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Stress, Status, and Sociability: Exploring Residential Satisfaction in the Rural Midwest following Rapid Immigration

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Abstract

This investigation examined predictors of residential satisfaction among newly arrived residents (NAR) and long-term residents (LTR) of a rural community following a rapid influx of immigrants into the community. The physical environment, social/cultural aspects of life, and resources and public services were hypothesized to affect perceptions of residential satisfaction. Both LTR and NAR were pleased with environmental attributes, sociocultural attributes, and public services. An inverse relationship was revealed between stress and residential satisfaction. The primary sources of stress for LTR related to economics and social status issues, whereas the primary sources of stress among NAR involved issues concerning family and friends.

Keywords: Latino, Rural, Residential Satisfaction, Environmental Attributes, Newly Arrived Residents, Stress

From 1990 to 2000 the United States showed a considerable increase in its Latino population (Census Bureau, 2000). Interestingly, during that time many Latino immigrants diverged from their traditional destinations on the East and West Coasts and opted instead to settle in the midwestern and southern regions of the country. In the Midwest, some regions found their Latino populations growing by more than 100 percent (Census Bureau, 2000). This remarkable increase in the Latino population is clearly seen in Nebraska where over one half ($n = 56$) of the state's ninety-three counties experienced significant growth (> 100 percent) in their Latino populations (Census Bureau, 2000).

Due to these dramatic increases in immigrant populations, many small, rural communities in the Midwest have seen significant increases in the size and scope of their citizenry. These historically homogeneous communities have found their population changing from an almost entirely Anglo populace to a diverse blend of ethnic groups (Census Bureau, 2000). The vast majority of this change in the Midwest is due to the large influx of Latino immigrants that has come to these communities in search of work in the local food-processing plants (Baker & Hotek, 2003; Dalla & Christensen, 2005; Grey, 1999; Grey & Woodrick, 2002; Stull, Broadway & Griffith, 1995). While this surge in immigration has injected life into sluggish, rural economies, many of these small communities find themselves struggling socially and culturally with the rapid changes they are experiencing (Baker & Hotek, 2003; Dalla, Villarruel, Cramer & Gonzalez-Kruger, 2004). As Anehensel (1992) has noted, increased levels of perceived personal and interpersonal stress are endemic among the residents of areas undergoing dramatic change.

A number of qualitative studies have been done to explore community residents' individual perceptions of, and responses to, this rapid in-migration (Dalla et al., 2004; Dalla & Christensen, 2005; Grey & Woodrick, 2002; Hernandez-Leon & Zuniga, 2000). In a study conducted by Dalla and colleagues (2004), they explored perceptions of long-term community residents concerning community change related to immigration; however, the views of the newly arrived community residents were not examined in this study. In a separate study, Dalla and Christensen (2005) examined the community perceptions of the immigrant residents in rural communities, but there was no comparison done between the views of these more newly arrived community residents and the long-term community residents.

While these studies have been helpful in providing information about the feelings and opinions of individual community residents, a more objective measure of community residents' perceptions concerning community changes is necessary to lay a foundation for future research. At present, there is a dearth of quantitative studies exploring both newly arrived and long-term rural community residents' perceptions of their communities following massive immigration. Additionally, except for Dalla, Cramer, and Stanek (2002), previous studies have not compared the similarities and differences in the perceptions of the newly arrived community residents and the long-term community residents regarding the quality of life in their community. Although Dalla et al. (2002) suggest that long-term community residents and immigrant newcomers are more alike than different; we suspected there might be some significant differences in perception, as well. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of residential satisfaction to gain insight into how immigration affects newly arrived residents and long-term residents differently.

Residential Satisfaction

Defining and measuring residential satisfaction has been the subject of much research since the concept's inception in the 1940s (Anderson & Weidemann, 1997; Barcus, 2004; Davies, 1945; Galster & Hesser, 1981; Marans, 2003; Sikorska-Simmons, 2001; Sirgy, Rahtz, Cicic & Underwood, 2000). As a measure, satisfaction taps into the perceived wellbeing of an individual and, as such, has been examined from many diverse perspectives. It has been defined as an attitude (Francescato, Weidemann & Anderson, 1986), and as a measure has been considered as affective (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Marans & Rodgers, 1975), cognitive (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Rapoport, 1977), and behavioral (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In light of these interpretations of satisfaction, it is suggested that residential satisfaction should be understood as a multifaceted construct that incorporates affective, cognitive, and behavioral components (Anderson & Weidemann, 1997).

It is important to note the subjectivity of satisfaction as a measure. Since satisfaction is a measure of *perceived* well-being, it is critical to point out that perceptions are not always congruent with objective measures. In fact, several variables have been found to influence people's perceptions of residential satisfaction, including: culture (Deshmukh, 1995; Smith & Krannich,

2000), life satisfaction (Amerigo, 1990; Pruitt, 1978; Rohe & Basolo, 1997; Theodori, 2001), neighborhood, as well as house and neighbors (Amerigo & Aragonés, 1990; Basolo & Strong, 2002; Taylor, 1993; Taylor, 1995), social factors (Filkins, Allen & Cordes, 2000; Goudy, 1977), and race (Painter, Gabriel & Myers, 2001). As noted in the literature cited above, an individual's sense of satisfaction is easily influenced by contextual factors, thus compromising its objectivity as a measure. However, it is important to point out that satisfaction is contingent upon the *meaning* an individual assigns to it; therefore, it is critical to evaluate what the physical, social, and psychological climate of a community means to its residents (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976).

Since the measure of satisfaction is subject to the individual perceptions of diverse members of a community, it is imperative to address residents' perceived well-being on several different levels in order to more accurately gauge their perceptions (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Rapoport, 1977). As previously stated, the measure of satisfaction has been identified as affective, cognitive and behavioral in scope (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Marans & Rodgers, 1975; Rapoport, 1977). Since satisfaction is comprised of several dimensions, many methods of evaluation have been devised to address those different dimensions (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell et al., 1976; Francescato et al., 1986). The method proposed by Francescato et al. (1986) is incorporated into the model used in this study. Francescato et al. (1986) suggested a list, or index, of four questions to encompass affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects of overall satisfaction. These four questions are as follows: (1) How satisfied are you with living here? (2) How long do you want to live in this community? (3) If you move again, would you like to live in another place like this? (4) Would you recommend this place to one of your friends?

Francescato et al. (1986) suggest that since an individual's interpretation of and responses to questions reflect affective, cognitive and behavioral elements, many different questions containing these same elements should be used throughout an assessment. In this way, each dimension of satisfaction is addressed in several different ways, thus producing a more accurate representation of the individual's sense of satisfaction (Francescato et al., 1986).

The model proposed by Francescato et al. (1986) also describes a six-domain taxonomy of predictor variables for residential satisfaction including: environmental attributes, individual characteristics, behavioral and normative beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and behavioral intentions. These variables address much more than mere environmental perception; they touch on the

underlying issues that influence a resident’s perceived well-being (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Francescato et al., 1986).

The Question at Issue

The hypothesis of this study is that community residents’ perceived residential satisfaction is affected by at least three major factors and that the importance of these factors will be different for long-term residents (LTR) of a rural community versus newly arrived residents (NAR). The three influencing factors are: the physical environment, social and cultural aspects of life, and the availability of resources and public services (Marans, 2003). A model of the relationships between these three factors and perceived quality of life is shown in figure 16.1.

Definitions for each factor included in the model are as follows: physical environmental attributes include variables such as neighborhood and housing conditions, noise level, and crowding; the sociocultural attributes in the model address issues such as family relations, feelings about neighbors, as well as a sense of affiliation and belonging to the community; the services and resources attributes deal with topics such as employment, retail conditions, access to police and fire protection, recreation, and transportation, The level of

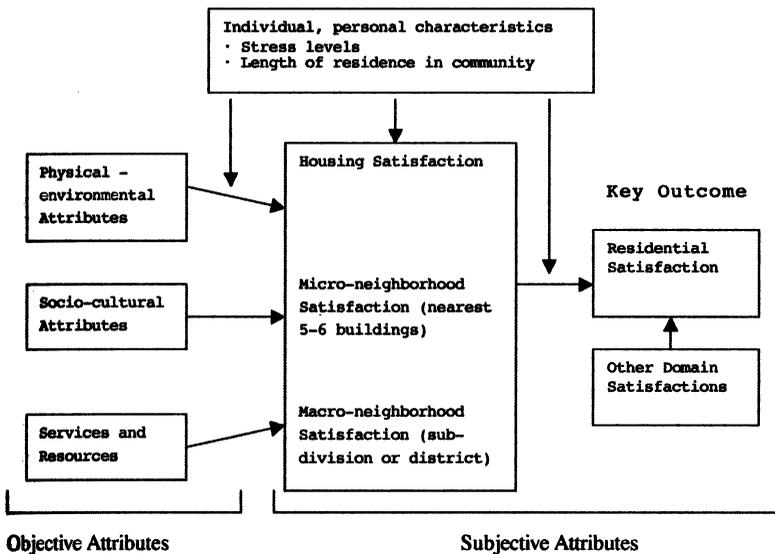


Figure 1. Model of the Relationship between Physical Environment, Sociocultural Attributes, and the Availability of Resources

importance that each of these factors holds for individual community residents is different; thus, it is the aggregate combinations of these factors that impact the overall perceived satisfaction with housing, immediate neighborhood, area of residence, and the community as a whole. The manner in which an individual perceives the objective attributes of the model will be mediated by the personal characteristics of that individual which result in subjective evaluations of satisfaction. The individual, personal characteristics which mediate this relationship include such things as the person's length of residence in the community and level of stress. It is important to reiterate that individual differences in perception exist. Although these perceptions reflect the reality experienced by each individual community member, they may vary from the actual conditions in the community itself.

Method and Procedure

This study examined the perceived quality of life in a fast-changing rural community that had been impacted by a large influx of immigrants, a community located in sparsely populated east-central Nebraska, boasting a population of just slightly more than 4,000 residents. At the time of this study, roughly 800 of the community's 4,000-plus residents had recently moved to town; the majority of those newcomers were Latino (66.7 percent). This rapid influx of residents to the community was primarily due to the availability of employment with the town's expanding meat processing plant. Meat processing is not typically a job sought after by many members of the Anglo population (Dalla et al., 2004; Grey & Woodrick, 2002; Massey, Durand & Malone, 2002; Stull et al., 1995). In order to fill these jobs, meat processing plants had been hiring more and more non-Anglo workers (Dalla et al., 2004; Grey & Woodrick, 2002; Massey et al., 2002). From 1995 through 1996, a group of architectural and planning researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducted a survey study to learn about the impact of this population influx on the perceived quality of life of the community residents. The methodology used in this study involved three stages. The goal of the first stage was to identify issues related to immigration, population influx, life quality, housing, city services and infrastructure, and city planning. In order to obtain the information, the research team conducted meetings with two focus groups; one with fourteen LTR and the other with eight NAR. LTR were defined as those who had lived in the community for at least fifteen years, and NAR

were defined as those who moved into the city within the last five years, All information was provided in English and Spanish,

Based on the findings of the study's first stage, a questionnaire was developed and the research team conducted face-to-face interviews with residents of eighty-five households in February of 1996, Respondents of the LTR and NAR were selected by targeting specific areas of residential neighborhoods, that is, those that concentrated LTR and those that concentrated NAR, using census-block data, supplemented by local key informants, From the targeted areas individual households were randomly selected and surveyed, Fifty-five percent ($n = 47$) of those surveyed were LTR and 45 percent ($n = 38$) were NAR. Fifty-four percent of the respondents were male and 46 percent were female.

The survey questionnaire included nearly one hundred questions. Most of the questions used a five-point Likert scale. Consistent with Marans's (2003) model of residential satisfaction, the survey questions addressed issues regarding residents' satisfaction with, as well as perceptions of: (1) aspects of their physical environment, (2) the city's sociocultural environment, and (3) community services and resources. Marans (2003) suggested that the physical environment is comprised of both natural and built attributes. In line with Marans's (2003) definitions, the current study included housing and neighborhood quality, crowding, and noise levels. The sociocultural attributes of Marans's (2003) model were addressed in this study through items concerning relationships with family and neighbors, and the general sense of community. Consistent with Marans's (2003) definition of services and resources, this study included items addressing fire and police protection, education, financing, recreation, and healthcare. The potential mediators of residential satisfaction—including length of residence and level of stress—were addressed following Anehensel's (1992) discussion of change-related stress. Researchers tapped into these variables by examining the types of changes taking place in the community and the sources of stress that residents experienced in their daily lives.

Findings

In the first stage of analysis, the questions from the survey were grouped together based on which topic they were addressing: changes in the community, housing, services, sociocultural issues, stress, and so on. Cronbach's Alpha was then used to test the reliability of the twelve topical areas. The combination of variables that produced an alpha above 0.7 was considered to be

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha

<i>Index Variable</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>LTR</i>	<i>NAR</i>
Changes in the Community	.89	.76	.89
Stress Factors	.77	.78	.79
Service Issues	.76	.79	.74
Housing Concerns	.72	.63	.80

reliable (see Table 1). The other topical areas that were deemed unreliable for determining residential satisfaction were dropped from subsequent analyses. The questions that were considered reliable were collapsed into composite scores (means) or indexes. Four indexes were created. In addition to an index variable of *residential satisfaction*, four other index variables were used in the subsequent analysis of residential satisfaction. They were *Changes in the community*, *Stress Factors*, *Service Issues*, and *Housing Concerns*. Although the *Housing Concerns* index was considered reliable for the total population, it was not as reliable for measuring residential satisfaction among LTR. We felt that the alpha value was close enough and the index was important enough to warrant including it in the subsequent analysis.

After determining the indexes to be used in further investigation, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed to predict residential satisfaction for each of the following groups: the total population of the community, the NAR, and the LTR (see Tables 2 and 3).

Gender and age were also included since prior research has suggested they influence quality of life (Garrison, 1998; O'Brien, McClendon & Ahmed, 1989) and subjective well-being (Diener, 1988).

The stepwise regression analysis revealed some significant similarities and differences in residential satisfaction between the LTR and NAR. For the total population of the community, stress had a significant ($p = .001$) inverse relationship with residential satisfaction. In other words, for both LTR and

Table 2. Stepwise Regression—Total Population

<i>Index Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Changes in the community	-.03
Stress Factors	-.50**
Service Issues	.01
Housing Concerns	.19
Gender	.12
Age	.04
Resident Type (long/short term)	-.07

** $p < .01$

Table 3. Stepwise Regression—Newly Arrived Residents (NAR) and Long Term Residents (LTR)

<i>Index Variable</i>	<i>NAR Beta</i>	<i>LTR Beta</i>
Changes in the community	.04	-.04
Stress Factors	-.43*	-.41**
Service Issues	.13	-.01
Housing Concerns	.03	.37**
Gender	-.02	.20
Age	.07	.02

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

NAR, higher levels of stress were indicative of lower levels of residential satisfaction. For the NAR, stress had a significant ($p = .013$) inverse relationship with residential satisfaction; for the LTR, stress also had a significant ($p = .002$) inverse relationship with residential satisfaction.

In addition, the results indicate that for LTR of the community, issues concerning housing were significantly ($p = .006$) related to residential satisfaction. In other words, as satisfaction with housing increased, so did residential satisfaction. Surprisingly, housing issues were not significantly correlated with residential satisfaction for the NAR of the community.

Since stress was a factor that influenced the residential satisfaction of both LTR and NAR, the individual items in the stress index were analyzed to determine what significant relationships, if any, existed between them and the residential satisfaction index. For the LTR, insufficient income ($r = -.370$), having a residence which provides a healthy environment ($r = .297$), economic differences in the neighborhood ($r = -.466$), living in a residence which undermines social status ($r = -.424$), struggling for a better house ($r = -.511$), social and cultural differences of people in the neighborhood ($r = -.339$), and recommending the neighborhood to a friend ($r = .379$) were all significantly related to the residential satisfaction index (see Table 4).

Table 4. Correlations for Residential Satisfaction Index and Stress Items—LTR.

<i>Items from Stress Index</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Insufficient income	-.37*
Residence is healthy environment	.30*
Economic differences in neighborhood	-.47**
Current residence undermines status	-.42**
Struggle for a better house	-.51**
Social/cultural differences in neighborhood	-.34*
Recommend neighborhood to friend	.38**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 5. Correlations for Residential Satisfaction Index and Stress Items-NAR.

<i>Items from Stress Index</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Tension with neighbors	-.60**
Living in the community is good for my family	.46**
Very happy to live in the community	.37*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

For the NAR, tension with neighbors ($r = -.601$), living in the community is beneficial for family ($r = .460$), and being happy to live in the community ($r = .366$) were all significantly related to the residential satisfaction index (see Table 5).

Interestingly, the sources of stress for LTR appeared to be related more to economic and social status issues than to other issues. Sources of stress for NAR seemed to be based more on issues concerning family and social relations.

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, residents' perceptions of their quality of life differed only slightly by length of residence in the community. The total population seemed to be basically pleased with environmental attributes, sociocultural attributes, as well as the services and resources available in the community. One important difference between the LTR and NAR was the salience of housing concerns. LTR felt that housing issues concerning quality and maintenance of housing were closely tied to their perceived residential satisfaction. This may seem odd taken at face value, since the vast majority of the NAR were of Latino ethnicity and housing for ethnic minorities in rural communities usually tends to be insufficient (Whitener, 2001). However, since LTR may tend to feel that their neighborhoods are being compromised by the presence of an ethnic minority group (see Dalla & Christensen, 2005), it is possible that issues of integration caused them to perceive housing quality and maintenance as salient concerns. As a point of clarification, in such a small community, "neighborhoods" and "neighbors" may need to be interpreted in the broadest sense of these words. The community is like one big neighborhood, and neighbors probably mean other community members.

Though the LTR and NAR perceived housing issues differently, both groups did believe that the most critical issue influencing residential satisfaction and

quality of life in the community was stress. When considering Anehensel's (1992) discussion of change-related stress, the high levels of stress found in both the LTR and NAR of the community are very understandable. High stress levels are quite common among people who are experiencing major changes in their lives (Anehensel, 1992). In light of the immense changes that the community was experiencing due to its rapid population growth and collision of cultures, the elevated stress levels are not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the difference between the perceived sources of stress for each resident group. The LTR struggled with issues concerning social status in the community. It appears as though the economic, social, and cultural differences between people in their neighborhoods created a great deal of anguish among the LTR. Perhaps having to share a neighborhood with people of a different ethnic background was considered to be a threat to the social status of LTR in the community. A definitive feature of many small, rural towns is their sense of community, or corporate identity (Burton, 2002; Salamon, 2003). Much of what binds small, rural community members together is a shared history—cultural roots—that provides them with an understanding of themselves and their neighbors that often spans generations (Burton, 2002; Flora, Flora & Tapp, 2000; Salamon, 2003). This shared, social identity has made it easy for many members of small communities to *otherize* newcomers to their towns (Salamon, 2003). Newcomers who are drastically different from the traditional members of the community may be perceived as a threat to the community identity which could result in stereotyping and discrimination (Tajfel, 1982). The perception of threat may induce the *fight or flight* response in community members, thus resulting in elevated levels of stress. Future research could examine this phenomenon in greater detail.

The sources of stress for NAR were vastly different from those of the LTR. Tension with neighbors appeared to be the most stressful aspect of life for NAR of the community. Though the NAR are happy to live in the community and believe that living there is good for their families, they seem to struggle in their relationships with their neighbors. As discussed previously, some of this may be explained by the strong sense of corporate identity found in rural communities, which often leads to the rejection of newcomers (Obs, Smith & Zinkiewicz, 2002; Salamon, 2003). This problem may be exacerbated by the cultural dissimilarity between the LTR and the NAR, resulting in racial tensions (Dalla et al., 2004; Lausch, Heuer, Guasaco & Benjamin, 2003; Supples & Smith, 1995; Wirth & Dollar, 2004). Additionally,

language barriers between the two groups have been found to magnify their differences and foster more tension (Dalla & Christensen, 2005; Dalla et al., 2004). The tension with neighbors experienced by the NAR is clearly a complicated issue that needs to be addressed. Future research which addresses this issue from the view of both LTR and NAR is needed.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the importance of examining the perceptions of both newly arrived residents and long-term residents in rural communities in order to assess the issues important to each group more accurately. This study unearthed a critical difference in perceived sources of stress for each group, as it relates to residential satisfaction. Long-term residents find issues that are related to their status within the community as their primary sources of stress. Newly arrived residents' sources of stress are related to relational issues, particularly tension with their neighbors. These findings highlight some key sociocultural issues which should be of concern for community leaders who wish to effectively address the needs of all members of their communities. The findings suggest the importance of education in the area of language acquisition by newcomers (which also suggests a service component of adult ESL classes). In addition, in the area of social-cultural familiarization with each other, for both newcomers and long-term residents, there need to be programs to help break down barriers created by the fear/mistrust arising from mutual cultural unfamiliarity. This could be addressed through the local school system (involving school children and parents), and by organizing community events that attract and involve both community groups (e.g., food festivals, recreational sports leagues).

Further research with other communities would increase the sample size and reduce the limitations imposed by the small sample size of this study, thus enhancing our ability to generalize the findings that would contribute to policy action. Also, there has been a dearth of research examining the impact on the sending communities, which would greatly contribute to a better understanding of the ongoing national immigration policy debate. Finally, we recognize that tackling these issues poses a significant challenge to local community leaders and community members, but it is a good first step toward fostering goodwill between neighbors of all ethnicities.

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