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We Welcome the New Immigrants

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WE WELCOME THE NEW IMMIGRANTS

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From the very beginning of this project we have focused on taking a balanced approach to identifying the strengths and challenges of new immigrants in the Great Plains. Discussions of change in our world invariably focus on problems, and only occasionally on the strengths. We set out to look at new immigrants from a different perspective, in our view, a more realistic perspective: seeing the inherent strengths they possess as newcomers to our region and the gifts they bring, and examining the cultural assets the newcomers and the longer-term residents all can rely upon in working together to meet the inevitable challenges that an influx of new people brings to our world.

What, then, have we learned about the new immigrants and the new immigrant families to the Heartland? What challenges do they face in their journey to create a safe, prosperous, and harmonious new home for themselves and their loved ones and friends? What strengths do they possess to accomplish these goals? What gifts do they bring to our region? Let's go back to the original questions posed by the authors, and discuss what we have learned.

How can Great Plains communities make sense out of the migration of the world's refugees to their communities?

John Gaber, Sharon Gaber, Jeff Vincent, and Darcy Boellstorff analyze refugee settlement patterns in the Great Plains and remind us of what we gain economically from these new neighbors. Though refugees have immigrated to a new country, the investigators take the position that they are qualitatively different from immigrants, because immigrants may voluntarily choose to move, while refugees are involuntary newcomers.

Only nine countries today accept quotas for refugees on an annual basis: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United States. The United States takes the most refugees each year among those that have a yearly quota system. The Great Plains constituted a little more than 13% of the total US population in 2000, but resettled about 9% of the nation's refugees that year. The top four countries of origin of refugees resettled in the Great Plains are Vietnam, the former USSR, Vietnam Amerasians, and the area formerly called Yugoslavia.

Resettling refugees, while done in the spirit of international goodwill, brings distinct economic benefits to the host country and state. Using Lincoln, NE, as a case study, the investigators focused on a multi-ethnic economic enclave that has developed along North 27th Street in the city of 225,000. They list three economic benefits from this multi-ethnic economic enclave: the entrepreneurs supply goods and services to newly resettled refugees in the community; the enclave has created a vibrant international marketplace experience for nonethnic citywide consumers, giving Nebraska residents a chance to experience people, tastes, and cultures from around the world; and finally, the enclave has revitalized an older and dying retail corridor. New ethnic businesses brought life to a decaying area. The Lincoln case study demonstrates that refugees often put down roots and thrive economically.

What aspects of ethnic minority culture serve to promote prosocial behavior among young people?

Researchers Maria Rosario T. de Guzman and Gustavo Carlo defined prosocial behavior as behaviors primarily intended to benefit others. They found, first of all, and consistent with earlier research, that peer attachment positively predicted prosocial behavior. The quality of adolescents' peer relationships has important implications for social development and adjustment.

Second, de Guzman and Carlo found that family adaptability was positively related to prosocial tendencies, but neither cohesion nor parent attachment were. Earlier research on majority US samples of adolescents had shown that positive development is promoted by parental warmth and reasonable levels of structure or demands placed on the child. De Guzman and Carlo found, however, that family adaptability, rather than a sense of family closeness, was a better predictor of prosocial behavior tendencies. The researchers said this could be explained by Latino families' valuing of interdependence and an orientation toward the family. Many Latino families tend to rely on each other for support, and even young children are likely to participate in household tasks and caring for younger siblings. Immigrant families who often experience socioeconomic difficulties and other challenges living in a new culture rely on adaptive strategies, including role flexibility, to meet these difficulties successfully.

And third, de Guzman and Carlo found that higher levels of adapting to the majority culture were associated with lower levels of prosocial tendencies. Earlier research had found that Latino youth tend to have higher levels of cooperativeness and prosocial behavior, and that identifying with their ethnic culture can serve as a positive factor in their development. De Guzman and Carlo suggested that as Latino youth' traditional values come in contact with the values of the majority culture in the Great Plains, an orientation toward the good of the group and cooperativeness might give way to individualism and competitiveness in order to achieve success, as defined in Great Plains majority culture.

De Guzman and Carlo concluded that aspects of Latino culture may help promote positive social outcomes, and Latinos bring particular strengths that serve as protective factors contributing to the developmental success of young people.

The qualities of cooperation and closeness that Latino immigrant families bring to the Great Plains fit well in a Heartland society that has long been proud of a warm, generous, and welcoming spirit. In fact, we have good reason to believe that their focus on family and a cooperative approach toward living will strengthen our communities.

How do new immigrant families in the Great Plains perceive their strengths and the acculturative stresses they face?

A team of immigrants from the People's Republic of China, Xiaolin Xie, Yan Xia, and Zhi Zhou, combined to better understand immigrant

Chinese family strengths and the challenges they face upon entering a new culture. More than two million Chinese Americans live in the US, making them the largest Asian immigrant group in this country. The demographics of the Chinese Americans have shifted from rural to urban and from nonprofessionals to professionals over the years.

The family strengths perspective posits that it is important to ask not only “Why do families fail?” but also “How do families succeed?” By focusing on strengths, we develop a more balanced picture of individuals and family life, and learn how families use their strengths to effectively meet the inevitable challenges of life.

One such challenge is acculturation stress, which is an individual’s negative response to perceived conflicts in values, attitudes, and behavior between the home culture and the host culture. Acculturative stress can last for a lifetime, be pervasive in one’s life, and intense. The challenge for the newcomer is how to simultaneously maintain one’s former cultural identity—not give up the individual’s identity—and at the same time participate effectively in the host culture. Through this process of stress-adaptation-growth, an immigrant over time can become no longer monocultural but bicultural. Examined in this light, the internal conflicts generated by immigration can be a positive factor leading to an individual’s personal growth and psychological development.

In their interviews, the researchers found five major themes related to family strengths: (1) family support leading to achieving a renewed sense of family; (2) contextual support from friends and community; (3) communication among family members; (4) spiritual well-being; and (5) the ability to balance the host and heritage cultures. Themes related to acculturative stress included: (1) language barriers at the early stage; (2) loneliness; and (3) loss of social status and identity.

The researchers concluded that in many ways the group of immigrants managed to achieve cultural assimilation while simultaneously maintaining strong ethnic attachments to their home country. The immigrants adopted the new language, customs, and other cultural practices of the host culture, and preserved their identity as Chinese. To varying degrees, they had in essence created a bicultural identity.

What is the impact of the new immigrant population on small communities? How do longer-term residents perceive the effects of the new immigrants in terms of community changes, community benefits, and strategies for strengthening multi-ethnic rural communities?

Two articles in this issue complement each other extraordinarily well, and will be discussed together. From the perspective of community planners, James Potter, Rodrigo Cantarero, X. Winson Yan, Steve Larrick, and Blanca Ramirez-Salazar looked at the effects of a drastic population increase in a small town after the construction of a new beef packing plant. From the perspective of family scientists, Rochelle L. Dalla, Francisco Villarruel, Sheran C. Cramer, and Gloria Gonzalez-Kruger examined the same small town plus two other meatpacking communities. The findings of both studies are worth recounting in our search for ways to promote positive social change in small rural communities stressed and stretched by rapid growth.

The community planners interviewed long-term residents and Latino newcomers, and present a balanced view of the effects of dramatic population growth in Schuyler, NE, a city of about 4,000. In a decade the community grew perhaps as much as 20%. The research team reported that because of the recent influx of Latinos, ethnic tensions were not completely absent in the relatively homogeneous community made up of residents with German, Czech, Irish, and other cultural roots. And, neither the long-term residents nor the newcomers were accepting of each other without some hesitation. But over time the citizens began to realize that a better way to deal with the recent population influx was to do what their ancestors did in the last century: work together to establish a community of differences. This new heterogeneous community just might make the city even more livable in the future.

The family science team interviewed non-Hispanic white residents in Schuyler and two other Nebraska communities: Norfolk, with 33,000 people, and Madison, with 2,300 people. Perceptions of community change, communitywide benefits of the new Latino population, and strategies for strengthening multi-ethnic rural communities were documented. Changes included the perception of changing demographics in the communities, or so-called white flight; overcrowded schools; housing shortages; and geographic unity with cultural distancing.

Assets or benefits the immigrant newcomers brought included economic relief and cultural diversity, or exposure to different life experiences, value systems, and languages. The majority of white respondents perceived that the newcomers placed a special emphasis on "family," and they appreciated this. Immigrants were also seen as having a strong work ethic and the ability to succeed at difficult jobs to make a living for themselves and their families.

Strategies for strengthening multicultural rural communities included: (1) using communitywide multicultural education to improve residents' understanding of the newcomers' cultures and challenges; (2) focusing on children, youth, and schools, the most effective vehicle for providing and disseminating multicultural education; and (3) involving the packing plants in helping to better integrate the newcomers into the community.

The community planners and the family scientists concurred that the strengths of all the members of these growing and changing communities could be tapped in a collective effort to meet the challenges inherent in population growth and heterogeneity, while at the same time benefiting from these changes.

What are the key concerns of new immigrants and human-services providers, and how can an integrated service model be developed to meet these needs?

Investigators James B. Wirth and Susan C. Dollar help answer this question with data from surveys of Latino adults, Latino youth, and human-services providers in multiple rural cities and towns throughout southwest Missouri. Latino adults and youth identified language barriers, legal and documentation issues, a lack of job availability, and nonacceptance in the broader community as key concerns. Human-services providers identified language barriers, a lack of understanding of cultural differences, a lack of funds to develop culturally appropriate services, and a lack of job availability for Latinos with lower formal education as significant problems.

Despite significant financial, cultural, and linguistic barriers, Wirth and Dollar note obvious strengths in the Latino community that should be recognized when attempting to assess needs and develop programs to meet these needs. Latino individuals and families endure financial hardship, loneliness, and uncertainty that come with relocating and readjusting to a new culture and new community. But in Latino culture, as in Anglo and other cultures, people tend to rely on their families and others in their ethnic group for advice and social support. This asset emerges as a central theme in a strengths perspective, an emphasis on a distinctive trust for the clients' views and the clients' ability to gain resources on their own, as well as a respect for indigenous support and self-sufficiency whenever possible.

Wirth and Dollar believe that this cultural bond, shared by Latinos and traditional American culture, lays the foundation for the development of plans to improve integrated service systems for rural communities. This

work can be done at the community level through interagency coalitions, regionalizing organizations, participation on the boards of other community organizations, and joint fundraising activities. The researchers believe service integration and culturally competent practices for improving access to basic services for Hispanics—a “one-stop” service system—would improve access to health care, food and housing assistance, education, employment services, and legal aid. And it could be created by people of the various cultures, who share similar values, working together toward a common goal.

Do the media present an accurate portrait of new immigrants to the general public?

From the evidence that Mary S. Willis and Constance J. Fernald provide, improvements could be made. The researchers analyzed eight Nebraska newspapers on how they cover the story of Sudanese refugees in their communities. They found that native Nebraskans living in any city, large or small, are likely to learn a limited amount about Sudan’s traditional cultures or tribes after reading newspapers. In some cases, inaccurate information was printed, contributing to less favorable feelings toward Sudanese refugees and immigrants as a whole. Educating the host community can help limit resentment and prejudice about why the newcomers are in the Great Plains, the desperate conditions some have escaped, and why they deserve assistance.

Dismayed by print media limitations in terms of educating the general public about the Sudanese, and the lack of federal- or state-facilitated educational programs for educating the Sudanese about Western culture, Willis and Fernald cite positive efforts by some church groups and individuals who are volunteering as mentors for Sudanese refugees. The volunteers have learned that they must teach the newcomers about US culture, technology, and the economy, because almost every detail of American life needs some learning and adjustment.

The fascination and the frustration of coming to a new home is the inescapable fact that everything is to some degree different (language, food, customs, music, and on and on). Some of the differences are rather small—Kansas isn’t all that different from Oklahoma. And some are huge—leaving Sudan for Nebraska must feel like touching down on another planet. Because of this fact, trusted cultural guides are essential if the newcomers are to feel secure and welcome and comfortable. This is true both for people coming to America, and true for Americans when we go abroad. If we expect

to be welcomed when we travel to other countries, we need to learn how to be welcoming here at home. It is, thus, essential that our media get the story right so that the natives and the newcomers understand each other better.

How do women from so-called patriarchal cultures adapt to gender equality and feminism as they are perceived in the Great Plains?

How do women from Eastern Europe change as a result of living in what can seem to be a gender-neutral environment? Nanda Dimitrov did a fascinating job of identifying major cultural differences that newcomers perceive between gender-related norms in Eastern Europe and the American Heartland. She examined the strategies used in adapting to these differences, and noted when encounters with American feminists help and when they hinder the immigrant women's process of adaptation. Ms. Dimitrov believes the newcomers get caught in an American battle between the sexes in which they are reluctant to take sides.

Newcomers from Eastern Europe come from cultures in which the position of women is ambiguous: they receive preferential treatment in some situations while they are discriminated against in others. Two themes dominate gender dynamics there: the validation of women's identity in every interaction through politeness, and the clear separation of male and female roles. The home culture is patriarchal, evoking to westerners an image of dominant men and submissive women, but in Eastern Europe this is not entirely the case. Though it is true men are dominant in many situations, deference toward women is also common. A man would be considered rude and uneducated if he were not polite to a woman, opening the door for her, offering his hand for support getting off a bus, paying the bill when they go out together, and so forth. Western feminists might see this as men viewing women as weak. Eastern women would see the same behavior as a validation of their gender identity as a woman, and the recognition that they are valued for being a woman.

Margaret Mead was fond of saying that she went alone to the South Seas as a young, adventurous, rule-breaking woman in the 1920s so that she could learn more about Indiana. She wanted the Pacific islanders to hold up a mirror so that she could better examine and understand her home. The fascination of Ms. Dimitrov's observations is how they hold a mirror up to American culture as it is evolving. Are the Eastern European women telling us that we are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater? In our efforts over the past four decades to ensure equality for women, are we in

danger of taking some of the zest, excitement, and passion that comes from being different as males and females? Is there some workable middle ground that upholds individual rights, recognizes gender differences in those who yearn to appreciate them, and sees that people gain power in their culture in a wide variety of ways?

Women coming to the Great Plains from so-called patriarchal societies will learn some new ways to think about male-female relationships, and in turn, they will also teach us some new ways of thinking.

How do new immigrants meet the challenge of learning a new language? What strengths do they demonstrate in this process?

Learning a new language is no simple task, and it gets harder and harder to do the older one gets. Connie R. Schomburg, a dedicated English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, does a commendable job discussing the struggles and strengths of adult learners as they grapple with “survival English.” Schomburg’s ESL students range in age from 18 to 78, come from all around the world, and have a variety of motivations for learning English: to get a job; to advance in a job they already have; to help their kids with homework; to be able to talk with neighbors, make friends, and interact more comfortably in the community. Some never learned to read or write in their home country and are determined to learn here. Others seek a high school equivalency degree or to achieve citizenship.

They face significant challenges in their efforts to learn a new language: many are juggling job and/or family responsibilities in their efforts to attend class; others must overcome objections to their further education from spouses or other family members. Many come to the three-hour-long classes after working eight- to ten-hour shifts and must find even more time to study at home. And, speaking of home, most speak little English at home, and Schomburg’s classroom provides one of the few places where they can practice their newfound skills. The greatest challenge, she believes, is fear: fear at being laughed at or considered ignorant; fear of the resistance they may face from their families; fear of prejudice in the community.

Still, they come to class, they listen carefully, try very hard, and develop a social support network with each other, sharing recommendations about food stores, restaurants, job opportunities, and other insights into their new community. The help they give is both cross-generational and cross-cultural, Schomburg notes, telling of friendships developing between older and younger, easterner and westerner and northerner and southerner.

They accept each other and are most willing to work together. And, she notes, they consistently display the strength of good humor that promotes an engaging and productive classroom environment. They laugh together.

When Willa Cather wrote years ago about some of “old immigrants” to the Great Plains—the Europeans that came here in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—she told with great respect about their hard work and rich traditions. Schomburg believes that like those who came before them in the successive waves of immigration to the shores of our sea of grass, the most recent immigrants also display the qualities Cather valued so highly: sturdy traits of character, elasticity of mind, an honest attitude toward the realities of life, and certain qualities of feeling and imagination. She believes that these considerable capacities will undoubtedly lead to their success in our midst.

And, we know we’ll have made it—we’ll know the process of connection and growth together will have succeeded—when we have learned to laugh together, the old immigrants and new immigrants to the Great Plains.

What does a successful new immigrant look like? How do Heartland values of friendliness, openness, and fairness contribute to this success?

Finally, Jane Meehan tells the story of Mostafa (“Moe”) Jamshidi, a successful Iranian American engineer. The narrative traces Mostafa’s life in the Great Plains for 25 years from the time he was a new immigrant to the time, today, when he could be termed, perhaps, a middle years immigrant. It is a compelling story of the dedication, intellect, and spirit necessary to navigate the challenges a new immigrant faces. The story is especially moving because Meehan, a Heartland native, writes from the perspective of being Moe’s “surrogate mother and English teacher.”

Moe left his homeland, which was torn by years of dictatorship, war, and angry religious fundamentalism, and survived the drama and difficulties of immigration bureaucracy red tape and legalistic wrangling; geopolitical crises; language and culture differences; homesickness and unhappiness; falling in love and marrying Rhonda, an Iowa farm girl; parenthood; and a career as a highway engineer for the Nebraska Department of Roads.

He remains thankful he has found a home in the American Heartland. He has concluded that he just happened to live at the right time in history—a time when there were openings for immigrants from Iran—and he was lucky enough to be granted an opportunity to come to this country, in

essence, an opportunity to succeed in a world where success was possible. The Great Plains, with its friendliness, openness, and fairness, proved fertile ground for the young Iranian engineer. Meehan makes it clear that he has repaid us time and time again with his energy, effort, professional skills, and buoyant spirit.

For years we in the Heartland have been endlessly discussing our fears as we witness countless stewards of the land leave their farms and ranches, as small towns wither and die, and vast areas of the Great Plains undergo drastic depopulation. What will the future bring? We deride easterners who talk of a vast buffalo commons, and we search for effective ways to inject new juice into a social landscape that some perceive as drying up.

And then, perhaps just in the nick of time, along comes Mostafa Jamshidi and countless men and women and children like him. The new life they bring may be a significant answer to the question we pose about our future. The new immigrants are likely to help us by their coming as much as we are likely to help them by offering a gracious welcome.

Conclusion

The story of the Great Plains is the story of the world. A story of immigration and immigrants, a story of mothers and fathers and children. Real people, not statistics. Wave upon wave of human beings have crisscrossed the Heartland through the millennia. Each of us, deep down, is an immigrant. Some of us have roots that go down a bit deeper than others, but all of us are likely to have ancestors from somewhere else, whether we can trace them back or not.

In an important sense, today is no different from yesterday. A stream of newcomers arrives, bearing gifts of energy, hope, and new ways of looking at the world for the longer-term residents to consider. We look across the cultural divide that separates each from the other, sometimes amazed at the creativity and strength of the people on the other side, sometimes dismayed or puzzled by the new people in our midst.

And just as our ancestors did in generations past, we adapt to one another. Each person, slowly, steadily, in a pace that is almost imperceptible, begins the wonderful process of cultural change and growth. The newcomers slowly change to meet the culture they find here, and the life-long natives—those whose families have been here for a generation or two or three—slowly learn to appreciate the gifts and values the newcomers bear. In due time, we find as human beings, we are wonderfully different,

while deep down very much the same. And our Great Plains is the better for it.

A strengths-based approach to looking at the new immigrants to the Great Plains has proven to be a useful and accurate way of assessing the contributions these newcomers are making to our communities, and it gives us a blueprint for action as we strive to create welcoming communities that work to the advantage of everyone. There is good reason for hope.

Suggested Readings

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