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Prejudice toward Immigrants in the Midwest

The literature on contemporary immigrant-host relations in the United States has generally focused on large urban areas, yet during the past 10 to 15 years rural communities in many states experienced a large influx of immigrants attracted by job prospects in the food processing industry (Fennelly and Leitner 2002; Stull 1998; Griffith 1999; Fennelly 2005). In the Midwestern United States, especially, the relocation of meat and poultry processing plants out of urban centers into rural towns spurred the diversification of formerly white, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian origin communities. This movement was accelerated by business tax incentives, the proximity of water and grain supplies, and the opportunity to recruit non-union, low wage workers (Benson 1999; Cantu 1995; Fennelly and Leitner 2002; Griffith 1999; Yeoman 2000).

In the Midwest, most of those working on meat and poultry industry 'disassembly lines' are documented and undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America, though some towns also contain refugees from Africa and Asia. During the 1990s, foreigners moved to rural communities in such numbers that they helped reverse population losses of the previous decades (Minnesota Planning 1997). In some cases the arrival of large numbers of culturally different residents revitalized rural communities and led to the formation of pro-immigrant coalitions of

¹ Fieldwork for this study was conducted in collaboration with Professor Helga Leitner of the Department of Geography, University of Minnesota

local citizens and non-profit agencies; but in other cases immigration also led to xenophobia and prejudice among natives who perceived them as threatening competitors for resources, group identity, and power.

The relatively rapid change from predominantly white, European-origin populations to diverse communities with sizeable percentages of immigrants offers a natural laboratory for analyzing the perceived threats. In this chapter, I present qualitative data gathered in the summer of 2001 for a close-up view of the attitudes of U.S.-born residents toward immigrants in a rural town with a large meat processing plant. In doing so, I compare perceived symbolic and economic threats across three groups of Euro-Americans: Community Leaders, Middle Class citizens, and Working Class residents. Participants' own explanations of their attitudes are used to describe native sentiments within a context of rapid demographic change. The analysis sheds light on the nature of anti-immigrant prejudice and the kinds of public policies that might foster greater empathy.

BACKGROUND

Prejudice, broadly defined, is the acceptance of negative stereotypes that relegate groups of people to the category of "other" (Sniderman 1993). Racism is the extension of prejudice to an ideology or belief system that ascribes unalterable characteristics to the "othered" groups. Such belief systems are used to justify negative attitudes and social avoidance of out-groups (See and Wilson 1988). Prejudicial beliefs can also enhance a sense of positive group distinctiveness (Sniderman et al. 2004). Conversely, perceived threats to cultural unity are both a product of prejudice and a source of reinforcement for prejudicial beliefs.

Such “symbolic threats” to national identity have a long history in the United States. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they were kindled over concerns related to the integration of European immigrants (Castles 2003; Conzen et. al 1992; Nevins 2003). Higham (1955) describes how notions of racial superiority and exclusiveness that characterize racism were developed in the 19th century and emerged in the early 20th century as fully formed nativist ideology (p.131). Contemporary nativists compare the difficulties experienced by recent waves of immigrants—particularly Latinos— with the mythical success of previous generations of Euro-Americans (See, for example, Huntington 2004). These contrasts feed stereotypes that attribute to contemporary immigrants a lack initiative and talent. Both historically and currently, concern over perceived linguistic challenges to English as the national language constitutes an important component of immigrants’ symbolic threat—both as a determinant of prejudice and as a justification for pre-existing xenophobic attitudes.

A related symbolic threat in the Midwest is what might be termed “rural nostalgia:” the belief that demographic changes are a primary cause of the demise of pristine rural areas. Part of this nostalgia has to do with notions of ethnic solidarity, or what Tauxe (1998) describes as a “normative, self-reliant European-American community.” The sentiment is notably prevalent in rural areas where increases in immigrants coincide with other dramatic economic and social changes, such as losses of population, school closings, and the displacement of small and mid-sized farms by large agribusinesses (Fennelly 2002; Amato and Amato 2000). Rural nostalgia and xenophobia are fomented by anti-immigrant groups who couch their opposition to immigration in the cloak of social and environmental protection.

In addition to symbolic and linguistic threats and rural nostalgia, economic threats growing out of a perceived competition for scarce resources represent an important source of negative attitudes toward out-group members (Esses, 2001; Stephan et al., 1999; Fennelly and Federico, 2007). People viewing immigrants as a threat commonly view society as a “zero sum” competition in which resources are finite, so that gains by immigrants necessarily imply equivalent losses by natives. People of low socioeconomic status are most susceptible to the perception of immigrants as a competitive threat (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000). National surveys, for example, show that lower income, less educated adults in the United States are especially likely to believe that immigrants are a burden to the country and that they take away jobs from native-born Americans (Public Agenda 2000). Perceptions of economic threat are also particularly strong among those who adhere to a “Protestant Work Ethic” that attributes low status to a lack of self-reliance and hard work (Levy 1999; Reyna 2000; Esses 2001; Oyamoto, Borgida, and Fischer 2005). In contrast, persons of higher socioeconomic status feel less threatened by economic competition from immigrants and other minority group members (Burns and Gimpel 2000).

STUDY SITE AND METHODS

By the year 2000, more immigrants in metropolitan areas lived in suburbs than in cities (Singer 2004) and large numbers had moved into non-traditional gateway states, including Minnesota. Overall, the foreign-born population of Minnesota rose by 50% during the 1990s. Over the same period, the population of Latino origin increased by 166%--more than any other state in the Midwest, and almost three times the rate for the nation as a whole (McConnell 2001). Latinos, of course, include both native- and foreign-born individuals, although the distinction

may not be apparent to many white Euro-Americans. Mexicans have long come to the region as seasonal agricultural workers, but in recent years a strong economy and the availability of jobs in food processing and manufacturing led to a surge in their numbers (Fennelly and Leitner, 2002). By 2000, the state contained some 42,000 Mexicans and over 137,000 Spanish speakers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Mexicans constitute the largest share of foreign-born residents in both the nation (27.6%) and Minnesota (16%) (Migration Policy Institute, 2002).

Euro Focus Groups

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the causes of prejudice against Latinos and other immigrants in a rural community, we empaneled a series of focus groups in a town selected to meet the following criteria: a) the presence of immigrants of diverse origins; b) major ethnic-racial diversification within the past ten years; and c) the existence of a large meat processing plant. The community that we call “Devereux” fulfilled these requirements. It is a Midwestern community of 20,000, mostly white residents of European ancestry with a large meat packing plant that has expanded over the past decade, attracting hundreds of Latino, Asian and African workers. The meat plant is one of the major employers in Devereux but in the mid-1990’s most of the European-origin blue-collar workers (henceforth called “Euros”) left the plant after it was shut down and re-opened as a non-union shop³. At the time of our interviews 96% of the employees on the plant disassembly line⁴ were immigrants. The foreign-born population of the town included over 3,000 Latinos –predominantly from Mexico, about 250 Somalis, a similar number of Nuer people from Southern Sudan, and over 400 Asians—principally Cambodians and Vietnamese.⁵

The data on Devereux's Euros come from focus group conversations with three groups of older, white, U.S.-born residents who had lived in the community for at least ten years⁶-- long enough to have observed the demographic changes that are the subject of the study. Older residents were selected for the Euro groups because they have come to represent an increasingly large fraction of rural communities as Minnesotans age, and as younger white adults leave rural areas to seek employment in the cities.

Participants were assigned to one of three groups: Community Leaders (CL), Middle Classresidents (MC), and Working Classresidents (WC) on the basis of their employment and status in the community. Table 6.1 briefly profiles participants in these three groups, with each person assigned a pseudonym. Members of the Community Leader group were recruited through a list of town leaders provided by the head of the local Chamber of Commerce; Middle Class group members were recruited through community organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, the PTA, and the Rotary Club; Working Classparticipants were referred by a local resident who had run job retraining programs for former meat plant employees and by former employees themselves.

TABLE 6.1 ABOUT HERE

Each focus group was assigned two trained moderators—one to serve as the facilitator and the other as the note-taker. The moderators prepared verbatim transcriptions from tape recordings of the sessions. The transcripts, intake questionnaires, debriefing notes and observations were entered into the NU*DIST text analysis program, which was used to complement repeated close readings of the transcripts. Statements about immigrants and diversity were analyzed several ways. In the initial coding we evaluated each statement made

about an immigrant or groups of immigrants, categorized the nature of the comment (language, values, physical characteristics, etc.) and coded statements as ‘positive’, ‘negative’ or ‘neutral/mixed’. Two co-investigators and a graduate student did this coding independently, and later discussed and reconciled their discrepancies. We also kept coded information on each participant’s background characteristics.

After the initial coding, one of the investigators went back over the transcripts to make more refined distinctions among the various statements. This included coding ‘interjections’ – instances in which participants voiced the first positive or negative comment about immigrants in response to a neutral question, or which presented a view that differed from the previous speakers’ comments about immigrants. We did this because one of the risks of focus group discussions is the likelihood that individuals will be influenced by preceding positive or negative comments. We surmised that participants who volunteered the first positive or negative statement about immigrants in response to a neutral question were most likely to be voicing their own attitudes, rather than merely assenting to those of previous speakers.

The same might be said of participants who interjected opposing views to those of the previous speaker. For example, early in the Middle Classfocus group session, several individuals described their fear of going downtown because of the presence of immigrants. After several comments, one member disagreed, said “I think it’s your perception,” and went on to argue that immigrants congregated on the sidewalks downtown because they didn’t have suburban yards, adding “that’s where they live. They’re, you know, either that, or your choice is inside.” In the middle of this comment, a woman interrupted and said, “I live down at the north end of town and it’s scary down there...Sometimes...groups of maybe 10 go by my house and scream and yell

and it's very scary.” We coded the first person's statements in the preceding dialogue as the interjection of a positive comment about immigrants, and second person's as the interjection of a negative comment.

FINDINGS

Although members of the Community Leader (CL), Middle Class(MC) and Working Class(WC) focus groups were differentially recruited on the basis of position and reputation, the groups actually differed little in terms of background variables (see Table 6.2). The Community Leader group had a larger proportion of individuals with some college and with incomes over \$50,000, but these differences were not statistically significant. The mean age of participants in each group was over 50. This preponderance of older adults is characteristic of many rural communities where the lack of employment opportunities has led to an exodus of younger Euro-American residents to urban areas.

TABLE 6.2 ABOUT HERE

Before presenting qualitative data from each of the three focus groups, we summarize the number of positive and negative statements made by group members about immigrants, and the number of positive and negative “interjections” as defined above. As can be seen in Table 6.3, the three focus groups varied greatly in the relative number of positive and negative statements about immigrants, ranging from a ratio of 22:19 positive-to-negative among the CL group, to 58:70 in the MC group, to 75:113 in the WC Group. Thus, only Community Leaders made more positive than negative statements about immigrants, although they also made the fewest statements of either kind.

TABLE 6.3 ABOUT HERE

Conversations about changes in Devereux provoked a lengthy conversation about economic development on the part of the CL group, in contrast to the other two groups in which the question immediately elicited comments about immigrants. While the WC group clearly voiced the most negative opinions about immigrants, they also made the largest absolute number of positive statements. It may be that their greater proximity to immigrants in the workplace and low-income neighborhoods resulted in a greater variety and intensity of opinions. The three focus groups also varied in numbers of positive and negative interjections. The rank order of the ratio of positive to negative interjections for the three groups was the same as for the general comments described above: Community Leaders had fewer interjections but voiced more positive than negative opinions than other groups, 4:2, compared with 16:19 for the MC group and 5:15 for the WC group.

Community Leaders

Conversations in each focus group were initiated with a question about how long each member had lived in Devereux, followed by a general question that asked, “what are some of the changes that you all have observed in life and in work in Devereux over the past five to ten years?” Members of the Community Leader group were older, longer-term residents of the town and included a former mayor, a bank president, and a number of small business owners. Not surprisingly, their perspectives on immigration reflected their roles as entrepreneurs concerned with the economic vitality of the community. Their group discussion began with comments about the growth of the community, expansion of the interstate highway, competition for small business owners from Wal-Mart and other corporate chains, and the importance of business diversification in the town.

Members of the CL group were most likely to view ethnic and racial diversity as a generally positive “side-product” of economic growth. The first mentions of the topic came in the form of comments about the segmented labor market in which immigrants take jobs that U.S.-born residents eschew:

Phyllis: They fill a definite niche. There are some industries that Caucasians and young preppy college students aren't going to work in, and we need the economic base to be diversified.

Joe: I don't know how else to put this, but this white face is probably not going to work at the meat plant, and we have people willing to come to Devereux and to do the work; I'm willing to buy the meat and eat it but I have a lot of feeling for the people willing to take these jobs.

Immigrants were not perceived to pose direct economic threats to most CL group members, but a few expressed concerns about the effect of immigration on retail businesses. Gary, for example, worried that the presence of Mexicans and Somali immigrants downtown was scaring older, Euro-American customers away from his store, and Phyllis added that concentrations of immigrants were ghettoizing sections of the commercial area:

Phyllis: There is a housing problem because they don't have money to move to residential neighborhoods... The retail neighborhoods and trailer courts are becoming ghettos and this is not good.

Another participant expressed concern over more indirect economic threats in the form of negative influences on school budgets, property values, and business in general:

Matthew: I worry about the impact on school system. The state has a formula per student; the impact of providing ESL is huge on our community.

Overall, members of the Community Leader group made few statements that revealed symbolic threats, but close interactions between immigrants and members of the CL group were infrequent. Cheryl observed that, although she rented apartments to Sudanese and Somali residents, she has had little contact with them, and Matthew commented on the superficiality of the relationships between the US- and foreign-born:

Matthew: I'm going to use a difficult word; you just get along. I think the community gets along, but I don't think the community understands the various backgrounds. We've started a Diversity Center but the communication is painfully slow.

Middle Class Focus Group

Participants in the Middle Class focus group were all long-term residents of Devereux. The group included several older, white-collar workers and retirees who did not have college diplomas, as well as four members between the ages of 44 and 51 who were college graduates. In the MC group the introductory question on changes that participants had observed over the last five to ten years immediately elicited examples of symbolic threats. Fear of the unknown and nostalgia for a more homogeneous town population combined to foster negative attitudes toward immigrants among these Middle Class residents:

Sharon: We used to feel like we knew everybody. I mean, you used to walk around town and you could walk down [Main Street], and you knew everybody, you knew all of the faces. And now, you don't know all the faces and so, I think sometimes you feel a little

isolated, or maybe vulnerable, just because you're not familiar with that person's background.

Some of the MC group alternated positive statements about the changes in town with an acknowledgment of fear. Sue had taught English to immigrants in Devereux, and though she initially commented that the town had become “more exciting” now that there were new Latino and African businesses, she also admitted feeling afraid:

Sue: One time we did walk up this way... we walked really fast down [the main street] just simply because of the different nationalities, the Hispanics... we just didn't feel safe. Another participant interjected that there were no yards by the downtown apartments, and that this led many Latinos and Africans to congregate in the street in the summer. Others continued to dwell on perceived physical threats, sometimes drawing upon hearsay. Herb mentioned the high crime rate in a Texas town where his sister had lived as a reason for his concerns about Latinos in general. His description of “what look like very moral” Texas Latinos hiding weapons reveals a deep distrust that he transfers to Latinos in Devereux:

Herb: And so you see this, what look like very moral people, just like I see 'em here in town, and yet everybody's carrying a knife? Or something like that...well in the last five-ten years, it's very common that somebody gets stabbed or maybe two or three of 'em in one fight. So these are some of the things that are changing in that regard.

Rates of serious crimes in Devereux actually decreased over the five years prior to the focus group study, but innuendo and selective recall of crime and traffic accident reports mentioning immigrants contribute to the perception of increased crime:

Dale: There's more trouble in town too... Well, you look in the paper, you can see it in the paper. A lot of driving violations. A lot of fights and stuff like that. In other words, you kind of wonder about walking downtown Devereux at night.

One of the most prominent themes from the MC focus group was the symbolic importance of language as a means of defining membership in the community. English language proficiency was perceived, not as a skill, but as the reflection of core American values by the Middle Class Euro-Americans. The implication is that immigrants voluntarily chose whether or not to speak English, and that this choice indicates acceptance of American mores and the desire to be integrated into U.S. society. Immigrants who do not master English were portrayed as unwilling to be 'assimilated', as in this comment:

Jeff: The Mexicans—because there's quite a few of 'em— it's too easy for them to speak their own language. They are not gonna make the attempt. I think there's gotta be more pressure, from somewhere, to uh, learn.

Negative comments about immigrants who do not speak good English were most often directed toward Spanish-speakers. This may be because they represent the largest group of immigrants in Devereux. The use of Spanish was cited more than once as an example of deviousness—that Latinos who knew how to speak English were intentionally pretending not to understand or to be able to communicate in that language:

Herb: I think they've gotta put the right foot forward more than they do... a lot of 'em talk just as good a English as good as the rest of us. But you'd never know it....so, hey, come clean. If you talk English, talk English to me. If you don't, then learn.

These quotes are clear examples of internal attribution of responsibility for disadvantaged status. As Sue and Ed described it, immigrants who speak in their native languages are “creating their own isolation:”

Sue: If somebody's speaking Spanish or Somalian or whatever, and we don't know it, we can't, you know, if they're sitting down to coffee and conversing in Spanish...

Ed : And you're bein' mutually excluded, yup.

Sue: ...you're not gonna join in. So they're kind of creating their own isolation once again there.

After the last comment, the moderator asked, “so is it all about just learning English? What else, besides?” to which Dale and Jeff replied:

Dale: Culture, our culture. Blending with us, I think. You know, getting' away from their culture more or less, what they've had.

Jeff: I still think the quicker assimilation of these people is, the sooner, the quicker the better. They'll get along much better. They'll feel more comfortable.

Some speakers implied that immigrants were being given unfair preferential treatment that would not be accorded to the white Euros if their situations were reversed, as one woman articulated:

Vicky: Well I think they should learn English as fast as possible. If we went to Mexico or some place we'd have to learn Spanish right away or we wouldn't get very far.

Middle Class group members also made an implicit connection between communication skills and American values. In a fascinating response to the moderator's question about “what does it mean to be American?” Dale responded: “Don't be clique-ish,” and went on to elaborate:

Dale: You talk to people. Say hello. I notice it, I'm up in the morning early and they're walking down to the meat plant. I say good morning to 'em, some of 'em say hi and nod. The rest just keep on walkin'.

There seemed to be no awareness of the significant time and effort that many of the immigrants were investing in English language learning. Furthermore, English proficiency was viewed as the sole desired goal, with little support for bilingualism or retention of one's native language. To the Euro-Americans in this group, English language acquisition is seen as an essential step toward the "assimilation" of immigrants. In the words of one respondent: "instead of English as a Second Language it should be English as the First Language."

Like the CL group, members of the MC group described a pervasive segregation of immigrants into enclaves with little interaction with Euro-Americans:

Sharon: I feel like we have maybe three communities existing right here, and you know, we overlap at the grocery store or the gas station or whatever, but basically they kind of go to their little areas, and we kinda go to our little areas, and..

Moderator: What are the three communities?

Sharon: Well, actually there are probably more, but I mean you know, the European—the white Europeans—the Hispanic, and I would say the African. Because, like I said, I think that the Asians have really become almost part of the European...

Gary, who is married to a Latina, was one of the only members of the group who mentioned close friendships and interactions with immigrants—in this case Latinos. Other examples cited as friendships were generally neighborhood acquaintances or casual working relationships.

Unlike the CL, group where only a few members mentioned few economic threats or concern over immigrant use of public resources, several MC residents attributed lower school achievement and declining property values to immigrants, with Jeff and Dale's comments being typical:

Jeff: I was curious, back on some of the um immigrants that we have if they, the parents, support the kids in school. That's gotta be a problem, cuz you know schools get criticized because, well, their SAT scores and everything's down...uh we get criticized by the Governor and whatever, how the schools are not doing as well, and I think the immigration is bringing that down.

Dale: My opinion is the rentals, the houses, the real estate will go down. 'Cuz they have cars all over, and junk; they don't take care of the yards and stuff.

Jeff: A friend in town had a house for sale for I think over \$300,000. And unfortunately next door was a rental property with a, uh, Spanish Mexican family, and they had about three cars in the yard... it just looks bad. Three, two, cars with all covered in junk.

Dale: I hear a lot of people talk about the tax dollar, too. They don't wanna see the tax dollars spent teaching people how to read... I think that's definitely wrong, you know, but I do hear it. And I hear it downtown.

Assessments of immigrant initiative varied among MC group members. In these conversations Latinos or Mexicans were often singled out, and there were fewer references to Cambodian, Vietnamese, Somali or Sudanese immigrants. In the views of some participants, Latinos were hard workers, but with limited expectations and drive compared to Euro-Americans or Asians, as noted by Herb:

Herb: The good part of the Spanish working for the minimum wage area is they can live on it. They have less wants and so on, and so they're probably happier as workers than the locals.

Heidi: They [Hispanics] have a very different attitude towards education too...I think it has a lot to do with their economic status. I mean, to them, education is not as important as earning a living.

But Latinos are not always described as conforming to the American worth ethic. Jeff, for example, broadly characterized Mexicans as less reliable than Somalis.

Jeff: Some of 'em [Mexicans] don't even realize that, hey, you have to be on work on time and this kind of thing. You can come to work any time you want...Other, uh, other of the nationalities like the Somalians, I hear they're good workers.

Of all the Euros in the Middle Class group, only Ed appeared to recognize the diversity that exists within the various immigrant groups, as well as selection process that attracts low income Mexicans to the U.S. In the following statement he described the role of poverty driving many low income Mexicans to immigrate to the United States:

Ed: You obviously are not getting the elite of Mexico up here, from a standpoint particularly from finances - and education. So uh...you're getting a community here either that is very, very hard-working or sees an opportunity to work - or maybe not to work. Maybe they come up here and take advantage of another situation. And uh I've found both, ya know. I've had experience with people that I'd just soon not associate with, and people that I wouldn't mind livin' next door to.

Other examples of empathetic statements came from Euros with family members who were born in Europe. Although Herb was quoted earlier, demanding that immigrants speak English, he later recalled his own parents' struggles learning the new language:

Herb: I think it's important to remember, uh, we're in a big hurry here I think to integrate them into our society. My folks both came from Holland years ago, and they came through the same thing we're talking about here. When my older brothers and sisters started getting close to going to school, they were still talking Dutch at home.

At another point Jeff made a similar admission:

Jeff: I can compare...like, even my mother came over from Denmark. Couldn't speak a word of English when she came over, but she'd do housework and so forth. And uh, it was a struggle.

In addition to these empathetic expressions, there was open acknowledgment of Euro-American prejudice at several points in the conversation. At one point Dale directly acknowledged the existence of racism. After Sue's story of the isolation of her daughter's Somali classmate he stated:

Dale: I think it's us.... If you're white, you're prejudiced against the colored automatically, 'cuz you're born and raised [muffled], you can deny it.... Now there's two Irish people in town, immigrants that I got to know pretty well. No problem at all. They're white. But now, if they were black, or yellow or something else...I think there'd be a reservation there.

Working ClassFocus Group

The Working Classfocus group participants in our study had the closest contact with immigrants because they had worked in the meat processing plant with Mexican, Vietnamese, and Cambodian employees, and some lived in a trailer court with many immigrant neighbors. In spite of this high level of “exposure” to immigrants, their reactions convey deep prejudice and stereotyped attitudes. WC participants and many of their family members had worked at the Devereux plant in the early 1990s when workers were represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, before the closing and de-unionization of the plant and its subsequent shift to a predominantly immigrant workforce.

The subject of the plant closure naturally came up in the WC focus group. Somali immigrants were mentioned in this conversation, even though they were only recently arrived in Devereux and represented a small share of immigrants:

Andrea: [The company] is not there to support the town; they’re there to support their own pockets.

Daniel: Right.

Leanne: And the town let ‘em do it. I think that hurt a lot of people.

Daniel: They gave ‘em a bond to build a bigger [plant]. Well then they went downhill real quick. They busted the—they laid everybody off to bust the union. Now they gotta...they’re the ones that brought the Somolians in....Not a lot of people wanted to go back to work there after that.

A question about how Devereux had changed over the years immediately elicited nostalgic comments from the WC group members who described an idealized past and the ways that demographic change had altered it:

Andrea: You don't know your neighbors anymore.

Leanne: We had softball.

Daniel: Oh, you went outside? You played softball there in the summer?

Leanne: We played 'til dark. And you knew who lived in what house and when they were home ... and you'd go and walk in and talk to them.

Daniel: Oh, God, now you wouldn't wanna do it. You know.

Leanne: Even when [my son] wants to go play with a friend up at what we call the trailer court up there, I don't want him there, and the friend's white, I just don't trust him going up there. Again, it's a trailer court....

Andrea: When we were growing up, everybody was the same. This is something different coming in, so we don't know how to talk to 'em

The line between the image of a pristine countryside and its symbolic “pollution” by an influx of non-European immigrants becomes blurred in the focus group discussions:

Andrea: I don't mind the minority, just so, we're getting so overpopulated. There's nowhere to drive and see trees and stuff. ...

Lilly: You used to drive around the countryside...

Andrea: Yeah.

Lilly: ...and look at nice beautiful

Andrea: Leaves.

Lilly: Now there isn't.

Daniel: I mean, yeah, you'd go a mile and you'd see a farmhouse. Now you can go ten miles without seeing a farmhouse.

Andrea: Without seeing the trees too. [chuckles]

Daniel: Really changing.

Loss of jobs, over-population and the demise of a rural agricultural economy are thus fused with descriptions of immigrants. As Andrea stated clearly, “this is something different coming in.” Among members of the Working Class group, immigrants were generally described in stereotypic terms as an undifferentiated “Other,” receiving what were perceived as unwarranted advantages. Several of the members of the group had direct experience with welfare cuts themselves, but they had exaggerated notions of the benefits for which immigrants are eligible. In their minds all immigrants get long-term government help.

Andrea: They do get a tax break.

Daniel: That’s another thing. They don’t pay taxes for, what? Five to seven years?

Leanne: I think they changed it now. Three to five.

Daniel: Well, I think the government's going overboard with 'em. I mean, they should treat 'em all the same, whether they're Mexican or whatever, wherever they come from. They should all be treated the same. You know, whether they get kicked out of their own country, whether they wanna come over here. You know, but they shouldn't be treated better than we are. We're the ones that are payin' for what they're gittin. If they're gonna run around act like they're better than we are, we ain't gonna, we ain't gonna appreciate that at all.

Daniel’s comments are a clear statement of what some researchers have called the “modern prejudice belief system”(Levy 1999). As overt statements about the lesser abilities or characteristics of minorities are increasingly viewed as politically incorrect in the United States,

such views have been replaced assertions that discrimination no longer exists, and that minority group demands for economic and political power are unwarranted. In studies of white attitudes toward blacks, this prejudice is reflected in high levels of agreement with statements such as “over the past few years, the government and news media have shown more respect for blacks than they deserve” and “Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights” (Eberhardt and Fiske 1996:375).

On the one hand, immigrants are stereotyped as a “burden” on society—individuals who do not subscribe to a work ethic and who receive welfare and other “undeserved” state benefits. On the other hand, their potential economic and political success is simultaneously seen as threatening. This twin attribution is made explicit in the following conversation where economic and political power are both clearly viewed as zero sum games in which gains by immigrants threaten the majority status of white Americans.

Moderator: Can you imagine the different groups we're talking about becoming full-fledged members of the community?

Deborah: But I mean like as far as like, I don't know if that's what you meant, like becoming more in our community, but you think of School Board, and you think of City Council and you think of Chamber, and...

Deborah: Well, yeah, it would be kind of scary, but I mean I just can't imagine it would even happen like in the next 10 or 15 years. I would hope.

Leanne: It would be almost scary, yeah, I guess, that scary feeling they may change it...

Deborah: Well, I mean, maybe if enough of 'em all get here they could all vote them in...

Leanne: I still think we'd be kind of afraid that they wouldn't have our best interests at heart. That they'd have their group.

A concern over the potential loss of majority power is also implicit in this fragment of the discussion; the fear becomes explicit in the next statements:

Lilly: Yeah, but if they keep on bringing, bringin' 'em over here, as many as they are for the last five years, man where is everybody else gonna be? There's no homes for 'em now.

Deborah: I think that is, was one of the concerns that was brought up about how many more people are gonna be here before we...

Andrea: Get overpopulated.

Deborah: ...like I said, yeah, feel like the minority.

What is particularly revealing about several of the WC group participants is that they not only express fears and stereotypes of immigrants, but also recognize their prejudices. In the following conversation, Andrea, Leanne and Daniel compare contemporary stereotypes of immigrants with the racism directed toward African Americans that they learned while growing up. They openly acknowledge that immigrants are the 'new blacks'.

Andrea: But you always heard growing up—blacks are bad, they don't work, they work but they, you know, steal from ya, they steal ya blind.

Leanne: And you gotta be afraid of 'em cuz they will hurt ya.

Andrea: And now you're more afraid of the immigrants that are coming in instead of the blacks that we've had here. I don't know, it just seems like no one talks about black

people anymore. They must be okay and accepted now because there's somebody else not to like.

Daniel: [laughs] That's about it.

Andrea: You know? I s'pose it was the Indians before the blacks, I don't know.

Remarkably, these same individuals who openly articulate nativist attitudes and admit to racism also express the hope that their children will grow up without prejudice:

Daniel: Yeah, it is. Really. (Diversity) is good for the kids.

Leanne: You know, they're growing up not prejudiced.

Daniel: Well, it's gonna hurt and help both. I don't think they're gonna love 'em all. I mean they're gonna find out they're just like the white people, there's good, there's bad, ugly, there's cute.

This admission is one of several contradictions demonstrated by different Euro-Americans in our study, and even within the same individual. On the one hand, Daniel expresses anger and resentment toward immigrants who “shouldn't be treated better than we are.” On the other hand, he mentions going out for drinks with Vietnamese and Mexican co-workers and acknowledges that not all immigrants are the same, and that “just like white people, there's good, there's bad, ugly, there's cute.” These sentiments were echoed by other WC group members when at the end of their conversation the moderator asked ‘what do you think is the most important thing that we've talked about today?’

Daniel: It takes all kinds to make a state, or a city.

Andrea: Yeah, we believe there's good and bad...different nationalities within themselves.

Leanne: I think it's important too that, we, you know there's changes and our kids are accepting the changes.

Daniel: Gotta give 'em a chance.

Although tolerance and the importance of cross-cultural understanding were clearly not themes of the WC conversation, this is the summary statement that Daniel, Andrea and Leanne wish to make. It is interesting to question why positive statements about diversity are proffered in a group that has had no compunctions about revealing deep-seated stereotypes and negative attitudes toward immigrants.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

As rural Midwestern communities lose population, they offer incentives for the relocation and expansion of meat processing and manufacturing plants. The nature of the work and the demise of labor unions make the work unattractive for native-born residents, but the opportunities for steady, full-time work at wages well above the federal minimum wage, are a lure for documented and undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and for refugees from Africa and Asia. As Amato and Amato (2000) have noted, these newcomers arrive as strangers, and their primary motivation is to work. This all-consuming focus and their low levels of English language ability and education pose formidable challenges to community integration. Together, language barriers and socioeconomic class differences relegate many immigrants into a permanent category of outsiders. In Devereux, for example, some of the so-called 'newcomers' have lived in the community for over a quarter of a century.

Socioeconomic and language barriers reinforce existing status differences between U.S.- and foreign-born residents. In the words of Lamphere (1994), integration and change occur in

the context of specific institutions where newcomers and established residents interact and have differential access to power. Interactions between Euro-Americans and immigrants usually occur in formal settings where relationships are defined and circumscribed by role relations such as manager-worker, owner-tenant, or teacher-student. These scripted roles establish individuals of European-origin as the ones who hold the power and immigrants as those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Indeed, in the year of our focus group study, 96% of the jobs on the disassembly line in the Devereux meat plant were held by immigrants, and only 4% by Euro-Americans. In contrast, the Euros held jobs in management and administration, as supervisors, mechanics, or human resource specialists.

These power differentials are, of course, exacerbated by the undocumented status of many Latino workers, and by the fear and uncertainty regarding rights and expectations experienced by all immigrants, regardless of legal status. Given the social and economic disadvantages facing immigrants, it is ironic that middle and Working Class Euros perceive them to be strong economic and symbolic threats. This misplaced perception comes from ignorance about the day-to-day struggles of foreign-born workers.

The extent of interaction with immigrants varied greatly across the three focus groups and permitted us to reflect on the theoretical model first put forth by Gordon Allport (1954) over half a century ago. He hypothesized that proximity to out-groups would diminish perceived differences linked to prejudice. However, the combined implications of contact research and studies of the association between social class and prejudice are ambiguous regarding expected relations between Working Class native-born and foreign-born residents. It is Working Class whites who live and work in closest proximity to immigrants in rural communities; but

whites of low socioeconomic status are also perceive the greatest economic and social threat from immigrant workers. Working Class focus group members had often worked side-by-side with immigrants in the meat processing plant before being laid off, and they lived together with them in local trailer courts. Because they were closest to immigrants in economic and social status they felt most threatened by their presence. This finding underscores the complex effects of 'contact' on race relations

In towns with large meat processing plants the role of contact in promoting empathy may be reduced if white workers feel that they have been displaced by immigrants. Although a number of studies have shown that immigrants generally do not take jobs away from native-born American workers (Leitner, 2000), meat processing firms have implemented a strategy that entails relocating to rural areas, closing unionized plants, re-opening non-union plants and lowering wages to a level that attracts only immigrant workers. Competition is particularly evident when U.S.-born unionized workers are discouraged, or prevented from reapplying for jobs in the newly re-opened facility. In these settings, contact and proximity to immigrants are likely to produce conflicting attitudes among low-income white residents because they make the economic threat of foreign-born workers appear more immediate and more serious.

The end result is that many Euro-Americans may have friendly relations with some individual immigrants, while simultaneously harboring resentment and supporting broad negative stereotypes of groups. Such attitudes appear to be a manifestation of what a number of social scientists have described as 'ambivalence', or internalized conflict over racial policies. Alvarez and Brehm (1997), for example attribute such ambivalence in White attitudes toward African Americans to competing interpretations of the Protestant Work Ethic and humanitarian-

egalitarian orientations. In the case of the Working Class group in Devereux, ambivalence is exhibited by the juxtaposition of statements about the value of diversity with expressions of fear over undeserved benefits accorded to immigrants, and indignation (as articulated by Daniel) that “they shouldn’t be treated better than we are.”

As Hochschild (2006) has succinctly stated,

Americans find it very difficult to sustain their dedication to equality when it is defined as anything more robust than a thin equality of opportunity synonymous with liberty... People define their group as people like them in some crucial way, and they seek justice, here defined mainly as greater equality, for that group. They perceive those outside the group more dimly and care less about whether justice is done to them, or they sometimes perceive outsiders as threats or even enemies, who must be stalled or defeated in order for justice to be done (p44)

Although Daniel espouses the virtues of teaching his children to be more tolerant than he is, these statements are less convincing than his outrage over the perceived marginalization of his social group, and the perception that immigrants are “being treated better than we are”.

This conclusion corroborates the findings of other studies—that it is members of the lowest socioeconomic groups who feel most threatened by economic competition from immigrants or other minority groups (Burns and Gimpel, 2000).

Alvarez and Brehm (1997) distinguish between *ambivalence*, which cannot be resolved with additional information, and *uncertainty*. One senses that the Working Class objections to

immigrants stem less from concern that they violate the Protestant Work Ethic (as described by the Middle Class group), than from WC anger over their own marginalization. In contrast, the Community Leaders are elites whose principal concerns were economic development and diversification. They generally perceived immigrants as economic assets, by virtue of their role as laborers in expanding industries. From their isolated and privileged vantage points, few CL focus group members viewed immigrants as economic or symbolic threats. The Middle Class group, in contrast, included a majority of white collar workers who openly expressed fears toward immigrants, whom they perceived as both a physical menace and as a threat to the cultural and linguistic cohesion of the white majority. As blue collar workers and former employees of the town's meat processing plant WC members did not express the same fear of immigrants as the MC group, but they were vehement in their perceptions the foreign-born as a threat to white majority power and in their conviction that immigrants were receiving unwarranted advantages. These dual sentiments, first described by Myrdal (1944) almost half a century ago, are the result of an internal struggle between racism and internalized notions of socially desirable behavior. They are also the logical result of socialization in a society that sanctions and promotes negative stereotypes of immigrants, while simultaneously lauding equal opportunity and the "American Dream."

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FOOTNOTES

3. In the early 1990s the plant employees belonged to the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). In 1992 management asked the union to make wage concessions, but the UFCW refused. In December of 1993 the company closed the Devereux plant and many employees left to find other jobs. The plant was re-opened the following month, but when the union contract expired at the end of that year, neither party opened negotiations. Large numbers of immigrant employees were hired to work on the disassembly line. In January, 1995 existing employees voted to decertify the union. Production expanded in the following years, and by 2001 (the year of our study), the plant had added a second shift and employed about 600 workers. In that year 96% of the disassembly line workers were immigrants.
4. The animal carcass is cut up for packaging in what is called a disassembly or evisceration line.
5. These estimates are based on a combination of census data and reports from agencies and churches serving immigrant groups.
6. The exception was one resident who had lived in Devereux for six years.
- 7.

Table 6.1. Descriptions of the ‘Euros’ interviewed in Devereux focus groups.

<u>Group and Respondent</u>	<u>Description</u>
Community Leader Group	
Joe:	White male in early 70’s; some college; retired from business management job. Born and raised in Devereux. Married to Elizabeth. Has an adopted daughter born outside of the U.S.
Elizabeth:	White female in early 60’s, retired from White collar job; some college; lived in Devereux for most of her life; Has an adopted daughter born outside of the U.S.
Gary:	White male in his early 50’s; small business owner; married to an immigrant
Cheryl:	White female in her early 50’s; small business owner; has lived in Devereux for over 30 years.
Phyllis:	White female in her early 60’s; college graduate; small business owner; lived in Devereux for most of her life; married to a European immigrant.
Ron:	White male in his mid-60’s; some college; business manager; born elsewhere in the Midwest, but grew up in Devereux
Matthew:	White male in his mid 50’s; White-collar service job; some college; born elsewhere in Midwest; long-term resident of Devereux. Worked in meat processing plant while in high school.
Middle Class group	
Sue:	White female in mid 40’s; college graduate; office worker; born elsewhere in Midwest; long-term resident of Devereux; has taught English to immigrants
Dale:	White male in late 60’s; some college; born and raised in Devereux; currently works part-time in retail
Herb:	White male in mid 60’s; small business manager; HS graduate; born and raised in Devereux; parents were immigrants from W. Europe
Jeff:	White male in mid-70’s; some college; born and raised in Devereux; retired from a White collar job; mother was an immigrant from W. Europe
Sally:	White female in mid-60; no HS diploma; worked in meat plant for 15 years and in childcare; currently retired; born and raised in Devereux.
Vicky:	White female in mid-70; HS graduate; currently retired from work as secretary; born and raised in nearby town.
Ed:	White male in early 50’s; college graduate; owner of retail business; born elsewhere in Midwest; long-term resident of Devereux; married to Heidi
Heidi:	White female in late 40’s; college graduate; school teacher; born elsewhere in Midwest; long-term resident of Devereux; married to Ed.
Sharon:	White female in early 50’s; college graduate with some graduate school; part-time store clerk; lived in Devereux most of her life.

Table 6.1. Continued.

<u>Group and Respondent</u>	<u>Description</u>
Working Class group	
Lilly:	White female in early 60's; did not graduate from HS; has worked various low wage, part-time jobs; born and raised in nearby town; long-term resident of Devereux; worked at meat plant for 20 years; currently retired.
Leanne:	White female in late 30's; has an associate degree; blue collar worker; born and raised in Devereux; Worked for many years at meat plant; Lives in trailer court; has relative married to a Mexican; sister of Andrea.
Andrea:	White female in early 40's; college graduate; commutes to small town outside of Devereux for blue-collar work; born and raised in Devereux; lives in trailer court; sister of Leanne.
Deborah:	White female in mid 50's; some college; commutes to another town for blue-collar work; born elsewhere in Midwest; long-term resident of Devereux.
Daniel:	White male in early 60's; did not finish high school; born and raised in nearby town; moved to Devereux 6 years ago; currently unemployed; previous work in food processing plant supervising Mexican and Asian workers.

Table 6.2. Comparison of the characteristics of members of the three European-origin focus groups.

Variables	Community Leaders	Middle Class	Working Class
Education			
High School or Less	14.3%	44.4%	40.0%
Post Secondary	85.7	55.6	60.0
Income			
<\$50,000	40.0	55.6	80.0
\$50,000+	60.0	44.4	20.0
Marital Status			
Married	77.8	100.0	80.0
Divorced or Single	22.2	0.0	20.0
Gender			
Male	57.1	44.4	20.0
Female	42.9	55.6	80.0
Age			
Mean Age	59.7	60.0	51.6

Table 6.3. Number of positive, negative, and empathic evaluative comments made about immigrants in Euro-American focus groups.

Groups and Respondents	Positive Statements	Positive Interjections	Empathetic Statements	Negative Statements	Negative Interjections
Community Leaders					
Joe	5	1	3	2	1
Elizabeth	6	0	0	3	0
Gary	1	0	0	3	0
Cheryl	1	1	3	3	0
Phyllis	3	1	2	1	0
Ron	0	0	0	1	0
Matthew	6	1	10	6	1
Total	22	4	18	19	2
Middle Class					
Ed	9	5	16	6	0
Heidi	5	0	3	4	1
Sue	4	1	4	10	3
Dale	6	1	5	28	6
Herb	9	2	3	7	4
Jeff	6	2	3	4	1
Sally	3	0	0	8	4
Vicky	9	3	1	3	0
Sharon	7	2	4	0	0
Total	58	16	39	70	19
Working Class					
Lilly	17	0	3	26	4
Andrea	10	3	3	35	6
Deborah	10	1	0	27	0
Leanne	19	0	3	25	3
Daniel	19	1	3	39	2
Total	75	5	12	113	15
Grand Total	155	25	69	101	36

NOTE: Positive and negative interjections are instances in which participants offered the first positive or negative comment about immigrants in response to a neutral position, or presented a view that contradicted the previous speakers comment.