trust and networks are the result of social capital, not social capital itself. It is Fukuyama's definition that most clearly explains the social capital utilized by immigrants interviewed for this paper. I disagree with Herrero (2004) that the obligation of reciprocity of trust and information that can be derived from social networks is not social capital itself, but a result of social capital.

Social capital networks are traditionally broken down into two forms: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital occurs between individuals who are similar through some form of group membership (culture, religion, club, etc.), which reinforces exclusive identities (Uslaner and Dekker 2001). Bonding and bridging are not black and white either-or categories, but dimensions better compared as more-or-less (Putnam 2000). Networks resulting from social capital

among immigrant strangers may best be considered bonding social capital.

Bridging social capital refers to networks formed amongst dissimilar groups. In this case bridging social capital would be between an immigrant and an American. It was brought forth through the interviews that bridging social capital usually took place when the interviewee entered a school to learn English or when they became employed at a place with few non-American co-workers. Both bridging and bonding social capital networks are used to circumvent barriers encountered in the daily life of the immigrants (Aguilera and Massey 2003: 692).

One can extrapolate from Loizo's (2000) work on refugees to, in this case, all immigrant groups. Immigrants often enter into a country where the host population has an environment of social networks that may be different from their own. These social networks are established through cultural norms and language. The majority of immigrants entering into the United States are unable to communicate in English at a proficient level. Similarly few Americans are proficient in other languages. This language barrier makes it difficult to establish information networks amongst the two groups. Immigrants may also encounter hostile behavior from the local population, further compounding the difficulty in establishing information networks.

Humans crave the familiar. They look to others who share their values and commonalities. They hope that by finding this they will be able to experience a sense of belonging. In situations where there is a language, cultural or other social barrier, immigrants will turn to each other for support and to feel legitimized socially. To accomplish this, immigrants will adapt and oftentimes socially reconstruct elements of their lives from the time before their migration. To do this, immigrants will rely on the informal norms from their culture to create connections with others.

Trust and Reciprocity

Literature on trust and reciprocity has focused mainly on civic groups and associations. Herrero (2004) focused on trust amongst individuals within associations. In his work he puts forth that reputation (of both the truster and the trustee) plays an integral role in the decision to trust. Herrero also acknowledges that there are varying degrees of trust and different reasons for trust. Uslaner and Dekker (2001) focused their research on trust amongst civic groups. Uslaner (2002) believes that trust is based on a moral foundation to help others and to believe in the goodness of others.

Trust is an abstract concept, therefore hard to define. For this paper trust will be defined as relying or depending on another person's goodwill. There are different levels of trust. People trust that in interactions others will be honest; that others will not take advantage of them, intentionally lie to them or will not

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intentionally cause them harm. People trust on civic, institutional, personal, and political levels (Johnston and Soroka 2001: 31).

Particularized trust is trusting in a small group of individuals because one would have little opportunity to develop trust in others. Generalized trust would be to trust a wider range of people (Uslaner and Dekker 2001). Uslaner (2002) further argues that generalized trust is the perception that most people belong to your moral community (26). Herrero (2004) uses the term *"social trust"* for generalized trust with unknown individuals. Culture and community associations are strongly linked to social trust. Through socialization processes humans learn to associate certain traits with certain characteristics. For example a smile can indicate friendliness. Immigrants may often consciously as well as unconsciously rely on context clues from their culture for traits that are associated with trustworthiness to determine who they should trust.

It is difficult to determine if immigrants interviewed tend to utilize particularized or generalized trust. One could argue that they mainly employ generalized trust due to the fact that they often form networks and ask for information from other immigrants. However, when the interviewees arrived in the United States they came alone. They were not part of a specific group, such as a church congregation, trusting only the individuals in that group. They generalized their trust to immigrants of similar backgrounds as a whole. Fukuyama (2001) used the term *"*radius of trust*"* to delineate a group of people among whom co-operative norms operate (8). Essentially, the interviewees (Hispanic immigrants, Liberian and Montagnard refugees) included those in their specific cultural community in their radius of trust.

The concept of trust and the concept of reciprocity are inherently tied into the concept of social capital. Putnam (2000) refers to the principle of generalized reciprocity as the touchstone of social capital. Reciprocity is normally seen as the exchange of resources, both tangible and intangible between entities (nations, companies, individuals, etc.). In social capital, reciprocity can be the exchange of resources between two individuals. For example Mrs. Smith will loan Mrs. Adams sugar today with the expectation that in the future Mrs. Adams will reciprocate the favor in a time of need. For this paper reciprocity also includes the concept of forward reciprocity, paying forward the favor or resource to a future individual in need of assistance.

Aguilera and Massey (2003) have done significant research in Mexican communities that send a large number of migrants to the United States. Within these networks there is a system of *reciprocity exchanges*, favors extended to friends and relatives as part of a generalized system of exchange. Migrants help friends and relatives not because they expect immediate repayment, but because they anticipate help being extended to them or their kin at some future date. The reciprocity exchanges are characterized by *enforceable trust*, since migrants who refuse to help

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friends or family may be ostracized or punished by relatives and friends at home and abroad (673). The crucial difference between membership in a social network and the generation of social capital is the creation of an obligation of reciprocity (Herrero 2004: 9).

Uslaner (2001) believes that people who trust are ones who tend to see the world as a beneficent place and they have the moral obligation to make it a better place. (106). Let us step back to the situation of the group that we are looking at in the context of this article, immigrants.

Aside from reviewing current literature on the topics of social capital, trust and reciprocity, I also interviewed two Liberian refugees, two Montagnard[1] refugees, and eight Hispanic immigrants about their experiences traveling to and living in the United States. All the interviewees came to the United States in different ways and for different reasons. Believing that they will have similar experiences by virtue of their shared commonality of being immigrants, it has been my attempt to try and ascertain how they gained and utilized a variety of resources upon arrival in the United States. I also tried to garner an understanding of their perceptions of trust and reciprocity and how these ideas have meaning in their own lives.

Through my work as a teacher of English as a Second Language and as a volunteer with HIAS[2] in Charlotte, NC I have been able to meet and interact with immigrants and refugees from a variety of backgrounds. I have been able to observe over the years that immigrants often cluster together with other immigrants like themselves and more willing to reach out to strangers who appeared to be from the same cultural or linguistic background. Due to communication barriers, my pool of interviewees was limited to those that could communicate with at least an intermediate level of English fluency. I explained to each interview that I was working on a project about immigrants for university and asked their permission to be interviewed.

Each interviewee was asked why they were currently residing in the United States and what forces drew them here. They were asked how they met new people and how they sought out information. Of the dozen interviews, each interviewee gave examples of approaching someone who demonstrated the same

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[1] The Montagnard people are the indigenous people of Vietnam. They were named Montagnard, or Mountain People, by French colonizers. They have been persecuted for years in communist Vietnam both for having assisted American Forces during the Vietnam War as well as having converted to Christianity.

[2] HIAS stands for Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. They are a refugee resettlement group funded by the Jewish Community in the United States. They use the acronym as their brand just as the YMCA does.

informal cultural norms and/or shared language each interviewee held. Sometimes conversations were initiated with others to find out information for an immediate need and other times to help assuage the loneliness felt at being a stranger in strange land. The interviewees were also questioned about the extent to which they trusted both Americans and other immigrants as well as if they would reciprocate any assistance they received to others in the future.

Selected Case Studies

"She carry her washing on her head" is a simple and telling statement from Lucy[3], a Liberian woman when asked why she decided to first approach Nelly, the woman who she now considers her best friend in her new country. When asked to explain further, this is what Lucy said, "I arrive here in September, only me and my little sister. I miss my friends, the people I know from the camp. Some of us left Africa together, but different agencies take us different places. I see this woman black like me, dark, not like American black. She carry her washing on her head. I think she is from Africa, from my country. She gonna understand me."

Han is a Montagnard man. One can often find him outside socializing in the evening with other Montagnard men in the courtyard of his apartment complex. Many of the men in his social group are new arrivals to the United States. They came in the most recent wave of Montagnard resettlement in late 2005. Han came in the late 1990's. He has had time to adjust to life in the United States. Now that he has a job, a car, and a good command of the English language he considers it his responsibility to help new arrivals. When asked why, he states, "When I first came here, I knew nothing, could speak nothing in English. Life was very different here than in my country. Another Montagnard man who came before me helped me to settle here, to learn. This was good for me. I need to do the same for others."

Asked how he knows who is a Montagnard he said, "There are many of us. Our language is not all the same, but we don't sit on the ground, we crouch close to the ground. I look at the people, look at the faces, we are not Vietnamese, and we are different." When asked if he trusted other Montagnards he answered, "We only have each other here; we will not hurt each other."

Manuel is a 30 year old undocumented immigrant from Mexico. Before coming to the U.S. Manuel studied architecture for two years at the university level. Manuel lives in an apartment with his brother, sister-in-law, nephew, and two other undocumented workers.

Manuel crossed the border on foot. It took him about three days to walk across the desert. Once across the border he and other immigrants were packed

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[3] All names have been changed to protect the identities of the interviewees.

into truck, "like sardines" and driven to Los Angeles. He had paid a *coyote* or smuggler $1,200 (US) to lead him across the desert and arrange for transportation to Los Angeles. Aside from the risk of being caught by the authorities, there was the risk of death in the desert and risk that the coyote could be untrustworthy failing to deliver on promises made. When asked why he trusted the coyote Manuel answered, "I didn't have any other option."

When asked who he is most likely to ask for information in any given situation Manuel believes he is still more likely to approach a person who is obviously Hispanic or someone he hears speaking Spanish before he would approach someone he believes to be American.

Though all the interviewees now have some family members with them in the United States, they all arrived alone. In their own countries the interviewees utilized networks of family and acquaintances to find out information on how to come to the United States and what they should do upon arrival. After arriving they all relied on the kindness and willingness of strangers to help them. They generally approached strangers who they felt looked like them, spoke their language, and had other habits that they recognized were similar to their own.

All of the immigrants came to the United States because they were looking for a better life. For them a better life could entail: escaping war or persecution, living in a less corrupt society, more freedom, the opportunity to earn better wages and the chance to remit money home to help out relatives left behind.

To arrive virtually alone leaves one in a vulnerable state. Sometimes trust is simply a matter of survival, of needing to have basic needs met. When an individual is in a critical situation he/she does not have the luxury of weighing the pros and cons of whom to trust. His/her options are limited. When one is an immigrant or a refugee and he/she finds himself/herself in a new country where the populous speaks a different language, may have a different culture, and may be hostile towards the individual, his/her options are even fewer. He/she simply has to trust those that he/she can. An immigrant will pull from his/her own cultural knowledge to make the determination of whom to approach.

All interviewees stated that during their time in America that they have attempted to gain information and resources through other immigrants like themselves. Upon arriving in the United States each approached strangers who were obviously of their ethnic origin to ask for assistance. Generally, they were greeted with people willing to help, but not always able. While Han believes his own people would not hurt each other, Manuel and other Hispanic interviewees make the claim that not everyone is trustworthy. Manuel stated that, "almost nobody helps unselfishly." However, all interviewees claim that they do their best to help others when they are asked. All groups state that they help others because they were given aid by someone else previously. They empathize with the commonality of the situation they share with other immigrants. They remember

well the feelings of fear, uncertainty, apprehension, and frustration from being a stranger in a strange land compounded by a language barrier.

Building New Networks

To reiterate Fukuyama (2001), social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes co-operation between two or more individuals. These norms are part of cultural capital. Cultural capital includes those norms, beliefs, and values that assign roles, confer status and determine entitlements and obligations of different social groups. (Poverty Reduction Strategies 1998: 13). Cultural norms and values are carried by individuals as they migrate from place to place. Taking risks by trusting strangers will eventually lead to the formation of networks and friendships among immigrants. Formal networks are formed by participating in religious services with other immigrants and patronizing stores and restaurants that cater to immigrants in their community.

For the interviewees, bridging social capital networks normally developed through English classes and job opportunities. The majority of all their interactions are within the immigrant community, for despite the number of years the interviewees have been in the United States, they know very few Americans. Instead of truly assimilating into American culture, they have reinforced their cultural identity by interacting primarily with other culturally similar immigrants. As Loizo (2000) states, immigrants and refugees may lose material and economic capital when they move to a new country, but their social identity normally survives. It is this social identity they use as capital to approach others whom they identify as like themselves.

Conclusion

Though immigrants and refugees may move to a new country where they may encounter cultural and language barriers, they do not lose or forget their cultural identities. Instead they tend to draw on their social intelligence to gather resources from individuals who are like themselves. Immigrants will tend to approach others who they see are of a similar racial profile or individuals who they hear speaking their native language to ask for assistance before relying on a native of the host country.

Newly arrived immigrants may often find themselves in situations where they are lacking language skills, material and/or financial capital. Through necessity they find they must risk trusting strangers to access the information or resources they need. They do not have the luxury of trying to find the most trustworthy person. They must instead trust those individuals with which they can

communicate.

Through interviews with immigrants in the United States I have found evidence supporting the idea that at times, individuals must trust because they have no choice, it is simply a matter of survival. Those interviewed have in turn willingly reciprocated being helped previously by helping other newly arrived immigrants. The reciprocity arises out of cultural constructs of a moral obligation to be their brothers' keeper. Not only empathizing with the situations new immigrants may face; they also feel that it is their duty to help others out because they were helped out of a similar situation in the past.

The willingness of immigrants to assist other immigrant strangers reinforces the idea that social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes the cooperation between two or more individuals. These immigrants are drawing on their cultural expectations of trust and reciprocity even though they are no longer in their home country. The social capital is their social and cultural intelligence that has moved with them into their new country.

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