Building social capital in Hightown: The role of confianza in Latina immigrants’ social networks in the New South

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the social networks of immigrant Latinas from two women’s groups in northwestern North Carolina. We explore how participants built social capital and confidence in self through sharing knowledge and experiences in intimate, mujerista spaces. We argue that traditional analyses of social capital, framed in terms of cost-benefit obligations, are insufficient for understanding the complex relationship of commitment and trust, or confianza, that characterized the social networks the women developed.

Key words: immigrants and immigration, confianza, Latin@ diaspora, social capital, women
Social scientists posit that immigrants’ development of social networks, both within and across ethnic groups, can have a number of buffering effects from the harsh social, political, and economic realities faced in the host country (Lew 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). In developing extended co-ethnic networks, immigrants are able to share information and resources, locate economic and educational opportunities (Coleman 1988), as well as share expertise and barter in services (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 1992). In this study, we explore the social networks developed by Latina immigrants in the context of two women’s groups in two rural communities in northwestern North Carolina. We discuss the ways that Latina immigrant participants leveraged the social capital embedded in their social networks to achieve educational, social, and economic goals for themselves and their families. We argue that for these women establishing relationships characterized by *confianza*, mutual trust and respect, was central to creating and maintaining effective social networks.

This study builds on the current literature in two important ways. First, we extend the analysis of immigrant networks beyond urban centers by examining rural communities in the New Latino South (Hamann, Wortham, and Murillo 2002). While the majority of immigrants continue to settle in urban areas, many seek employment in agricultural sectors (Hamilton 2004) and have settled in rural areas with limited resources in schools and other agencies (Goździak and Martin 2005), making this an important region for examining immigrant social networks. Further motivations arise from analyzing the anti-immigrant and anti-education environment in North Carolina, a climate instantiated by recent legislation that has eliminated teacher tenure, increased high-stakes testing requirements for students and teachers, and seeks to deny immigrants access to public colleges and universities.
Secondly, we suggest that the traditional analysis of social networks via social capital is a useful, yet insufficient heuristic for examining the networks of Latina immigrants. Social capital is defined as the knowledge, resources, or other benefits that an individual can access by dint of her social relationships and as a result of social interactions with others (Bourdieu 1977, 1986; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998). As we think about social capital in the context of the New South, we draw on Chicana and Latina feminist ways of knowing (Delgado Bernal 2001; Trinidad Gálvan 2006; Villenas 2001). These perspectives helped us develop a nuanced understanding of how the Latina immigrants in this study used informal educational spaces, specifically the Hightown and Lowtown Women’s Groups, to navigate their cultural, economic, and political realities. We assert that the relationships built in these spaces assisted the women in achieving small, yet significant, personal successes despite the entrenched institutional barriers they faced. Villenas (2005) and Trinidad Galván (2006) articulated the importance of mujerista, or Latina womanist, spaces in individual and collective transformation. Trinidad Galván (2006) described the mujerista space as one that

- aims to uncover, share and validate the diverse knowledge and experiences of Latinas in the United States and abroad. It takes a holistic approach to self that includes spirit and emotion, and recognizes our individual/communal struggles and efforts to name ourselves, record our history, and choose our own destiny. [2006:172]

We suggest that such spaces were crucial for the participants in our study and believe that the work that occurs within mujerista spaces needs to be more widely recognized, as this work expands notions of knowledge production and social capital.

As we examine the social networks, knowledge, and practices developed in the women’s groups, we draw on the notion of confianza, a Latin@ cultural construct that signifies a complex
relationship of commitment and trust (Dyrness 2007, 2011; Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 1992). In their research on the exchange of knowledge, skills, and resources in the U.S.-México border region, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) discussed the ways in which children are socialized from a very young age to develop thick bonds with family and extended family. These bonds are characterized by a commitment and attention to the needs of others and the development of respect and mutual trust—confianza. While confianza implies a trusting relationship, the concept extends beyond a belief in another individual’s integrity or reliability to include a commitment to that other person. In dominant U.S. culture, when one states that she trusts another person, this is an indication of reliability and an affirmation of that other person’s moral character. However, confianza also implies reciprocity. As O’Connor (1990) explained, “to be considered de confianza is both an honor and a burden, for it implies a responsibility to help people in a wide variety of ways” (87). More recently, in her ethnography of a group of Latina mother activists, Dyrness (2011) articulated the role of confianza in transforming individual courage and confidence into collective action for social change. Hence, being able to develop thick bonds with others promotes confidence in self and agency. We argue that confianza was an essential quality of effective social networks for the women in our study.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical construct of social capital was first developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1986) and later, Coleman (1988), to describe the benefits that accrue to individuals through their participation in particular social groups or communities. Since then, the concept has been used in educational research in myriad ways (see Dika and Singh 2002 for a critical synthesis of the literature). While both Bourdieu and Coleman conceptualize social capital along the lines of the potential benefits that individuals may attain as a result of their social networks, there are key
differences between the two. Coleman (1988) emphasized a functional system of social capital where group values and norms help establish and maintain trust within a community. These elements help create what Coleman referred to as closure, or the establishment of strong ties within a particular community that ensure the observance of norms and expectations.

Coleman’s functional approach to understanding social capital was critiqued by Portes (1998), who noted that the sources of social capital (the relationships) and the actual benefits accrued (opportunities and resources) needed to be more thoroughly examined. Other critiques assert that Coleman’s work fails to address the historical inequality of power and access to resources within and among groups of different ethnic, gender, racial, and class positions (Lew 2004; Stanton-Salazar 2001), suggesting a naïve assumption that social capital exists in a sociopolitical and economic vacuum (Morrow 1999). These critiques are addressed by Bourdieu’s work, which places issues of power and social class at the center of analysis.

Bourdieu’s (1986) work on social capital needs to be understood in concert with his work on cultural and symbolic capital, all of which are integral elements of a larger framework of social reproduction. Based on his research, Bourdieu noted that people put forth much effort to develop and maintain social networks that they believe will result in increased economic and cultural capital. Social capital then is comprised of the social network itself, and also the amount and quality of the economic capital (such as scholarships, loans, gifts, jobs) or cultural capital that one is able to leverage through associations (Bourdieu 1986; Portes 1998). The cultural capital that one can access through social networks may be embodied—developing relationships with people who are considered high status or experts who might confer similar status or entrée through association—or institutionalized, recognition by or admission to schools, licenses, certifications, visas, or the like. Bourdieu conceptualized the transfer of social capital as a system
of privilege and control for the dominant classes, emphasizing how access to institutional relationships and resources is highly selective and embedded in a hierarchical system. According to Bourdieu, those in power create the criteria for access, thereby constituting a reproductive cycle in their favor. Nonetheless, individuals and groups develop creative methods for subverting this cycle of reproduction in order to secure what they need for their family and kin. In the case of the Latina immigrant women in this study, their ability to develop relationships and networks characterized by confianza helped to disrupt the reproductive cycle by creating spaces for formal and informal learning and exchange of knowledge and resources.

Critical Chicana and Latina scholars posit that exploration of the social and cultural capital of Latina immigrants and Chicanas must begin with acknowledgement and examination of the knowledge gained through personal experience and in intimate spaces (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006). Because personal experiences reflect collective experience, they are foundational to the production of knowledge and agency, and are valued just as highly as institutionalized social capital (Delgado Bernal 2001; Dyrness 2007; Trinidad Galván 2006). For example, in her work with Latina mothers in the San Francisco Bay area, Delgado-Gaitan (2005) demonstrated how mothers helped one another accumulate social capital and support their daughters’ education. The group had weekly meetings that included the sharing of personal stories, as well as informational sessions about child development and the U.S. education system. Over the course of their first year the women were “taking classes in English, buying computers for their children, and becoming more visible in their children’s schools—in effect building social capital” (2005:268). Delgado-Gaitan’s work demonstrated the power of collective mujerista spaces, as the women garnered individual strength and knowledge thorough the sharing of social and cultural experience.
Developing confidence and agency through the sharing of personal experience was also a key finding in Dyrness’ (2007, 2011) ethnographic study of a Latina parent group. Dyrness found that the women valued opportunities to recount personal experiences during their meetings because through their conversations, their individual experiences were recognized, validated, and contextualized as part of a collective struggle. Through the pooling and analysis of personal experience, women developed the confianza needed to speak out in public settings where they might have otherwise felt insignificant or marginalized. Thus the aggregation and development of social capital within Latina mother controlled spaces, provided the women with the chance to engage in both individual and collective empowerment, which then allowed them to participate in public forums. Similarly, Trinidad Galván’s (2005) research among grassroots literacy groups in México demonstrated how the women used these groups to have conversations about politics, gender roles and other consequential issues. Both Dyrness (2007) and Trinidad Galván (2005) argue that the solidarity, convivencia (communalism), and confianza the women created in the context of their group meetings were essential in the processes of agency and empowerment, which in turn assisted women in penetrating official social networks from which they had previously been excluded.

While Latina and other immigrants may gain greater access to a wider variety of social networks after honing confidence and skills within spaces they control, ethnic identity, socio-economic class, and immigration status all mediate the kinds of capital that immigrant families and youth have access to, as well as the goals they are attempting to fulfill (Lew 2004; Stanton-Salazar 2001). The economic well being of a community also appears to influence the extent to which social networks translate into social or economic benefits (Menjívar 2000). As Menjívar (2000) points out, there is a tendency for researchers to overemphasize the positive aspects of
immigrants’ co-ethnic networks and their attendant social capital. She warns that it is important to recognize that relationships are always contingent and evolving and should not be seen as a static safety net for immigrants and their children. In communities that are under economic duress, specific individuals may begin to feel tapped out by excessive demands on their time and resources (Menjívar 2000; Portes 1998); community cultural norms of solidarity are put to the test when individuals are consistently dehumanized and atomized by the broader economic system that appears to thrive on undocumented and unregulated immigrant labor.

**Methods and Research Context**

The data discussed in this article are taken from an ethnographic study exploring the experiences of immigrants and spaces of intersection and interchange between the “locals” and “immigrants” in northwestern North Carolina. We took a qualitative approach to our research, employing participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and the collection of artifacts (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). Primary data collection for this study occurred from the spring of 2011 through the summer of 2013; however, the authors continue to maintain involvement and contact with many of our participants. To protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms are used to refer to all people, places and organizations.

Our primary method of data collection was the ethnographic interview. We interviewed 43 participants, both immigrant and U.S.-born, who represent a variety of social positions including parents, educators, social service providers, community advocates, business owners, students, and religious leaders. Interview participants ranged in age from 13 to 65; 25 were immigrants (Mexican or South American), while 18 were non-immigrants (European American). To identify interview participants, we began by contacting local social service agencies and educational and community organizations that serve the immigrant community. We then used
snowball sampling (Patton 2001) whereby initial participants suggested additional contacts. This process allowed us to map out social ties, identify and confirm important people, places, and organizations, and locate contacts that we may have otherwise overlooked. This sampling method confirmed persons considered central to the Latin@ community in the area, but may have also limited our sample to people who participated in relatively mainstream social networks. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and addressed personal experiences with immigration, adjusting to life in rural North Carolina, perceptions regarding the contributions of immigrants to the local community, language use, learning English, and experiences with schools. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, depending upon the preference of the participant, and were audio recorded. Those interviews conducted in Spanish were translated by the authors with assistance from native Spanish-speaking participants, namely Melinda and Beatriz, members of the Hightown Women’s Group.

In addition to conducting ethnographic interviews, we attended and observed a wide variety of community events including two women’s groups that met weekly, church services, ESL classes, fiestas, soccer games, and other community events. The authors conducted approximately three hours of field observations per week, mostly in the context of the women’s groups. The data analysis presented here is rooted in the first author’s participation in and observations of these women’s groups and our interviews with 25 female participants, both Latina and Anglo. Of the Latina participants, all but three were Mexican-origin and were diverse with regards to age, education, and social background. Many did not have the proper legal documentation needed to obtain a driver’s license or social security number in the U.S. and these women’s undocumented status was a frequent source of frustration. Over half of the women we
interviewed lived in mixed status families, with one or more of their children born in the U.S. and others who were born or still living in the country of origin.

Our research is influenced and guided by the precepts of Chicana and Latina feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal 1998) in that we wish to develop collaborative, respectful, and participatory relationships with our participants. As other researchers who work with Latin@ and immigrant populations note, the development of trust, or confianza, between researchers and participants is an essential aspect of culturally appropriate research design (DelgadoyGaitan 2005; Dyrness 2007; Foley and Valenzuela 2005; Villenas 2001). Where possible, we have sought feedback from participants. The original manuscript was reviewed by two participants, and we have engaged in many informal conversations to clarify interpretations of events or relationships. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that our interpretation of participants’ perspectives and life experiences is necessarily incomplete. As White, European-American faculty members in a mainstream educational institution, we are not insiders in the Latin@ community. We are conscious of our positionality and privilege and believe that, as much as possible, our research should be grounded in the life experiences of our participants. In representing other people’s experiences in complex ways, we acknowledge that our interpretation is influenced by our cultural lenses and have worked to interrogate our understandings by continuing to engage in dialogue with others. We continue to build authentic and multi-dimensional relationships with some of our participants—developing friendships, and spending time with one another in our homes or at school and community events.

**Research Context**

Northwestern North Carolina is a predominantly rural area. The Appalachian and Blue Ridge Mountains are prominent features that define much of the physical and social
environment. While the mountains create inspiring scenery, they also contribute to rugged
topography and isolated communities separated from one another by ridgelines and limited road
access in many areas. These geographic realities combined with limited public transportation and
harsh state laws restricting access to drivers’ licenses contribute to the isolation of many
immigrant families in the area. Despite a thirty-year history of Latin@ migrant labor in the
region’s Christmas tree industry (Hamilton 2004), the area remains predominantly White.
According to U.S. Census (2011) data, over 90% of the residents across a five-county region
identified as White non-Hispanic. Like many rural areas in the Latin@ diaspora, the overall
number of Latin@s remains quite low (approx. 4%); however, it is important to note the steady
increase in this group in recent years. Between 2000 and 2010, North Carolina had the fifth
fastest growing population of Latin@ children in the United States (Passel, Cohn, and Lopez
2011).

Participants in this study lived and worked in five different counties; however, the
majority of our participants lived in the communities of Hightown and Lowtown. Hightown is a
picturesque college town of about 17,000. Due to the presence of the university, wealthy retirees,
and a strong tourist industry, the town has a relatively robust economy (although the poverty rate
in the county is about 25%) and a reputation for being a politically progressive and welcoming
community. The primary industries in the area include the university, the hospital, the tourist
industry, and Christmas tree farms. Lowtown, a rural community “off the mountain,” is about 40
minutes from Hightown. Lowtown has fewer economic opportunities and is generally more
politically conservative. The largest employer in Lowtown is a poultry-processing plant owned
by an international agribusiness. Many Latin@s work either at the processing plant or on one of
the many poultry farms in the area.
Social Networks, Social Capital and Educational Goals

In what follows we explore the ways that participants’ involvement in the women’s groups in Hightown and Lowtown helped them to accrue the social capital needed to modify or improve educational opportunities for themselves and their children. Three prominent themes serve as the framework for discussing our findings. First, these groups were fruitful educational spaces for the women, and this education took place through the exchange and analysis of personal experience. Second, the groups provided support and guidance with regards to the education and socialization of children. Finally, we examine the women’s efforts and attitudes with regards to being involved in events that were organized by the wider community. We noted that the development of confianza, trust, confidence, respect, and reciprocity, was necessary for establishing productive social networks. We explore the ways that these social networks and spaces were significant for developing knowledge and agency. We agree with Delgado Bernal (2001) that it is crucial to highlight the ways that social and cultural knowledge learned and transmitted in intimate spaces can be activities of resistance. However, we also attempt to illustrate the complex system of barriers many participants faced as female, brown, and undocumented persons in a predominantly White rural community.

The Hightown Women’s Group (HWG), initiated in 1999 by the director of the county’s cooperative extension, was a group of four to eight women who met once a week to support one another in learning English and raising their children. This group was loosely led by Carol, their ESL teacher, who had worked with them since 2003. Carol was a White, European-American woman in her late sixties who learned Spanish through her service in the Peace Corps in Honduras. She was respected, loved, and well connected in Hightown Latin@ and Anglo communities. Central members of HWG included Melinda, Laura, Beatriz, and Alma. Other
women participated more sporadically. The first author observed and participated in the group on and off beginning in 2009, with regular weekly participation throughout 2011 and 2012. During our interview, Carol noted that the group was socially and culturally diverse, and stated that in other circumstances the women would have never socialized with one another due to differences in social class background. For example, Melinda was a bubbly, outgoing venezolana, who told a riches-to-rags story during our interview, while Laura was from a very poor family in Chiapas, México and had to support herself from the age of 13. Beatriz and Alma, who were sisters-in-law and comadres, were from central México. Beatriz had a college education and had come to the U.S. to reunite her family; her husband worked for a local tree farmer. Alma came to the U.S. to join family members who were already here and to find employment.

The HWG had several unique attributes. For one thing the women were welcomed to bring their children to group meetings, something that was not allowed at the free ESL classes offered at the local community college. Although the group was established as an English as a Second Language (ESL) class, and all of the women affirmed that one reason they attended was in order to improve their English, it did not look like a typical English class with the teacher at the front of the room and the students working on dialogues and grammar worksheets. Instead, the group was a place where women could come to gain social and emotional support, exchange advice, share recipes, and generally convivir (share life). While Carol, la maestra, was treated with the utmost respect, and provided direction and leadership for the group, the class and space was controlled by the participants. The relationships and confianza that the group had developed created a context for self-determination and responsibility to ensure that the group served the women’s best interests. More than one of our participants proudly told us the story of how they forced out one of their first ESL teachers because she was dissatisfied with what she viewed as
the women’s unorganized and lackadaisical approach to learning English, or as Beatriz put it, “ella no pudo adaptarse a nuestra forma de ser” [she could not get used to our way of being].

In contrast to the Hightown Women’s Group, the Lowtown Women’s Group (LWG) was organized, developed and run by Latinas. This group was initiated by Cinthia, an immigrant from Sinaloa, México who worked in occupational health for Latin@ workers, specifically those employed at the local poultry-processing plant. During the fall of 2011, when the first author and our graduate assistant visited and participated in this group, they had been meeting for about two years and had six regular participants. The group met in a county building where other classes were offered, and thus were able to take advantage of the available childcare. The LWG focused on health and nutrition, and some participants weighed themselves at the beginning of each meeting. Cinthia organized the meetings, invited guest speakers to discuss issues in healthcare or nutrition, shared relevant news items, and led the women in health or handicraft activities.

**Educational Goals and Personal Empowerment: The Central Role of Personal Experience**

Both women’s groups promoted the sharing of knowledge and information, with the ultimate goal of helping the women actualize their goals, improve their lives, and become more comfortable in their communities. It is critical to note that above and beyond the explicit foci of the groups—learning English and learning about health and nutrition—the women’s own personal experiences and interests constituted valuable knowledge, and were central in shaping the content and trajectory of the meetings. The group leaders, Carol and Cinthia, made clear and consistent efforts to draw on the knowledge and experiences of participants to enrich the educational development of all of the women involved, including themselves. Participants’ personal life experiences served as the primary curriculum and learning was participatory and collective (everyone is a teacher), rather than hierarchical (one teacher with many students).
During the HWG meetings, Carol treated participants’ needs and personal experiences with interest, empathy, and importance. The following excerpt exemplifies Carol’s emphasis on tying their English class sessions to the women’s life experiences and her interest in exchanging knowledge about language use:

Carol began by showing the ladies a picture of poison ivy: "I brought this to show you so you’ll recognize this and teach you a saying we have, leaves of 3, leave it be." Alma shared a story in Spanish about her husband taking out a poison ivy vine during the winter, but still having a terrible reaction to it. Carol and I learned the word “comezon” which means itchy. Carol also shared the word she knew for vine from Honduras and then looked up it up in her dictionary. [Field notes, September 7, 2011]

This excerpt highlights a common occurrence—the exchange of information, a sincere interest on the part of the “teacher” in learning from the “students,” and comparing and playing with language. The exchange may seem inconsequential, but we view it as an example of the ways that the women’s knowledge and experiences formed the primary content of the education that took place during HWG meetings. Carol demonstrated her respect and care for the women by listening to them and allowing them to direct the pace and direction of their class meetings. In this way, members of this group were able to form deep and authentic bonds with one another, which promoted and supported each individual person’s growth.

One of the favorite activities of the HWG was their organic garden. While working on the garden, the women shared information about herbs, cooking, preserving food, and traditional medicine. For example, when the women discovered that they had an herb called ruda (rue) growing in the garden, they shared methods for using this herb to combat stomach or muscle aches and shared cuttings with other Latin@ families in the area. Yoga was another favorite
activity and one that allowed Melinda to share her expertise since she was trained in
transcendental meditation. The women were the driving force behind the group, and their
identities as mothers, as mexicana or venezolana, as bilingual, as practitioners of medicine, or
meditation, or herbalists were accepted and drawn upon to enrich the group.

At the LWG meetings, as the women engaged in various handicraft or educational
projects, their conversations ranged from cross-cultural marriages, to where to get a good deal on
clothing, to how to download and view an upcoming episode of Teresa, their favorite telenovela.
While the women loved sharing a good laugh, personal experiences related to being an
immigrant, being a Latin@ in Lowtown, and learning English were also central content. For
example, during one meeting, the women were sharing their experiences with learning English.
Cinthia related that when she arrived in Lowtown, she thought that speaking English would be
no problem since she had studied English in school and already knew it:

“Ya sabía ingles” (laughing and with irony). She said that she was surprised by the effect
that accent and regionalism had on the English here. She couldn’t understand anyone, and
no one could understand her. She told a story about how she had gone to the doctor with
her sister to help translate, but had such a hard time figuring out what was being said that
her sister ended up translating for her! Cinthia then told a story about when she and her
husband (who is white and a local) were dating that he was having some friends over to
play board games. She came in to bring them some food and he introduced her as his
maid… “Yeah, I came in and he was like, ‘This is my maid.’ He thought he was joking,
but I told him not to talk to me like that.” [Field notes, December 5, 2011]

Cinthia spoke English fluently and worked with a local university; the women in the group
looked up to her. In sharing her personal experiences with language barriers and discrimination,
Cinthia contributed to the creation of a safe space where frustrating or even humiliating experiences could be discussed, examined, and used for learning. Through sharing these personal stories and engaging in these weekly exchanges, the women developed the thick and reciprocal relationships implied by the notion of confianza. In doing so, the women were able to contextualize personal incidents in relation to broader social issues such as gender, social class, or language discrimination (Dyrness 2007; Trinidad Galván 2006).

Cinthia also used group meeting times to develop the women’s agency. Cinthia’s goals included returning to graduate school and increasing her responsibilities at work, and so she planned to scale back her involvement in the group. She was concerned with growing the LWG’s membership and wanted to build the women’s capacity for self-direction. To facilitate this, during one meeting we observed, Cinthia led a brainstorming session to identify the needs and resources in the Lowtown Latin@ community. Cinthia began by leading the group in a reflection on their accomplishments and activities, and then she asked each woman to list and discuss problems faced by the community. Each woman was provided time to speak. Topics raised included language use and communication difficulties between parents and their children, access to healthcare and bilingual doctors, and recycling. While this session primarily focused on naming challenges, Cinthia intended to develop a list of resources based on the problems identified. Cinthia’s use of this reflective and participatory process was educational in and of itself since she directly involved the women in a community-based problem solving method.

The women’s groups provided participants with much needed space for socializing and relaxing in the company of other women. Sometimes the women attended the group meetings in the face of protestation on the part of spouses or children. When asked by her husband why she needed to go to a women’s group, one of the women in the Lowtown group explained, “you have
soccer and I have my women’s group” (Field notes, September 19, 2011). During our interview, Melinda, a central member of HWG, explained why she continued to participate in HWG, even while she had become disillusioned with other organizations:

…it’s more flexible, because if you come stressed out and you want to share a problem, everyone is going to listen to you and we will forget about class… And sometimes we get information from the university, from other people who want to help or contribute and in some way they teach us. A lot of times you might think it’s a waste of time, but it’s not so much a waste of time but rather everyone can relax, can express herself and you can say, “Do you all know where they do this or that? Someone called me and they asked me this. Does anyone know how this is done?” And so we proceed sharing information.

Melinda highlighted how the confianza developed in the HWG fostered a sense of responsibility and commitment to the women’s immediate needs or concerns over any predetermined “English class” agenda. Additionally, Melinda indicated how the HWG led to direct knowledge exchange, learning and the development of social capital. The group was a comfortable place to create friendships, socialize, and develop new social relationships outside of family networks, an opportunity not always available to participants. Beatriz explained that the group was the one
place where she could meet new friends like Carol, and talk with other Latinas outside of the home. Otherwise, her life was fully occupied with caring for her family. The women’s groups allowed opportunities for women to focus on themselves, their families, and their goals and interests. In this way, the HWG was a real source of educational, social, and even economic capital for the participants.

**Supporting and Guiding Educational Choices for Youth**

In addition to being educational spaces for the women involved, both women’s groups provided support for the education and socialization of Latin@ youth. All of the participants wanted their children to be successful in schools and most cited this as a primary reason for either coming to or staying in the United States. As Melinda wondered aloud during our interview, “Is this all worth it? In my case, it is worth it for the education of my children and for the security that they have here; for those reasons I have tried to endure…” The women’s groups helped participants navigate U.S. school systems and provided spaces for women to air questions and gain insight from others. Support sought ranged from straightforward needs such as assistance in filling out school forms, to more serious issues related to parenting style, language acquisition, cultural identity and maintaining desired parent-child relationships and roles.

The struggle to be involved in their children’s education especially as those children were rapidly acquiring English and becoming “American” was a frequent topic of conversation in both women’s groups. One of the common challenges discussed was communicating effectively with teachers. Laura, a member of HWG, found it especially challenging because hers were the only Latin@ children enrolled at her local elementary school, and none of the teachers spoke Spanish nor were they accustomed to working with bilingual children. Laura dealt with language and cultural differences, as well as instances of racism. For Laura, the women’s group was an
invaluable source of support and social capital. When her daughter confronted racism in school, Laura drew on the resources of the group, specifically, Carol, who volunteered to meet with Laura and her daughter’s teacher on several occasions:

Llevé muchas veces a Carol porque la otra cosa fue que cuando (mi hija mayor) entró acá, le decían que era diferente a ellos. Que ella era una niña muy diferente. Entonces yo le decía a la maestra que si ella se daba cuenta. Entonces ella: --sí, sí, todos los niños son diferentes, y les mostramos libros de Filipinas, de Honduras, de México, de de, este, de Chino, de todo, de todo el mundo… y dice, y sabemos, todos los niños saben que son diferentes. Pasó, ese fue la primera, la segunda fue de, a los niños se les pidió hacer un dibujo de sus compañeros, entonces se la pintaron de negra y le dijeron horrible.

Entonces ella vino llorando…

[I took Carol (to the school) many times because when (my oldest daughter) enrolled there, they told her that she was very different from them. That she was a girl who was very different. And so I asked the teacher if she had noticed this. And she said, yes, yes, all children are different, and we show them books from the Philippines, Honduras, México, China, from all over the world, and we know that all children are different. So that happened, that was the first incident. The second was when they asked the children to draw pictures of their classmates. And so they drew her with black skin and called her horrible (things). So she came home crying…]

Being able to air and discuss her concerns in a safe forum validated her experiences and helped to give Laura both the confianza and the tangible support needed to speak with the teacher directly about a sticky topic. The support of the women’s group assisted Laura in acting with more agency and power than she might have otherwise. This finding resonates with previous
research (Delgado-Gaitan 2005; Dyrness 2007, 2011; Trinidad Galván 2005) that notes that sharing such experiences helps to reinforce the reciprocal relationships, as well as develop women’s confidence in asserting their perspectives public settings, even if those perspectives are not always accepted or acted upon. In this case, although the teacher rejected the notion that Laura’s daughter had experienced racism in her classroom, Laura still felt somewhat satisfied because she was able to express her misgivings. While the women’s groups did not necessarily offer solutions, they did provide the women an opportunity to name their lived experiences with racism and other challenges. This was a significant source of social capital because these exchanges encouraged the women to problematize their material, social, and political conditions and to think through possible responses with one another (Freire 1970; Trinidad Galván 2006).

In addition to being able to collectively address common challenges, the women’s groups also provided a forum for sharing success stories that served as positive examples and inspiration. Frequently, developing the confidence and agency to speak up in public spaces was the focus of these narratives. For example, Beatriz shared a story in which the principal at her son’s school tried to keep her from visiting her son’s kindergarten classroom:

Beatriz signed in at the office and the principal approached her and asked her where she was going. She told her, and the principal said, ‘Well I’m very protective of my teachers and I don’t want to interrupt the class. I can bring your son his snack.’ But instead of giving the snack to the principal, Beatriz explained that she was just going to check in and that they could go together. And so they did! The principal walked with Beatriz to the classroom and as it happened the kids weren’t in the room and the teacher was by herself. The principal commented that Beatriz was lucky that she would have the time to talk with the teacher. [Field notes, August 17 2011]
Everyone present applauded Beatriz for asserting herself with the principal and not being intimidated. A primary motivation for learning English for the women who attended the group, was to improve their ability to effectively support their children’s education. Hearing stories from parents like Beatriz was helpful when it came to discussing norms and expectations for communicating effectively with teachers and administrators.

Another way in which the women’s groups provided important social capital relates to the ways in which they supported efforts to maintain the Spanish language in the face of the heavily English-only environment found in the schools and surrounding area. All of the women we spoke with expressed a desire that their children maintain Spanish. During the summer, when children frequently attended, the HWG became an informal educational space that supported cross-linguistic and cross-cultural exchanges. Carol and Molly, a local artist who worked with the group each summer, coordinated gardening, cooking, and art projects. In 2011, the summer program focused on clean water and clean rivers. The following excerpt from our field notes demonstrates how this was a rich and multi-layered educational space for children and parents:

Inside was a whirlwind of activity! All of the children were there, ages 3 to 14 along with Ag Center staff and staff and interns from the farmworker health program. The kids were making fish prints with rubber fish and paint and learning about fish food chains and body parts—they had a poster paper with a fish that they had labeled in English and Spanish. Melinda went to see what her son R. was doing. W., the educator from the Ag Center was talking to him and he was teaching her how to say, *el pez nada en el rio* [the fish swims in the river]. W. explained that the kids had been teaching them the Spanish words for different aspects of the activity. R. and W. showed Melinda the fish food chain and they talked about a crayfish that R. had seen in the river. This conversation took
place in English and Spanish with R. explaining things to his mom in Spanish while W. communicated in English. [Field notes July 6, 2011]

In the context of the women’s group, the children had opportunities to not just learn, but also be teachers. They were able to play with one another and express themselves creatively. The strong bonds and confianza that the women built with one another and with facilitators like Carol and Molly, created space for the women’s group to become a truly bilingual, bicultural, and multi-generational space for formal and informal learning. In this way, the women’s group reinforced Latin@ cultural norms and the Spanish language as an essential aspect of identity.

Community Involvement: Claiming Recognition and Self-Definition

In addition to considering how the women’s groups fostered knowledge, confidence, and agency for individual women and their children, we also examined the women’s efforts and attitudes towards being involved in events planned in the broader community. In reflecting on these efforts, we believe that they demonstrated evidence of the women’s desire for recognition and self-definition. In our interview with Cinthia, she told us of many instances of misrecognition—being perceived as a janitor in her place of employment, as a maid in her own home, and as a monolingual Spanish-speaker in a local fastfood restaurant. By participating in the women’s groups, Cinthia and other participants found ways to define themselves and to be recognized in positive ways by the broader community. For example, the women of the LWG expressed a collective desire to be recognized as valuable and contributing members of the community, as evidenced by the group’s decision and commitment to participate in the annual Christmas parade in Lowtown. Beginning in October, the women invested significant time, energy, and resources organizing themselves to participate in the parade. They reviewed videos
of dances, designed banners, and prepared traditional dresses and outfits. Field notes from the meeting the week after the parade illustrate the importance of this public act for the women:

All of the women were in high spirits because of the parade and they seemed to be empowered that they had planned and executed such a successful event. They discussed and reviewed their performance and looked at an article in the paper to see if they had been mentioned. The paper had little in the way of a story and no photos of the group. It was clear that the women have become more dedicated to the group, and that their activities are attracting notice from other Hispanic women, and from the larger Lowtown community. [Field notes, December 5, 2011]

The women were proud of their work and concerned with how they were perceived in the broader community. In the end, Cinthia asserted that they had been one of the most interesting groups there, as most of the other participants in the parade were very similar. Although the parade moved too quickly for them to showcase their dances, the women succeeded in injecting Latin@ culture, music, and language into the parade. Given the politically conservative climate of Lowtown and the limited visibility of Latin@s, we view this act as one of genuine resistance, wherein the women of the LWG artfully and assertively claimed recognition in a very public forum. Our data demonstrated many instances in which local Anglo residents expressed displeasure or even anger when Latino participants asserted their ethnic, linguistic, or cultural identities. That the women had the desire to put themselves in public view for anyone to evaluate speaks to the strength and confianza that they developed in the context of the LWG.

Our data from the Hightown Women’s Group reveal a different trajectory regarding their relationship with the broader community. The HWG was the one well-known group of Latin@s in Hightown, and as a result, whenever someone wanted to get a Latin@ perspective on an issue,
increase Latin@ community involvement, or learn more about Latin@ culture, they would contact HWG for assistance. The members of the HWG were often asked to participate in community events, or asked to serve in volunteer positions in Anglo-run organizations. This was a source of both pride and frustration for the women. For example, several years ago the HWG was asked to collaborate with faculty from a university in the eastern part of the state to sponsor a Health and Safety Fair for the Latin@ community in Hightown. The women were involved in months of planning, post-event evaluation, and were invited to share their feedback with other groups in the state. The fair was well attended and deemed a success by HWG members.

More recently the group was invited to participate and represent the Latin@ community in the Fourth of July parade. The women were invited to participate by Molly, who offered to come out to Beatriz’s house to help them make costumes and props, and they enthusiastically agreed. Throughout the month of June, the women and their children invested time and energy creating costumes and puppets. However, because they had opted to work out of Beatriz’s home instead of on-site at the arts collective, their many hours of preparation went relatively unnoticed by the organizers of the parade. Further, although the parade organizers said they wanted greater involvement from the Latino community and even named the parade *Viva la Libertad*, they had not prepared a welcoming statement in Spanish, directions to participants were not provided bilingually, and the organizers were not willing to provide the women and their families with meal tickets that were given to other volunteers.

According to Carol, the group was proud of their status as the go-to group of Latin@s in Hightown and enjoyed participating or serving when called on. However, Melinda highlighted a different perspective. In her experience, groups formed to assist the Latin@ community asked too much of one’s personal time with few concrete accomplishments to show for one’s efforts.
Frequently being asked to serve as the token Latin@ representative resulted in some participants feeling exploited by the Anglo community. While the women were developing confianza and capital in the context of their group, the central members of the group—Laura, Melinda, Beatriz, and Alma—did not have sufficient reserves in terms of time, money, documentation, or English proficiency to respond to every request for community involvement. The women of HWG prioritized learning English, discussing their children’s experiences in school, and gathering with other Latinas in a supportive space to share experiences (convivir). As Laura put it, “una de las principales que me gusta ir, es, sería porque convivo con las mujeres” [One of the major reasons that I like to go, is just to share time and life with the women].

**Structural Challenges**

The Hightown and Lowtown women’s groups were empowering spaces characterized by confianza and respect for the women’s lived experiences. As a result, participants like Laura leveraged the information and support gained from the group in order to take action to improve her daughter’s education. The groups provided space for women to name and share their experiences with racism, power, and mistrust in schools and other public spaces. While we acknowledge these accomplishments and the vital role that the women’s groups played, we do not wish to present an overly triumphant or simplistic picture. Rather we believe it is critical to discuss how the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural realities of the region frequently undermined many of the benefits accrued from these social networks. Despite their successes, many of our participants’ efforts were constricted due to the sociopolitical context. Access to education and well-paying jobs required documentation and proficiency in English. For example, although Beatriz had a college education, spoke English reasonably well, and was encouraged by the principal to apply, she was unable to secure a job as a translator at her children’s school due
to her legal status. She and her family decided to return to Mexico because of the stressors and uncertainties of living on one income and as a mixed-status family. Laura, a resourceful and self-reliant individual, lost her job at a local fastfood restaurant due to her documentation status. She was able to find a new job as a hotel worker in a nearby tourist destination, but this increased her commute and decreased her ability to socialize with friends and spend time with her family. After accepting her new job, Laura was unable to continue consistent participation in HWG.

Kristina, one of HWG’s more occasional members, came to the U.S. just one semester short of completing a nursing degree in México City. She has all but given up the idea of becoming a nurse, saying “Yo creo que ya se perdió” [I think it’s already lost]. After being in the U.S. for five years, too much time had passed to resume studies in México, and her lack of English and documentation constituted significant obstacles to pursuing the degree here in the U.S. Because barriers like these accrue from documentation status, they go unacknowledged, are accepted as the norm, or are blamed on individuals. These struggles are then individualized and atomized, rather than seen as structural obstacles and inequities arising from unjust social policy. The individualization of struggles and the positioning of structural challenges as being the result of personal choice hinder peoples’ ability to see issues of misrecognition, marginalization, or discrimination as a collective enterprise.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the social networks of Latina immigrants in rural northwestern North Carolina in order to understand the ways in which these women used their networks to achieve social, economic, and educational goals. Although our participants encountered challenges, many were viewed as leaders and sources of support and capital for others in their networks. Social capital and networks of exchange in this immigrant community appeared to
function most effectively when a level of trust and respect had been developed within the social network. The concept of *confianza*—which embodies notions of reciprocity, confidence, trust, and respect—is key to our understanding of how social capital was developed and utilized by Latina immigrants in this study.

Coleman (1988) asserted that people develop trust and consolidate social capital through on-going mutual exchange. Data in our study certainly corroborate this normative view of social capital, but we argue that the relationships that developed in the context of the women’s groups were characterized by confianza, and thus went beyond a simple calculus of cost-benefit analysis— beyond feeling *obligated* to return a favor (Coleman, 1988:s102). In the women’s groups, members had developed respectful and reciprocal relationships, yes, to exchange and share information, material resources, job tips and the like, but also for the purpose of personal and collective empowerment (Trinidad Galván 2005, 2006). In these settings, the confianza that was developed allowed the women to share information that was personal and reflected difficult experiences. The dialogue of sharing life experiences and engaging in mutual problem-solving served to reaffirm the collectivity of experiences and provide a context of recognition which counteracted the many instances of misrecognition and symbolic violence that women dealt with on a day-to-day basis (Bourdieu 1991; Delgado Bernal et al. 2006). Further, the development and maintenance of equitable, trusting and reciprocal relationships *across* social class, cultural background, race, age, education and documentation status created spaces that filled unique and important purposes in these women’s lives and allowed the women to engage with mainstream institutions or events in ways that they designed and initiated themselves. The women participating were centrally involved in defining the purposes and foci of these groups; these purposes shifted with their needs and interests. In this way, the women’s strengths, skills, and
cultural identities were affirmed and developed through their participation. This finding illustrates the power of mujerista spaces as educational spaces that recognize individual and collective experience (Delgado Bernal 2001)—individual experiences served as catalysts for reflection and action for the wider group (Dyrness 2007). Social inequities and structures, particularly documentation and economic status, constrained individual’s abilities to employ the social capital that they were developing in these intimate spaces. Nonetheless, we assert that these groups provided important opportunities for members to develop confidence and skills that they later applied in broader community settings.

Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986) noted that the goals and desires of the lower classes, or in this case of immigrants, are based on aspirations created by the dominant groups who also ultimately control access to public institutions. We argue that the knowledge, agency and confianza that participants developed through their social networks, specifically the women’s groups, supported them in defining their own goals and engaging with public institutions on their own terms. Nonetheless, access to social capital continues to be constrained by the dominant classes through the discourses of “legality” or “illegality” of persons. The issue of how documentation status is interpreted by individuals and the extent to which this influences people’s desire to involve themselves in broader community outreach efforts is a question that merits further exploration. However we conclude that lack of legal documentation severely undercut individuals’ abilities to convert individual human capital into positive social capital that might benefit a wider swathe of the Latin@ community. Participants who were in the U.S. without legal documentation faced one obstacle after the next. While these problems were mitigated and even disrupted by their social networks and the social capital these networks afforded, being well connected was not enough to significantly alter the economic and material
realities of their day-to-day lives. Our study supports Menjívar’s (2000) assertion that even thick bonds characterized by confianza are made much more fragile and tenuous by the precarious socio-economic status of many Latin@ immigrants.

Even though participants in our study acknowledged many obstacles, Latin@ immigrants in Hightown and Lowtown continue to build supportive networks characterized by confianza, despite the economic, political, and physical challenges they face. Perhaps more importantly, these networks provide informal educational spaces that engender grassroots organizing efforts to address immigrant rights. In North Carolina, after legislators tried to block access to drivers’ licenses for young adults who gained legal status through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (Department of Homeland Security, 2012), immigrants and non-immigrants alike petitioned the state legislature to secure their right to obtain a license. The Immigrants and Refugee Rights Project at the North Carolina Justice Center and We Are NC led a statewide campaign that swayed legislators from introducing an immigration bill based on Arizona’s SB1070. Lastly, more undocumented immigrants are “coming out,” demanding equal rights, fair pay, and a humane immigration policy (http://nopapersnofear.org/). This momentum of energy, awareness, and action suggests the potential for changing the political climate in a region that has spawned much anti-immigrant legislation in recent years. We believe that the mujerista spaces described here have much to offer these efforts for broader social change. Social networks built from mutual respect, trust, and confidence—confianza—may help immigrant groups in the New South navigate, and potentially transform, social and educational institutions that present ongoing challenges to their social, racial, cultural and linguistic identities.

1 Sadly, this participant succumbed to cancer in 2011. Her contributions to the Hightown community and her love for the women who helped us with this study continue to be missed.
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