‘You opened my mind’: Latinx immigrant and receiving community interactional dynamics in the United States

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Abstract
Communities are continually shaped by immigration. As immigrants join receiving community members as members of the same community, all must co-navigate emergent and evolving relationships. These intergroup relations can range from quite positive, marked by mutual enrichment and engagement, to quite negative, marked by prejudice and discrimination. This study seeks to illuminate immigrant and receiving community member relations by exploring what factors play a role in each group’s attitudes and actions toward, and experiences with, one another. Thirty first- and second-generation immigrants from Latin America and 30 third-generation or more U.S.-born respondents participated in semistructured interviews, which were thematically analyzed. Results indicated that while both intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) and the formation of common in-group identities (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996) helped to create positive intergroup relations, numerous personal characteristics—including values and beliefs, visible features, and relative power—affected experiences and attitudes. Further, in the absence of knowledge based on direct contact, media played a strong role in shaping attitudes toward both groups of community members. These findings show how attitudes and actions of immigrants and receiving community members are each shaped by experiences, or lack thereof, between these groups. Moreover, this pathway is iterative and reciprocal. Therefore, efforts aimed at increasing and improving positive intergroup relations must consider the bidirectional iterative process and experiences of both groups.

The United States has continually changed through immigration. While the number of foreign-born individuals has consistently increased, from 2.2 million authorized immigrants in 1850 to nearly 40 million in 2010, the percentage of foreign-born individuals has fluctuated, from 13.3% in 1880, down to 4.7% in 1970, but trending back up to 12.9%
in 2010. Approximately 10 million more foreign-born individuals reside in the United States without authorization. Immigrants’ places of origin have also shifted, influencing the U.S. culture. In 1900, 84.9% of immigrants originated from Europe and only 1.3% were from Latin America and Caribbean; by 2010 only 12.1% were from Europe and 53.1% originated from Latin America and the Caribbean (Gibson & Lennon, 1999; Grieco et al., 2012; Passel & Cohn, 2009).

When immigrants enter a new society, they bring values, practices, and identifications, which interact—at individual through institutional levels—with those of current society members (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). As these newcomers join preexisting members of the “receiving community” and become members of the same community, all must navigate relations with one another. This raises a number of questions: At what point can and do newcomers become fully accepted community members? What factors do receiving community members take into consideration when determining how they will act toward newcomers? How and at what point do newcomers determine they desire membership in their new community? What factors do newcomers take into consideration when determining their roles and interactions with receiving community members?

People seek group membership for many tangible and intangible benefits, such as security, resources, belonging, social support, and self-esteem. Groups create a system of values, beliefs, roles, and norms that unite individuals and shape their actions. Membership relies on group boundaries, which heighten the recognition of differences between groups and minimize the amount of differences recognized within groups. Relatedly, boundaries shape perceptions of and attitudes toward “in-group” and “out-group” members. Indeed, many researchers have demonstrated that even strangers randomly assigned to groups choose to reward members of their in-group over the out-group, even if they receive no personal benefit and have no relation to the in-group aside from random assignment (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gaertner & Insko, 2000; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971).

Because people are motivated to favor and protect the interests of their in-group, they can move beyond just noticing and/or ascribing meaning to between-group differences to fearing and disliking out-group members, particularly if they believe out-group members may present a threat to their group’s well-being. This theory appears borne out in Americans’ opinions of immigration: Over one in three U.S.-born Americans holds negative opinions of immigrants, believing immigrants burden society, worsen the economy, increase crime, and negatively affect society’s values (Pew Research Center, 2015). It is unclear if these trends broadly hold true in reverse, as we know of no relevant national polls of immigrants’ opinions of U.S.-born citizens. Negative views of African Americans, held by some immigrants, do suggest that out-group concerns run both ways, however (Philips, Mahalingam, & Sellers, 2010; Roth & Kim, 2013).

Intergroup anxiety is the negative emotional and cognitive reaction that emerges when a person becomes aware of potential group differences from actual or anticipated contact with out-group members (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Intergroup anxiety is enduring and cross-situational, but it may also be heightened during particular interactions with out-groups. These emotions and thoughts undermine empathy and are associated with negative actions toward out-group members, including withdrawal and aggression (Stephan, 2014).

Less is known about why particular groups form over others and what specific factors influence members’ attitudes and actions toward other groups. Nevertheless, the oft-cited solutions to negative attitudes toward out-group members usually take one of two forms: (a) increased contact with out-group members or (b) the formation of a common in-group identity.

The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) proposes that intergroup contact can improve attitudes toward out-group members. Optimal contact must include individuals from the groups sharing equal status and engaging in joint cooperative activities with a common goal. Social and institutional policies must also be in place to support their cooperation. This hypothesis has been empirically supported in many groups, including those defined by race, (dis)ability status, and sexual orientation (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Application to receiving community-immigrant relations is limited, but research has demonstrated that friendship with a Latinx immigrants is associated with more positive attitudes toward Latinx immigrants as a group (Ellison, Shin, & Leal, 2011). While positive experiences are more common, negative experiences are more enduring and often generalized to the larger group (Graf, Paolini, & Rubin, 2014).

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1 We use the term “Latinx” for immigrants from Latin America rather than “Latina/o,” a term that assumes binary gender (male/female) and thus may exclude some immigrants.
The in-group identity model (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996), proposes that attitudes and actions between in-group and out-group members can be improved by creating other groups, in which shared membership (e.g., religion, career, hobby, ethnicity) is more salient than in the original disparate groups. Research again demonstrates the importance of equal status, working toward common goals, and the support of social/institutional policies to facilitate common in-group identity development. The salience of new groups also depends upon their importance to members (Gaertner et al., 1996). Application of this model to receiving community-immigrant relations also remains limited.

Other potential influences on immigrant-receiving community relations can be distilled from immigration literature. One common friction between immigrants and receiving community members regards the navigation of cultural values, practices, and identifications. For example, the Concurrent Model of Acculturation (CMA; Piontkowski, Rohmann, & Florack, 2002) identifies four levels of cultural concordance to denote how immigrants wish to maintain their original culture and interact with receiving community members, and how receiving community members wish immigrants to maintain their original culture and interact with them. The CMA suggests the level of “symbolic threat”—fear that one’s culture is being impinged upon—is associated with increasing discordance on these dimensions. In this model, threat and attitudes are reciprocal; threat can both precede and affect intergroup attitudes and be the outcome of problematic/conflictual interactions (Rohmann, Piontkowski, & van Randenborgh, 2008).

Beyond cultural differences, immigrant-receiving community relations are likely to be affected by tangible resources. So-called “realistic threats” are concerns that one’s in-group will have less economic capital, political power, and poorer material/physical well-being because of out-group members. These can be true or perceived; many perceived threats are damaging, irrespective of evidence (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Policies may be instrumental in shaping perceptions between groups (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997).

In sum, while there exists a large, empirically supported literature exploring intergroup relations, the application of resulting models to immigrant-receiving community relations is lacking. Moreover, even less is known about what might influence intergroup relations over time. Further, when these models are applied, they usually concern only one half of the relation—immigrants or receiving community members. Consequently, this study used a qualitative approach to understand how first- and second-generation Latinx immigrants and third-generation or greater U.S.-receiving community members develop attitudes and actions toward each other. The primary research questions are as follows:

- What experiences do immigrants and receiving community members report having with one another?
- What influences the attitudes immigrants and receiving community members hold toward each other?
- What influences the actions immigrants and community members take toward each other?

## 1 | METHOD

### 1.1 | Participants

Sixty participants residing in the Baltimore Washington DC corridor were recruited for a 1- to 2-hour, in-person interview. The total sample comprised four smaller subgroups: 15 first-generation Latinx immigrants (1-IMs) who had resided in the United States for at least 5 years; 15 second-generation immigrants (2-IMs) who are children of Latinx immigrants; and 30 receiving community members (RCMs) whose families had been in the United States for three or more generations, 15 of whom self-reported high levels of contact with immigrants (H-RCMs) and 15 of whom self-reported low levels of contact with immigrants (L-RCMs). All participants were at least 18 years old. Women were slightly overrepresented compared to men in the full sample. On average, H-RCMs and L-RCMs were older (mean ages 44 and 45, respectively) compared to 1-IMs and 2-IMs (mean ages 36 and 23, respectively). Moreover, 1-IMs and 2-IMs were slightly less likely to have at least some college experience (86% and 80%, respectively), compared to the 93% of RCMs who had at least some college experience (see Table 1).

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The data represents one third of a larger data set with participants based in Lecce and Turino, Italy (Fedi et al., 2017).
TABLE 1  Participant demographic characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1-IMs</th>
<th>2-IMs</th>
<th>RCMs^a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (SD)</td>
<td>35.73 (11.11)</td>
<td>23.20 (4.80)</td>
<td>44.17 (18.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>10 (66.67%)</td>
<td>9 (60.00%)</td>
<td>18 (60.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school, GED, or H.S. diploma</td>
<td>2 (13.33%)</td>
<td>3 (20.00%)</td>
<td>2 (6.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or associate's degree</td>
<td>5 (33.33%)</td>
<td>8 (53.33%)</td>
<td>9 (30.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>4 (26.67%)</td>
<td>3 (20.00%)</td>
<td>8 (26.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's, professional, or doctoral degree</td>
<td>4 (26.67%)</td>
<td>1 (6.67%)</td>
<td>10 (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1-IM = first-generation immigrants; 2-IM = second-generation immigrants; RCM = receiving community members; SD = standard deviation.
^a One participant did not indicate her level of education; thus, percentages do not total to 100%.

The countries of origin for the 1-IMs included: Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Puerto Rico^3, and Venezuela. The countries of origin for 2-IMs’ parents were: Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Multi-origin. Among H-RCMs, eight identified as White/European American, three as Latinx, two as Black/African American, and two as biracial. Eight L-RCMs identified as White/European American and seven as Black/African American.

1.2 | Procedure
The current study used qualitative methods to explore the complex interplay of IMs’ and RCMs’ experiences, attitudes, and actions. This method allowed for a deeper understanding of acculturation processes among group members. Participants were recruited from public settings in the Baltimore Washington corridor (e.g., ethnic heritage festivals, laundromats), as well as through snowball sampling, word-of-mouth, and fliers. Participants received oral and written informed consent. A waiver of written consent was granted to protect participants’ confidentiality and immigration status concerns; consequently, some participants gave solely oral consent. Audio-recorded interviews were conducted between June 2012 and October 2013 in public settings (e.g., libraries, organizations, universities) and homes. Interviewees were compensated $15 for their participation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Identifying information conveyed by participants was removed from the transcripts.

1.3 | Instruments
This study used a semi-structured interview protocol that was administered by trained graduate and undergraduate student interviewers. Participants were asked about their family immigration history, experiences with IMs and RCMs, acculturation experiences, psychological sense of community, and beliefs about the treatment of IMs by the United States government and RCMs.

1.4 | Data analysis
A thematic analysis approach was employed to capture shared and unique themes, content, and processes. An iterative open and axial coding process was conducted to generate thematic categories from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Consensus on codes and definitions was built through a team approach. The resulting coding framework was applied to all interview transcripts, with coding completed in pairs for each of the four subsamples (1-IMs, 2-IMs, H-RCMs, and L-RCMs). Analysis was conducted within and across participants’ narratives to generate “local” and “inclusive”

^3 Because Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, Puerto Rican participants were allowed to self-identify as immigrants or RCMs. Two of the three Puerto Rican participants identified as RCMs.
integration (Weiss, 1994); that is, a greater understanding of the data tied together codes, themes, and narratives within and between groups. Through this process, themes were understood both in the context of each interview and brought together across interviews to form a cohesive whole.

2 | RESULTS

2.1 | Conception of the United States community

To begin to understand how people interact in a shared community, participants’ ideas about a salient shared community, the United States, were assessed. The four groups converged and diverged in their conception of the U.S. community and its members.

2.1.1 | 1-IMs

Most 1-IMs saw the United States as a place of opportunity, but not necessarily a community with which they strongly identified. The majority of 1-IMs described the United States and RCMs as diverse, and although they connected with some RCMs, they did not generally consider themselves U.S. community members beyond their own contributions to its diversity. When describing IM belonging, 1-IMs’ answers were frequently superficial: “Well, demographically, yes … the immigrant community is bigger. And they are still having children,” explained a 51-year-old Cuban woman. “Because they do a lot of jobs that a lot of people here don’t do,” reported a 42-year-old Venezuelan woman. “Whenever they put new music out there or restaurants or hairstyles or holidays,” related a 21-year-old Peruvian woman. Some described locales; some described identities, values, or interest-based groups (e.g., church, ethnicity, sports); and some mentioned particular United States settings (e.g., school) as communities in which they belonged, but very few identified fully as “American” or as a hyphenated identity (e.g., Latinx American, Honduran American).

Most 1-IMs felt more strongly connected to other IMs, who shared their immigrant experience, regardless of origin or ethnicity. A few 1-IMs saw RCMs as presenting realistic or symbolic threats, usually not to themselves, but to the larger IM community’s well-being. Some 1-IMs discussed fights over limited resources and unfair targeting by police; others saw RCMs as a cultural threat, particularly to their children’s well-being, should they adopt United States values.

2.1.2 | 2-IMs

Most 2-IMs held positive views of the United States community, describing RCMs as friendly, welcoming, and helpful, while recognizing their cultural differences. 2-IMs described the United States as providing many educational and economic opportunities to 2-IMs and RCMs, but not extending them to 1-IMs. They also viewed both 2-IMs and especially RCMs as privileged, materialistic, and lacking knowledge of other cultures, compared to 1-IMs. When asked about the United States, a 32-year-old Cuban American man responded, “I think we’re very privileged and a lot of times we’re not aware of the outside world… We don’t really relate or think of things outside of that sphere.”

Most 2-IMs referred to United States community members as “we,” considering themselves part of the community. More often than not, 2-IMs explained this sense of membership by noting similarities in their experiences to RCMs (e.g., citizenship, shared schools, friendships with RCMs). While they had seen their parents struggle to become accepted in the United States, 2-IMs felt that the government, institutions, and RCMs “automatically” viewed them as members. Rather than their immigrant heritage, 2-IMs felt their acceptance hinged on race, ethnicity, and/or skin color (described more fully below).

Consequently, no single community encompassed all 2-IM participants and many defined their community membership ambiguously. Most 2-IMs saw themselves holding dual IM and RCM membership, using “we” when referring

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4 Throughout the results, participants are described with their age, gender, and a marker of their nationality, ethnicity, and/or race. 1-IMs are described with their nationality of origin regardless of U.S. citizenship status (e.g., Cuban); 2-IMs are described with their parents’ nationality and their own nationality (e.g., Cuban American); both H-RCMs and L-RCMs are described with their self-reported race and/or ethnicity (e.g., Black, Latinx).
to either community. Generally, 2-IMs described feeling accepted in the U.S. community, although most described a greater sense of belonging among community members of color.

### 2.1.3 H-RCMs

Generally, H-RCMs described the United States as one large community defined by diversity and heterogeneity. What defined U.S. membership, explained a 42-year-old White woman, is that everyone “is from somewhere else … which makes America … by nature, kind of a mess.” One participant, a 36-year-old Asian/White woman, believed differences were too great for unity: “I just don’t think we have a big national culture anymore.” However, other H-RCMs defined U.S. membership by individually valuing the country’s diversity. A central tenant of being American meant embracing the “melding of many peoples together into one society that all accept each other’s ways,” explained a 68-year-old White man. Holding morals and values consistent with U.S. culture—freedom, individual choice/thought, and openness—was also important to U.S. membership, seen as important to tying the diverse community together. He continued, “I believe that there should be diversity. People need to maintain some of their own identity, but there needs to be a commonality of purpose, of how we wanna move forward. Some people describe that as the ‘American Dream.’”

Overall, H-RCMs appeared to welcome IMs into the U.S. community, viewing them as members and not as outsiders posing threats, as a 70-year-old White man exemplified:

> [My neighbor] happens to be from Colombia … His lifestyle is quite different than mine. It’s a beautiful lifestyle … I consider him a wonderful American. He worries about the market just as much as I do, he worries about his children just as much as I do, he loves going to nice things, going to theatres as much as I do, but he’s different. … You have people, different personalities, and different backgrounds and that’s what makes this country so freaking great.

### 2.1.4 L-RCMs

In contrast to the H-RCMs, L-RCMs held no overwhelming agreement on a definition of U.S. community. Some L-RCMs described the United States as a melting pot: “a little bit of everything … anything can be American” (according to a 19-year-old White woman), “multi-ethnic” (according to a 57-year-old Black woman), and “a mixing bowl” (according to a 19-year-old White woman). Others described the United States based on civic value characteristics needed for membership. For instance, a 46-year-old White woman defined U.S. members as “working hard, showing they’re responsible, and not breaking the law,” whereas one 48-year-old White man noted they must “pay their taxes and take care of their own responsibilities and … start to contribute somehow.”

Some L-RCMs also defined the U.S. community and its members based purely on place. “Being American is just where I’m from,” stated one 28-year-old White man. When asked what makes someone American, a 35-year-old White man simply stated “geography” and continued that he “doesn’t buy the idea of an American community…. Nationalities are a pretty bad basis for a community…. It seems pretty arbitrary for me…. To me a community that matters, that’s relevant, it’s got to be smaller, there’s got to be some kind shared thing.” In what was the most striking difference between H-RCMs and L-RCMs, most L-RCMs held negative views of Americans (e.g., impatience, intolerance, closed-mindedness, self-absorption) and the U.S. community’s history (e.g., not fulfilling its potential, legacy of discrimination). This appeared to affect their feelings of belonging. The same 46-year-old woman mentioned above described being “embarrassed” about the way the United States is viewed and the same 48-year-old man labeled himself only “technically American.”

Despite these views and definitions of a problematic U.S. community, the vast majority of L-RCMs still believed there existed meaningful differences between RCMs and IMs, defining IMs as an out-group. Many L-RCMs believed each group preferred to associate with their own group and viewed IMs as a threat to themselves or to the broader U.S. community. Some L-RCMs viewed IMs as a realistic threat, creating economic loss, taking jobs, and benefitting unfairly from U.S. policies (e.g., university scholarships, safety net programs). Moreover, some L-RCMs viewed IMs as a symbolic threat to their “old lifestyle.” There were notable exceptions to these threats, with some L-RCMs contending that IMs only take jobs RCMs do not want.
Given varying definitions of the U.S. community, membership, and valence, we then explored what influenced intergroup relations. Most participants described relations between IMs and RCMs as bidirectional; IMs’ and RCM’s attitudes, beliefs, and actions affected each other.

2.2 | Contact

As predicted by the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), IMs’ and RCMs’ remarks highlighted how intergroup experiences shaped attitudes and actions toward in- and out-group members. The amount of contact IMs and RCMs sought out and ultimately experienced varied with their group membership, characteristics, beliefs about each other, and contact opportunities.

2.2.1 | 1-IMs

Most 1-IMs said it took effort to interact with RCMs and many felt even the level of interaction was a choice. 1-IMs frequently described contact with RCMs as useful for survival (e.g., learning English, understanding U.S. rules) and a few noted other benefits (e.g., learning new ways of living, creating friendships). “Everything depends on exposure…. People are afraid of what they don’t know. That’s why they keep to themselves in their own community,” explained one 51-year-old Cuban woman. Another 23-year-old Colombian man described how his previous negative perceptions of RCMs changed when he came into contact with them: “In reality I like Americans a lot…. They’re very nice people, very welcoming…. So my view of the American people in the United States has changed dramatically [from] one pole to the other, to the best pole.” Contact with RCMs most frequently took place in schools (their children’s primary schools and their own secondary and/or postsecondary institutions) as well as, to a lesser extent, in workplaces and neighborhoods. 1-IMs frequently spoke of schools as places where they could not only interact with RCMs but also gain power and enter into the community.

2.2.2 | 2-IMs

2-IMs emphasized how interactions with RCMs provided close, positive relationships that foster understanding and respect rather than fear and threat. Similar to 1-IMs, 2-IMs described these interactions as necessary to navigate U.S. culture, gain acceptance as community members, and discover needed resources. One 30-year-old Chilean/Italian American man explained: “There’s no other choice. [Immigrants] have to [interact with U.S.-borns] if they want to find some level of success.”

For many, contact was seen as producing success because RCMs held knowledge of the United States that IMs lacked; one had to step outside the IM community to thrive in the receiving community. Another 22-year-old Bolivian/Mexican American man expressed: “It’s essential. You are who you hang around with. If you hang around with just immigrants, I don’t think you’re gonna make it far.” A 29-year-old Salvadoran/Nicaraguan American woman further expliclated:

It’s important to not completely live in a sort of cultural, racial, ethnic isolation…. We’re all not going to progress if people are only in their little bubble. Nobody’s going to understand your needs as an immigrant community if you’re always just in the same area…. I think especially [in terms of] resources, jobs, education.

A 30-year-old Peruvian American man explains why contact, which allows 2-IMs to learn U.S. cultural practices, is important: “That’s how we get accepted–when we start acting like them, when we start thinking like them. [When] we don’t, we’re like outsiders.” However, many 2-IMs believed RCMs did not engage in reciprocal behavior, as a 32-year-old Cuban American man explained:

I don’t think it’s a big priority for the majority of Americans…. If it is somehow what’s required of them … in work or something like that, then that’ll happen, but I don’t think that average Americans are going to seek out immigrants … unless it’s through community groups that are trying to affect immigrant populations in some
way… Americans [are] thinking only about Americans in America…. Even though [immigrants are] in our coun-
try, Americans themselves perceive the immigrants as foreigners.

2.2.3 H-RCMs

Perhaps drawing on positive experiences (interestingly no H-RCMs reported negative interactions with IMs), H-RCMs asserted that a lack of IM engagement contributed to negative interactions between RCMs and IMs. Ultimately, H-RCMs believed contact reduces prejudice and helps build peaceful intergroup relationships. Participants described schools and universities as not only hubs of trust and mutual understanding, but also places of increased knowledge and awareness of each other’s values and norms. Direct contact with IMs was viewed as critical to shaping experiences and, for a few H-RCMs, to changing the way they personally perceived IMs, as one 42-year-old Latina woman recounted:

[Having Mexican friends] helped me because prior I had this thing with Mexicans…. [Then] I became closest with
the sweetest people I’ve ever met in my life and they were Mexican…. I’ve always had this image of the cartel,
just a bunch of beggars and stealers and drug dealers and bad…. But after meeting [them] … I told them … ‘I
want to thank you because you opened my mind.’

One 22-year-old African American man also described how contact reversed negative beliefs instilled in childhood:
"There were certain stereotypes that you were introduced to from your parents and all over the place…. Like Spanish
people are notorious for harassing females…. As I grew up, I met a lot of different people and I was like, it is not true at
all."

2.2.4 L-RCMs

Conversely, L-RCMs reported low levels of knowledge about IMs’ experiences and relatively low motivation to inter-
act with IMs beyond their current level. Most L-RCMs had no current or prior contact with IMs. A few had what they
considered ongoing, but insignificant, contact in their neighborhoods or at work, and a few had only prior contact. Inter-
estingly, while they considered themselves to have low contact with IMs, two L-RCMs had near daily contact with IMs
who were significant in their lives (roommate, girlfriend).

While many L-RCMs hypothetically viewed increased communication, interaction, and integration as key to improv-
ing IM-RCM relationships, several believed the onus was on IMs. When asked what could be done to integrate IMs into
U.S. society, one 57-year-old African American woman responded, "It depends on how far they want to assimilate." Despite suggesting IMs should take responsibility for improving intergroup relationships, many L-RCMs gave no indica-
tion of how IMs should or could make improvements. Further, despite their own low contact and knowledge, L-RCMs identified other RCMs as even lower in knowledge, openness, and empathy than themselves. It remains to be investi-
gated if this represents self-validating, downward social comparisons, or an accurate reading by RCMs of difficulties to
IM acceptance in the United States.

2.3 Shared in-group identity

Both IMs and RCMs also frequently found common characteristics that allowed them to view members as part of their
in-group rather than an out-group.

2.3.1 1-IMs

Most 1-IMs defined their in-group as people who shared common characteristics (e.g., culture, values, interests, histo-
ries). A 42-year-old Peruvian woman explained: "There is this need of finding people that are similar to you, and in some
ways that was reflected with connections of people that I felt were my own people, Latina."

Some 1-IMs felt connected to people of color who shared experiences of discrimination/oppression. A 51-year-old
Cuban woman shared:
We envy [African Americans] in the good way because [we] see how they progress, how they fight, how they struggle…. I was infatuated with all of them, for all the history, for what [they have] been able to develop and the rights they have been able to conquer, so to be able to live in an African American community is the most for me.

Notably, one participant, a 53-year-old Bolivian man, rejected Latinx IMs and strongly identified with White U.S.-borns: "I feel like I'm a White guy, because I don't mix myself with my own people anymore. [I] stay away from them. I [am] more involved with the White community." 1-IMs also frequently sought out people with common values and interests. One 20-year-old Ecuadorian woman described her in-group as “a little network of people that I created, independent of what they do, where they're from.” Another 35-year-old Peruvian woman explained how these interests and values created bonds: “[My U.S.-born friends] are open-minded … aware of what's happening in Africa or current issues…. They are more exposed to the world.” A 47-year-old Mexican man in the U.S. Navy felt a part of the community “since I've gone through my own process and everything, just from being here I believe I actually joined a larger group.” He then shared how citizenship furthered his feeling of membership: "It gives me a sense of responsibility … as far as the community and being a good citizen, a good steward day-to-day.”

2.3.2 | 2-IMs

Within their social spheres, 2-IMs described many commonalities with RCMs, from growing up together and attending the same schools to holding similar values. Most 2-IMs expressed this commonality with RCM friends, as a 23-year-old Salvadoran American woman described: “It's pretty good, we get along well, have a lot of things in common.” Several 2-IMs also reported common bonds with RCMs based on shared geography, language, and customs. For example, a 32-year-old Cuban American remarked on how his experience growing up was similar to other RCM children: “I'm the youngest and my mom had been here for probably over 20 years, so by the time I was growing up … I didn't feel apart from American culture. We didn’t really speak Spanish in the home…. I feel like, it was just a regular, you know, American childhood.”

2.3.3 | H-RCMs

Most H-RCMs expressed a belief (also held by L-RCMs) that IMs preferred to interact with other IMs, particularly from their countries of origin. However, many reported that this was not necessarily a reflection of group hierarchy, but rather it was about the "comfortability when you get to slip back into your own language" (according to a 42-year-old White woman) and the ability to engage with those who share your cultural history. Several participants noted that this in-group preference was true of both IM and RCMs. A 49-year-old White woman described the U.S. community: “The reality is that you have these stratified communities of people who are finding community with each other because they're from the same place or they have the same color skin or they have sort of similar backgrounds.”

While many H-RCMs described IMs as an out-group with whom they did not share a common in-group identity, a few expressed a sense of sameness or emotional connection with IMs. For several participants, this was due to created familial or romantic relationships with IMs. One 19-year-old Latino man described: “I got people that I consider my cousins that wasn't born in the United States, that are born in Honduras, El Salvador, you know, those types of people. I got them like cousins to me…. [We] got so attached to each other.”

2.3.4 | L-RCMs

Similarly, L-RCMs defined their in-group as friends who they spent time with and felt most comfortable with because they shared similarities (e.g., interests, values, concerns, care). In almost all cases, L-RCMs' descriptions of community assumed a "sameness" that they didn't share with out-group members, including IMs. Thus, aside from superficial statements that "people are people," many L-RCMs saw IMs as different and assumed IMs preferred to spend time with other IMs. One 57-year-old African American woman hypothesized why: “It seems that might be so that it is a comfort zone. That’s why you might have Little Italy, you might have Chinatown.” In keeping with this understanding, one could view the L-RCMs who referred to the United States as a multiethnic “melting pot” as referencing a prior
difference, which has since been homogenized, allowing these past IMs to move from "them" to "us" over the years, but not a current condition where IMs and RCMS interact.

2.4 | Personal characteristics influencing experiences, attitudes, and actions

While the contact hypothesis and the in-group identity model help explain some relations between IMs and RCMs, they do not fully explain each group’s beliefs, attitudes, and actions toward each other. Both IMs and RCMs frequently contended that it was individual characteristics and choices that influenced their and others’ perceptions of and interactions with each other, with little regard to higher-order structures that may affect them. Further, while all participants believed they could “choose” certain characteristics to facilitate positive interactions, they simultaneously named many static personal characteristics that influenced interactions.

2.4.1 | 1-IMs

1-IMs frequently contended that it was their open-mindedness, appreciation of diversity, and willingness to engage in cultural change that affected their experiences in the United States. A 35-year-old Peruvian woman explained: "I'm more open-minded to other races and other cultures and different people … I don't mind trying something new, something that is foreigner." When asked if he would change anything about his immigration experience, a 23-year-old Colombian man stated, “Being more open to change … because [the] beginning was a little bit hard.” The majority of 1-IMs desired to maintain certain cultural elements, but they also believed they must change to function in the United States and have relationships with RCMs (rather than expecting RCMs to acculturate to them). A 20-year-old Ecuadorian woman explained:

“I know that [immigrants] want to keep something from their home with them, but if they moved here and want to be successful here, if they want to be happy here, I think that they have to get used to the way things are here. Of course they can try to bring things in … but they can’t always be so stuck in what they used to have or how they used to live while being somewhere different. I think it’s very important to at least try to assimilate in the culture and society here.

Participants also identified numerous characteristics they held that seemed to shape their interactions with RCMs. These characteristics were often directly observable (e.g., race/ethnicity, skin tone, language, accent) and/or related to the power they were perceived to possess (e.g., socioeconomic status, education level, immigration status). A 48-year-old Dominican woman stated: "Because you are Hispanic, they don’t treat you [well] or they don’t give you information. … They ignore you or don’t treat you the same way [as RCMs]." A 30-year-old Salvadoran man further argued: "We’re friendly, but then a lot of people, other ethnicities, take that as a weakness. They think that just because we are Spanish, we are stupid. … A lot of them underestimate us … They wanna control us. They want to take our money. They think they [are] better than us.”

1-IMs frequently connected having a darker skin tone, a lower income, speaking accented English, and RCMs’ knowing or inferring that they do not have authorization to reside in the United States as impetus for negative treatment. “You can talk decent English, but your accent betrays you,” explained a 37-year-old Peruvian man. Conversely, pursuing higher education and learning English were viewed as ways 1-IMs could gain power, become more accepted by RCMs, and be valued in the receiving community at-large.

2.4.2 | 2-IMs

Similarly, 2-IMs described valuing diversity and relationships with diverse people, which appeared to drive their interactions with both RCMs and IMs. One 32-year-old Cuban American man spoke eloquently about his opportunities and desire to interact with diverse groups, which coupled with those groups’ willingness to engage with him broke down prejudices and fears:
I think it’s really good to spend time with people from different cultures and different backgrounds. On a very regular basis at school and at stores and stuff I would interact with people from different places, so it was interesting for me at work to meet people from middle America, who had never seen or had no experience with people from other cultures. A lot of times you would see, at first, people’s fear and prejudices of people they didn’t know and then … they overcome things really quick, because of the shared stuff they’re going through. Pretty soon they’re learning Spanish words here and there, they’re eating dinner with all these people, and so I personally believe … meeting people from different cultures … it’s a way of expanding your horizons and … it’s good for everybody to do that.

Overall, 2-IMs also believed IMs were treated differently based on inferred personal characteristics, particularly generational status. They frequently reported receiving better treatment than their first-generation parents due to language fluidity, lack of Spanish accent, and citizenship. One 22-year-old Mexican American woman reflected on differences in treatment:

All of the exposure that I’ve ever had has treated us favorably. But I know that’s biased and it’s not the way it necessarily is … there’s lots of issues going on … that are very important to my parents but I’m kind of like in this protected little bubble…. I think that the expectations [for children of immigrants] are a little bit higher…. I think people wouldn’t expect my parents to know English…. People would expect my dad to cut someone’s grass. My brothers–I think people know and expect them to speak English.

One 23-year-old Salvadoran American woman spoke of differential treatment based on citizenship, saying that 2-IMs “have more help because they were born here. They have papers and everything. [The U.S.] can’t discriminate them or nothing like that, so they have to support them because they’re part of their country. They’re part of the U.S.A.” Further, while many 2-IMs discussed positive personal experiences, they believed this was not the case for everyone and believed IMs were generally viewed as outsiders and treated unfairly.

Some 2-IMs also thought RCMs’ personal characteristics influenced intergroup relations, with younger and more educated RCMs seen as more likely to interact with IMs and develop positive relationships. One 25-year-old Dominican American woman commented: “I think younger people, our generation, are probably more accepting of each other than … someone’s parent or grandparents…. Our generation’s definitely a lot more open.”

2.4.3 | H-RCMs

Open-mindedness and valuing diversity also appeared to affect H-RCMs’ interactions with IMs. All H-RCMs believed IMs should maintain their cultures, and many H-RCMs saw IMs’ cultural maintenance as a manifestation of what they valued about the United States: diversity. “They call it a melting pot or the tossed salad, or whatever. I like that. I think it’s good, what we need to strengthen us. We have to learn all different cultures, learn different things…. I think it gives us growth,” a 42-year-old Latina woman said. Still, while H-RCMs viewed cultural maintenance as important, many believed it should not occur at the expense of IM integration into the larger RCM culture. Most often, integration involved IMs becoming proficient in English and interacting with RCMs. A 22-year-old African American man described: “I think it’s very important [to maintain culture]…. If someone asked me to get rid of my American culture, it’s kind of wrong but … they have to balance both if they are gonna live in America. Like communicate with people to have the best of both worlds, which is harder, but they definitely should.”

H-RCMs explained that IMs’ treatment differed based on an interconnected and multilevel set of factors influenced by the anti-immigrant political context and rhetoric in the media that, according to H-RCMs, shaped who was viewed as the in-group and out-group in the United States. This, along with IMs’ geographic locations and personal characteristics—including race/ethnicity, English fluency, and age—was seen to affect IMs’ treatment. The same Latina woman quoted above explained: “Once upon a time, it was all about the [Mexican drug] cartels and bad-mouthing them and getting them out…. They just switch based off of whatever’s going on. After 9/11, it’s like anybody who looks Arabic, you gotta go…. That’s how we were acting…. Racism got a new face…. All we did was focus our hate on other people.”
2.4.4 | L-RCMs

While L-RCMs also reported being open to differences, as noted above, at least one third expressed this as “people are people,” suggesting many L-RCMs were inclined to minimize and/or brush over differences. When discussing instances of discrimination he had observed, a 33-year-old White man asserted: “I think people are people, so I think if they get to know the other side of it they probably wouldn’t have that much issue.” In positioning their openness as a belief that IMs are actually just like them, they seemed to be conveying an openness to look at similarities over differences rather than embracing diversity.

Additionally, some described acceptance of differences based on pragmatism rather than choice. One 57-year-old African American woman remarked, “In my age I’m not trying to learn too much of anything, but because of the workforce I know I still need to work with that ethnic group [because] immigrants are here whether we like it or not.” L-RCMs spoke positively of America’s long tradition of immigration, but frequently tied this to a generalized notion of the melting pot. While not saying so directly, they seemed to infer that IMs’ assimilation/homogenization was expected (“that’s just how it works”). The two L-RCMs who were overtly supportive of IMs maintaining their culture were self-referential in their reasoning, and a bit envious, wishing their families had maintained those elements and believing it would have given them a fuller sense of identity. Yet when asked what RCMs could gain from IMs sharing their culture, overall L-RCMs’ answers were fairly thin, focused on stereotypical markers such as music and food.

Although most L-RCMs appeared to have little specific knowledge of IMs’ treatment by individuals or institutions, they did identify characteristics that influenced interactions. A couple L-RCMs believed different U.S. settings and locations treated IMs differently. For instance, they viewed lower SES and rural areas as less open to IMs. For some, this notion resulted from what could be considered stereotypical attitudes they held about other RCMs (e.g., “bigoted blue collar” according to one 48-year-old White man) or views they heard growing up in rural areas compared to their current, more urban settings. Like other groups, L-RCMs also believed IMs’ characteristics, such as their country of origin, socioeconomic status (SES), English proficiency, and accent, influenced treatment, as did RCMs’ characteristics, including upbringing, place of birth, and SES. When asked how IMs are treated, a 19-year-old White woman responded: “It depends on where they’re from and how good their English is…. Probably people who don’t speak that great of English and who don’t have that much money are not treated that well.”

2.5 | Knowledge

Finally, our analysis revealed that the amount of knowledge RCMs possessed about IMs may strongly influence their interactions with IMs. Sometimes knowledge was gained from interactions or experiences, but when not directly sought out, it was often garnered from media.

2.5.1 | 1-IMs

1-IMs frequently reported that negative treatment by RCMs resulted from RCMs’ lack of knowledge, which created misconceptions or misunderstandings. In this way, 1-IMs did not view RCMs’ negative attitudes and actions as malicious, but rather as something that could change with education, knowledge, and interaction. A 21-year-old Peruvian woman spoke for many when she said, “I have an accent and people can just catch that and some of them try to make you feel very uncomfortable, but it’s part of being ignorant.” Similarly, a 42-year-old Peruvian woman told of a professor she witnessed being told to “go back home” by an RCMs who thought she was an “illegal” immigrant: “I really think there is lots of misconceptions, prejudice … a lack of knowledge that in some way I think has also been developed through media.”

Consequently, many IMs, particularly those with postsecondary education, felt compelled to positively represent IMs from their countries of origin and/or the larger Latinx IM community and educate RCMs. “Because I’m a part of a minority group [I’m] just working to dispel stereotypes, even on a daily basis, just having very purposeful conversations,” stated a 28-year-old Nicaraguan woman. However, providing such education could be exhausting, the Peruvian
woman quoted above explained: “I will constantly correct people, but at some point it was getting very complicated because I don’t need to educate everybody in this country…. For me it reflects so much a way that people in this country conceptualize their own space around the world.”

2.5.2 2-IMs

Similarly, when asked what explained differing behaviors between RCMs they knew and RCMs writ large in their interactions with IMs, 2-IMs reflected on RCMs lack of knowledge. For example, a 19-year-old Salvadoran/Czech American woman discussed how her personal experiences growing up with RCMs were quite positive, as opposed to her view of the larger U.S. society, particularly via media:

Most of the [online] comments I see from people from the U.S. are … quite uneducated…. They always have something very racist to say or something very demeaning and it just shocks me because I guess growing up I thought racism is not a huge problem…. My American friends would never do this and yet I see all these other American people going crazy…. [It’s] just like it’s a different world to me almost.

2.5.3 H-RCMs

Most H-RCMs gained knowledge from actual contact with at least one IM, and in almost all cases, participants described their knowledge, awareness, and perspectives on IMs as a result of this contact. When asked what RCMs can gain from IMs, a 22-year-old African American man described his learning: “We came from different places and we’ve experienced different things. We bring those together…. They can tell me something that I would’ve never thought about. They’ve opened my mind to different things.”

As opposed to their own experiences, H-RCMs were concerned that IMs’ treatment by RCMs was negatively affected by what other RCMs gleaned from media. They believed media significantly shaped negative attitudes, which led to and were simultaneously exacerbated by other RCMs’ lack of contact and unfamiliarity with IMs. They saw this knowledge, or lack thereof, reflected in the word “immigrant.” Almost all H-RCMs reported that immigrant had a negative undertone, associated with lack of English proficiency, thick accent, unauthorized status, and little intergroup interaction. A 49-year-old White woman reported: “Immigrants are often called that in a negative way … in conjunction with anti-DREAM Act rhetoric or ‘stealing my jobs’… The word immigrant shouldn’t have a negative connotation, but it has come to have one.”

2.5.4 L-RCMs

Generally, L-RCMs knew little about IMs’ experiences and often defined IMs entirely by assumed and often stereotyped differences. Discussing discrimination toward IMs, one 35-year-old White man postulated, “I think it must come down to fear…. It’s got to be a lack of exposure. If you’re not exposed to a group, then it’s a lot easier to think they’re different.” Because they had little knowledge about IMs, L-RCMs’ ideas about what they might gain from IMs were trivial, which reinforced the belief that no effort needed to be made to engage with and/or gain knowledge from IMs. While two-thirds of L-RCMS conveyed empathy for IMs, it was largely expressed as projections of their own experiences.

Despite stating a general openness to diversity and that “people are people,” L-RCMs simultaneously assumed that because they preferred spending time with “like others”–that is, RCMs–IMs would feel the same, preferring to spend time with other IMs. Perhaps as a result, L-RCMs lacked experiences with IMs to test their assumptions of difference, expressed low access and desire to learn more about IMs, and thus their attitudes, assumptions, and lack of knowledge about IMs went unchanged. However, a majority of L-RCMs expressed that if they knew of inequality or discrimination occurring against IMs, they would take a stand. As a 73-year-old African American woman explained: “I just have a strong personality, so I speak up and I try to fight for people’s rights…. No, I haven’t [witnessed discrimination against immigrants] because [if I had], I would be upset.”

While H-RCMs had slightly more education than L-RCMs, L-RCMs on average had some post-secondary education.
The current study’s results suggest that attitudes and actions of both IMs and RCMs are shaped by experiences, or lack thereof, between groups, and that these pathways are iterative and reciprocal. Below, we discuss not only the results but also the ways in which efforts to improve intergroup relations might build on these processes.

In discussing their varied conceptions of the U.S. community, most participants spoke to diversity, reporting varying levels of contact with members of diverse groups. While many participants (particularly IMs) viewed interactions with diverse community members as essential (e.g., for survival, fostering respect, sharing knowledge and culture), many RCMs felt the onus was largely on IMs to foster this interaction, and some, particularly L-RCMs, did little to purposively engage in these relationships.

Conceptualizations and values of diversity as well as perceptions of others’ values of diversity appeared to shape participants’ willingness and desire to interact with “others.” Whereas most L-RCMs saw diversity as something that could and perhaps should be smoothed away to create an “us,” most H-RCMs and IMs appreciated distinct differences that existed between people whom they still could consider “us.” Moreover, whereas many H-RCMs and IMs believed knowledge and personal growth could be gained and intergroup relations could flourish through interactions with diverse individuals, many L-RCMs saw group differences as unhelpful or even threatening to themselves and the community at large, reporting little motivation to seek out interactions with “others.” However, even participants who reportedly valued diverse intergroup relationships were careful to establish relationships with others who similarly valued diversity. Consequently, when seeking to improve intergroup relations, it may be important to assess the value individuals place on diversity, their motivation for intergroup relationships, and to make room for both micro- and macro-belonging (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Wiesenfield, 1996).

Participants developed common in-group identities, and both micro- and macro-belonging, through shared settings, roles, and experiences. For example, all 2-IMs and some 1-IMs saw themselves as part of the U.S. community because of their interactions with RCMs in workplaces and schools; common roles as taxpayers and parents; and shared experiences of raising children or growing up in the United States. Moreover, as with any diverse groups, IMs and RCMs do not merely differ on length of U.S. residence, but they also converge or diverge on language proficiency, ethnicity, religion, race, SES, age, etc. Thus, identifying opportunities for contact in which similarities and differences can be explored, learned from, and celebrated is essential.

Optimal contact occurs when groups share equal status, engage in cooperative activities for a common goal, and are supported by policies (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Through the lens of the contact hypothesis, it is not surprising that primary through postsecondary school settings were especially important to participants. In addition to having these crucial ingredients for optimal contact, IMs in particular felt education increased their power and created a pathway to more equal status (Enriquez, 2011). Participants in this study also reported positive intergroup contact in clubs/organizations, workplaces, neighborhoods, churches, and created family. Future research could identify other settings in which optimal RCM–IM contact can be achieved.

Results also suggest that knowledge of IMs’ and RCMs’ history and current experiences influenced intergroup attitudes and actions. In the absence of knowledge derived from contact, the media was an important channel through which people gained knowledge and developed perceptions of one another, usually for the worse. Notably, no participants directly stated that they formed their opinions through the media, though all indicated that others did so and were critical of this practice. This was especially true not only of RCMs’ attitudes toward IMs, but also of IMs’ attitudes toward RCMs, with IMs sharing that RCMs were depicted negatively in media as well. As some of our participants described it, the effect of media was epitomized by “immigrant” taking on a negative connotation, contributing to reluctance among some RCMs to interact with IMs or to identify immigrants they knew as part of this group. That is, as has been shown in previous research (e.g., Barlow et al., 2012), a positive relationship with one person from the out-group does not always extend to their larger group.

IMs discussed daily efforts to dispel these stereotypes and represent their community “well,” but many also reported tiring of this constant “duty.” Those who reported little contact with out-group members expressed little desire to increase contact while simultaneously believing that discrimination resulted from lack of exposure and
contending that they would take action if aware of discrimination against out-group members. Thus, an important first step to improve intergroup relations may be breaking down negative media perceptions that present only one side of a complex, reciprocal relationship and discourage contact.

3.1 Limitations

While there were many strengths in the design of this study, there were also limitations. Reflecting the relatively new tradition of Latin American immigration to the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., IMs were, on average, younger than RCMs. And, aligned with the realities of the immigrant paradox (Coll & Marks, 2012), 2-IMs were less educated than other groups; however, this may also be due to their younger age. Moreover, all interviews were conducted in English, thereby potentially limiting the 1-IM sample. While saturation was reached across interviews, additional themes may arise from other participants and in other settings. Further, the positionality of the interviewers, who ranged from undergraduate to graduate level and came from a wide range of backgrounds, may have influenced responses; however, rapport, open-ended and neutral questions, and interviewer training should have reduced this possibility.

Finally, this study focused on real attitudes, actions, and experiences, rather than experimental manipulation and control, strengthening external validity but limiting the generalizability that results from randomized control studies. Thus, while these experiences represent real validity and variability, it is not possible to determine causality of any relationships and as with all qualitative research the reader must decide the applicability of these findings to their settings of interest.

3.2 Conclusion

In the current political context of the United States, there is much ongoing debate concerning the benefits and potential drawbacks of immigration. The current study can help us to understand U.S. immigrant-receiving community relationship dynamics, particularly regarding the Latinx immigrant community. Lack of knowledge, contact and perceived commonalities between groups coupled with certain personal values and characteristics all contributed to fewer efforts to engage with or gain knowledge from out-group members. At the same time, many participants believed—and illustrated—that intergroup relations could be improved through positive intergroup contact, finding commonalities, embracing diversity, and gaining first-hand knowledge of others’ experiences in supportive settings.

In the years to come, it will be imperative to counteract skewed and often negative perceptions of both immigrants and receiving community members by highlighting the ways in which experiences across differences shape attitudes and actions, and how these, in turn, are shaped by the presence or absence of experiences. The experiences of our participants suggest that turning any step in this process in a positive direction can have radiating iterative effects on community member relations.

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