

# "That's What Friends Are For": English Language Acquisition, Social Networks and Their Role in Immigrant Assimilation

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**“That’s What Friends Are For”  
English Language Acquisition, Social  
Networks and Their Role in Immigrant  
Assimilation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study of female English language learners living in the greater Boston area investigates the relationship which exists between social networks, English language learning, and immigrant assimilation. Understanding that social networks are important for immigrant assimilation because of the social capital they provide (Portes and Zhou, 1993), this study aims to understand how immigrant women with limited English proficiency build social networks in the United States, both with immigrants and native-born citizens of the United States. Data analysis shows that English language learning plays an pivotal role in the formation of social networks both with other immigrants and with native-born citizens, and that immigrant networks are ultimately more beneficial because they are more accessible. As immigration policies in the United States continue to change, it is important to study the changing needs and experiences of immigrants. There is a need for the greater Boston area to provide more spaces for interaction between immigrants and Americans to facilitate the formation of social networks and exchange of social capital between the two groups.

**Keywords:** Immigration, assimilation, social networks, social capital, English language learning, immigrant women.



## **PREFACE**

Growing up in a small city in New Hampshire, I never experienced a time when those around me didn't speak my language. The people I interacted with always spoke English, and the words I spoke were always easily understood. It was not just that I wasn't spoken to in a language other than English, but also that I hardly ever hear other languages being spoken around me. When I moved to Boston for college, it was my first experience hearing other languages being spoken by a majority of the people. When I took my first T ride into the city during the fall of my freshman year, I heard a cacophonous mixture of Mandarin, Spanish and Portuguese, but English was still used in all my interactions, and what I said was still understood by all those whom I spoke to.

In the spring of my junior year, when I was about to board the plane in New York City for a semester abroad in Santiago, Chile, I truly experienced how it felt to not be understood and to not understand what was said to me for the first time in my life. Though I had studied Spanish for 6 years, my college knowledge was no match for the thick accent and rapid pace of Chilean Spanish- I almost missed boarding because I didn't understand the instructions that were being given for boarding over the loudspeaker. This continued throughout my semester, even as my Spanish improved. Many times throughout my 6 months living in Chile, my Spanish was misunderstood by my teachers, my classmates, workers at stores, and over the phone due to my accent or my lack of vocabulary. I experienced the difficulty of trying to explain a complex idea to a Chilean, and having them not understand a word that I had said. This made it difficult for me to accomplish necessary tasks such as registering my visa or taking a taxi home, and I realized how challenging it was to make the close circle of Chilean friends that I had pictured myself having before I went abroad without being able to express myself fully in Spanish.

I had experience working with immigrants to the United States as an English tutor before going abroad, but I had not fully understood the difficulty of immigrating to the United States and not speaking fluent English until I had experienced it for myself while living in Santiago. I was familiar with the patience that one needs when speaking to someone that doesn't speak English perfectly, but I did not understand how it would feel to be the one needing that patience from others on a daily basis. It was a humbling personal experience, but also one which made me want to know more about the lived experiences of those who immigrated to the United States without speaking English fluently. Through this thesis, I am to understand more about the lives of the many immigrants who are living permanently in the United States.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*“My day by day in Guatemala was based in relation with the people. I was the director of a foundation, I have job, other coworkers to talk with, of course my mother and my grandmother....I had a really active social network. And one day by other, all this disappear for me. And this is...not just being outside your place, is the language too...I don't feel free or sure or confident to go outside to a bar and drink a beer and have friends there. Now that's something I used to do in Guatemala or in Mexico. Okay, it's Friday, see you husband, see you daughter, I'm going to go outside to make friends. But with the language, I think it's not easy for me.”*

-Sylvia, 36, Guatemala.

There are a multitude of factors which make life in a new country difficult. There is a new transportation system. There are different types of food. There are new sights to see and new perspective to be gained. But beyond all of the things that are gained, there is also an aspect of loss. There is a lack of family and friends around. There is a gap in understanding what is being said. There is a loss of feeling of security that comes from living in the same country for 30 years. This is the reality of the lives of those who have emigrated from countries around the world to the United States. In the midst of these gains and losses, there is the negotiation of a new identity as immigrants assimilate

As Sylvia<sup>1</sup>, a 36 year old immigrant from Guatemala, describes in the above quotation, two of the most difficult aspects of the process of assimilation are the lack of English language skills and the rebuilding of new social networks in a new country. These two factors, an immigrant's social network and their ability to speak the language, are two of the most integral factors for successful immigrant assimilation. But the two do not exist independently. They are intertwined, and they depend on one another. How do immigrants who have minimal language skills rebuild their lost social networks in a new country? What role does the process of learning English play in the formation of these new networks?

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Through interviews conducted with 7 women who have immigrated to the United States and are currently enrolled in classes to improve their English, I aim to assess what role English language learning plays in the formation of social networks. Furthermore, I am interested in what types of social networks immigrants form- with others from their own country of origin, with other immigrants or with other Americans<sup>2</sup>- and which social network is most beneficial to immigrant women in terms of their assimilation.

As U.S. immigration policies continue to be reformed by President Obama, the foreign-born population of the United States will undoubtedly increase. These immigrant groups need to be able to coexist with native-born citizens, especially in Boston and other multicultural cities. For immigrants to be able to thrive in the United States and contribute to its prosperity, the two groups need to go beyond simply coexisting. Beyond that, immigrants need to successfully integrate into the society and social networks of the United States. By listening to the voices stories of these immigrants, I will be able to understand the unique needs that they have and what they will require in order to thrive in their lives in the United States.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### *Assimilation Theories*

Theories of immigrant assimilation in the United States have drastically changed since their earliest definition from the Chicago School of Sociology in 1921 (Alba and Nee, 2003). Popular assimilation theory for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including theories originating in the

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity, this thesis utilizes the word “American” to mean “of or from the United States.” This phrasing is not intended to exclude people from South or Central America in its definition and use, but is necessary in the absence of a more appropriate word, and for clarity.

Chicago School and from Milton Gordon, viewed assimilation as a “straight-line,” a singular route to assimilation that all immigrants could follow to be successful in their lives in the United States. In these early theories of assimilation, assimilating was also positively correlated with upward mobility in U.S. society. It is these two aspects of assimilation theory which have changed the most in more recent theories of assimilation (Kao, Vaquera & Goyette, 2013).

In modern assimilation theory, the process of assimilating into the culture of the United States is viewed as a segmented process as opposed to a straight-line process. The concept of segmented assimilation comes from “The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants,” in which Portes and Zhou (1993) base their theory off of the second-generation of immigrants to the United States who require a different assimilation theory to describe their own integration into American society. According to this theory, there are many different ways to assimilate, and not every person can follow the same steps largely because of where they settle and the different inherent characteristics that they possess. Relatedly, assimilation does not necessarily lead to upward mobility because immigrants that assimilate into a lower-class community, for example in an urban center, would experience downward mobility. According to segmented assimilation theory, there are 3 characteristics that influence whether or not immigrants will experience upward mobility in the second generation in comparison to the first. The first factor is color- immigrants who are not white are more likely to experience downward mobility as they assimilate. The second factor is location- those who settle closer to less-advantaged communities in the United States are more likely to experience downward mobility as opposed to upward because they adopting the characteristics and practices of a lower-class group. The third factor is the absence of mobility ladders. Immigrants who settle in lower-class

communities will likely be exposed to lower-class job opportunities and be connected to other lower-class people, hindering the possibility for upward mobility.

Segmented assimilation theory also introduces three resources which aide immigrants in the process of assimilation. One of these three is the resources found in the social networks of a “coethnic community” (Portes and Zhou, 1993, p. 86). When immigrants are welcomed into a previously existing community made up of different ethnic groups, they acquire the important resources which the community already possesses. These pre-established social networks, made up of other immigrants, and the material capital they possess ease the process of assimilation into U.S. society. Using the experiences of the Punjabi Sikhs in California and Cuban youth in Miami, Portes and Zhou (1993) argue that assimilation into well-established immigrant groups provide recent immigrants and their children with more social and material capital, and consequently more chances for upward mobility, than they would have had if they had assimilated into U.S. society.

A second important modern theory of immigrant assimilation comes from Alba and Nee’s 2003 work, *“Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration.”* Assimilation theory, as defined by Alba and Nee, contests the traditional idea of “assimilation” as “Americanization,” in which immigrants reject their own culture to become part of another. Instead, they view ethnicity as a social boundary which separates immigrant groups from native-born citizen and in the process of assimilation, changes occur on both sides of this social boundary. There are three processes by which this social boundary can be changed. The first is boundary crossing, in which a person may cross over a boundary, but it does not change. This is individual assimilation. The second is boundary blurring, in which the boundary becomes less distinct, and the differences between the two groups are no longer as clear. The

third process is boundary shifting, in which the social boundary of ethnicity changes entirely to include different groups on either side of the boundary. As entire ethnic groups of immigrants assimilate, the boundary between who is an immigrant and who is an American shifts, and both the assimilating group and the mainstream are changed. In their new definition of assimilation, Alba and Nee see a person's ethnicity as having less to do with the trajectory of their life the more assimilated they become. The opportunities they have and the successes or failures they experience have less to do with their ethnicity or country of origin and become the same as those of the native-born community that they have assimilated into. (Alba & Nee, 2003).

In their new definition, Alba and Nee (2003) argue that there are individual and societal factors which affect successful immigrant assimilation. The individual factors are the individual's own choices and impetus to assimilate. These choices and motivations are influenced by the individual's social network and the network's values. The societal factor, is the strength of the resistance from the "white majority" (p. 14) of American society to new Americans. This resistance, they argue, is weaker in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of the Civil Rights movement and the advancement of rights for non-whites.

### *Social Capital Theory*

Both assimilation theories described above name the social networks which immigrants form in the United States as key factors in facilitating their assimilation. These networks, made up of other immigrants and non-immigrants, and the resources they possess or have access to make up the immigrant's social capital. Social capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, is:

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...or membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital” (Bourdieu. 1986, p.21).

Therefore, the amount of social capital one possesses is dependent upon what social capital is possessed by the other people in his or her network, and what economic or cultural capital one brings to his or her network. Social capital depends on others, and can never exist independently of one's social networks and the capital possessed by those who he or she is connected to. It is important to note that the social networks within which social capital is exchanged do not inherently exist for individuals, but which are instead created by conscious or unconscious actions. These actions create obligations between people, leading to the exchange of social capital. Therefore, having relationships with others does not necessarily lead to having social capital; these relationships must also be invested in to allow for the exchange to occur (Bourdieu, 1986).

In his work *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) presents the main tenets of social capital theory, saying that the social networks that people are a part of have value and, "...just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups" (p. 19). He argues that social capital and strong social networks play an important role in U.S. society, saying that the social ties they create lead to reciprocity between citizens, which in turn makes societies more efficient because citizens can rely on one another to accomplish their goals. Strong social networks also allow civic virtues to flourish. However, he warns that social capital is not always positive in society, especially when it is fostered within circles that intend to use it negatively. Throughout the work as a whole, Putnam discusses the weakening of social networks in the United States as individualism begins to take precedence over communitarianism over the last several decades.

### *Relevant Immigration History*

The United States is currently experiencing a new wave of immigrant arrivals, which began in the early 1970's and still continues today- approximately two-thirds (62%) of the foreign-born population currently living in the United States arrived in 1990 or later, and one-third (35%) of the foreign born population arrived in 2000 or later. In this most recent phase of immigration, the majority of immigrants are from Central and South America. The number of immigrants to the United States is still increasing in spite of current U.S. immigration policies. Based on data from the 2010 American Community Survey, Latin Americans make up the largest percentage (53.1%) of foreign borns living in the United States, followed by immigrants from Asia (28.2%) and immigrants from Europe (12.1%). Mexico is the most common country of origin, making up 29.3% of the total foreign-born population. It is important to note that this data includes both authorized and unauthorized immigrants to the United States<sup>3</sup> (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). This new wave of immigrant arrivals follows a previous wave of primarily European immigrants to the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The majority of these immigrants came from Germany, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and most worked as unskilled laborers (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014).

According to Portes and Rumbaut (2014), there are two factors which differentiate current immigrants to the United States- the capital they possess and their immigrant status. The majority of immigrants to the United States in the past decade have been labor migrants who

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign-born, as described by the U.S. Census Bureau, is a label referring to anyone who is not born as a United States citizen. This includes those who have become US citizens, those living in the United States on a green card or student visa, refugees, temporary migrants and unauthorized migrants. Unauthorized immigrants, as defined by the Department of Homeland Security (2013), are immigrants who entered the United States without inspection or overstayed an expired visa. The American Community Survey is also used by the Department of Homeland Security in their estimations of the unauthorized migrant population in the United States.

immigrated in order to work. Some examples include seasonal agriculture, construction and restaurant workers. This category is comprised of both unauthorized and temporary legal status immigrants who possess minimal capital- they often have only a few connections in the United States and their ability to work. Those with unauthorized government status have often entered the United States illegally, most frequently via the Mexican border, and those with legal status often have it temporarily through a contract visa. In 2008, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency) increased deportations of unauthorized workers, and in 2010 more than 400,000 immigrants were deported due to their status under the government, changing the immigrant population significantly (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014).

The second type of immigrant to the United States, as described by Portes and Rumbaut, is the professional immigrant. In contrast to the labor migrant, a professional immigrant has legal status and possesses much more capital, including more money and more education. Some examples include foreign physicians, executives and researchers. These immigrants possess a unique identity because they have a high level of education and are therefore able to assimilate easily; meanwhile, they also have the financial ability to stay closely connected with their family in their home country. The final type of contemporary immigrant is immigrant entrepreneurs, those who have opened small businesses including convenience stores, restaurants and gas stations. These immigrants are often authorized citizens and, though they do not possess significant capital initially, they often are able to obtain capital from other immigrant entrepreneurs through shared social networks. (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014).

#### *Relationship between English Language Ability and Assimilation*

Much of the current literature about immigrant assimilation in the United States focuses on factors which facilitate the process of assimilation. According to almost every assimilation

theorist, the ability to speak the native language is a necessary factor (Akresh, Massey and Frank, 2014; Xi, 2013; Bleakley and Chin, 2010; Martin and Daiute, 2013; Nawyn et al, 2012).

However, there is disagreement about the extent to which English proficiency is correlated with successful assimilation into the culture of the United States. Some sources argue that learning English is not enough to guarantee that immigrants will assimilate and that there are many other factors at play (Akresh, Massey, & Frank, 2014; Warriner, 2007), while other sources argue that English proficiency is one of the best predictors of an immigrant's assimilation (Bleakley and Chin, 2010).

Akresh, Massey and Frank (2014) use data from the New Immigrant Survey to criticize the widely-held view that English proficiency is a good measure for assimilation. Firstly, they make an important distinction between English proficiency and English use. They argue that proficiency is weak measure for predicting English language use, and that being proficient in English does not mean that one is more likely to use English in everyday contexts. In their analysis, they attempt to understand differing levels of English use and assimilation among immigrants by looking at pre-migration, post-migration and intermediate variables. Their findings show that the use of English and the consumption of US media doesn't increase with more time spent in the US or with higher English ability, but is instead predicted by pre-migration variables. If an immigrant had traveled previously to the United States, studied English or had consumed US media prior to immigrating, it was more likely that they would use English while in the United States. Therefore, time spent in the United States and time invested in learning English does not increase an immigrant's assimilation in terms of cultural consumption, but this is instead predicted by factors which come before migration (Akresh, Massey, and Frank, 2014). However, this claim is refuted by an earlier study done by Akresh (2007), which

showed that the longer immigrants are in the United States, the more likely they are to speak English in informal contexts, such as with their friends, at home or with their spouse.

The claim that English proficiency is one among many important factors for successful immigrant assimilation is supported by Warriner's (2007) ethnographic study of an adult ESOL<sup>4</sup> program and interviews with female Sudanese English learners. She found that though the women she interviewed had become proficient in English through an ESOL program, they were still excluded from parts of society and were not given equal chance to participate in areas such as politics and work. They continued to experience difficulty finding work and earning enough to support their children, even though they had become proficient in English. Though the women she interviewed believed in the importance of learning English in order to be able to thrive in all aspects of US society, their experiences didn't support that belief (Warriner, 2007). Portes and Zhou's (1993) theory of segmented assimilation is clearly applicable in this situation. Segmented assimilation theory states that assimilation does not always lead to upward mobility, and is more likely to lead to downward mobility when immigrants are non-white, when they are settled closer to less-advantaged native communities and when there is a lack of mobility ladders (Portes and Zhou, 1993). The women from Sudan are non-white, and are described by Warriner to have arrived with a large group of other immigrants and refugees who would be similarly disadvantaged and wouldn't provide social capital to the Sudanese women, making the women more likely to experience downward mobility as they become assimilated (Warriner, 2007).

Claims which argue that English proficiency is not a good measure of assimilation are somewhat refuted by Bleakley and Chin (2010). Their study uses U.S. census data to investigate the relationship between English proficiency and social assimilation. They find a positive

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<sup>4</sup> ESOL is an acronym meaning English for Speakers of Other Languages. It is less commonly used than ESL, English as a Second Language, but is more inclusive of learners who speak more than one language. Those who participate in ESOL programs are referred to as English Language Learners, or ELL's.

correlation between English proficiency and marriage rates, in particular marriage to a U.S. native who has more education and a higher income than the spouse of an immigrant who is not proficient in English. Bleakley and Chin also incorporate the “critical period” of language learning into their study. Unsurprisingly, those that arrived in the United States during the critical period (age 9 and under), during which a child’s brain is supposed to be most receptive to language learning, were much more likely to be proficient in English or bilingual than those who arrived after the end of the critical period, and provide an important look at what benefits English proficiency has for immigrants. Immigration during the critical period also had a positive association with income as an adult and years of education. It also increases the likelihood for some cultural groups that they will live outside of a cultural enclave. Their findings support the idea that English proficiency does lead to social assimilation, especially in terms of marriage, income and educational outcomes, as those that became bilingual due to their time of arrival assimilated more successfully (Bleakley and Chin, 2010). However, Bleakley and Chin’s study focuses primarily on economic measures of assimilation, while Warriner and Akresh et al. focus more on social measures of assimilation, such as cultural consumption, which may account for the difference.

#### *Relationship between Assimilation and Social Capital*

The extent to which English proficiency is a factor in determining assimilation is debated within the literature. However, there are undoubtedly other factors which facilitate immigrant assimilation. Another factor for successful assimilation that has achieved wide acceptance among immigration scholars is the necessity of social networks and social capital. Within the theory of social capital, it is important to make a distinction between whether the social capital is coming from native-born networks or immigrant ones, and note that both can be advantageous to

assimilation (Dudley, 2007; Duguay, 2012; Naywn et al., 2012). Xi (2013), however, argues that social capital from immigrant networks actually hinders the process of assimilation.

In Nawyn et al's (2012) interviews with Burmese and Burundian immigrants in Michigan, her findings show that Burmese immigrants to Michigan had a stronger and larger community of fellow immigrants, which provided them with increased social support and eased their transition into life in a new country. In contrast, the Burundian community was smaller and had fewer resources, causing them to have more difficulty finding services they needed and making them feel more isolated. In the case of the Burmese immigrants, the social capital they gained from fellow immigrants provided support in the form of material resources, information and systems of social support, which are very important in aiding the transition to another country. Dudley's (2007) findings supported the importance of social capital in leading to immigrant integration, but described the exchange of capital as needing to take place between immigrants and native-born citizens in Canada through connections made in volunteer experiences. Dudley argues that the exchange of social capital between native-born Canadians and immigrants is a key step in integration because it gives immigrants a greater understanding of the culture of Canada and gives them connections<sup>5</sup>. In applying segmented assimilation theory, the exchange of social capital between immigrants and non-immigrants could help lead to upward mobility, as it addresses the lack of social mobility ladders (Portes and Zhou, 1993)

Duguay's (2012) comparative study of Haitian women experiencing Boston and Toronto's settlement policies provides insight into the exchange of social capital between fellow

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that this study looked at a relatively small sample (8 people) and that the findings might have been more varied had the study incorporated more immigrants who had taken part in volunteer opportunities.

immigrants and between immigrants and the larger population. Her research showed that women who settled in the United States were more likely to use informal social networks, such as friends, family or spouses, to aide them in their process of assimilation through the acquisition of social capital. This was in contrast to women who settled in Toronto, who were more likely to utilize formal networks, such as border services and employment agencies, as social networks to gain capital. For example, women in Toronto used formal facilitators to find housing when they arrived while women in Boston relied upon their existing networks, such as their family, to help them find a place to live. The networks of fellow immigrants in Boston were described positively and as providing important resources and knowledge for immigrants. However, they were also described as limited because they could not provide long-term, comprehensive services for immigrants in the same way that the formal, non-immigrant networks in Toronto could.

The idea of social networks made up of other immigrants aiding in their assimilation was not supported by Xi's article (2013). In this article, Xi looks comparatively at census data from 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010 to study the relationship between English proficiency and economic advancement. The findings suggest that recent cohorts were more assimilated, but their economic advancements and linguistic assimilation declined due to their environment, which was made up of increasingly more immigrants and less native-born citizens. He hypothesized that unmeasured factors led to this decline in more recent immigrants. The increasing hostility of U.S. society towards non-English speakers and the lack of investment in English education programs cause increased immigrant isolation and a higher probability of living in an enclave, which limits their English language acquisition. This directly contrasts Nawyn et al's (2012) argument that social networks comprised of fellow immigrants are helpful to assimilation. Instead, it says that in

recent years, the close social networks which immigrants form amongst themselves are detrimental to their process of assimilation into U.S. society.

Though there is an agreement that social networks are a factor which aide immigrant assimilation, there is a lack of consensus among the literature as to which social network is more beneficial to immigrants- networks made up of other immigrants or networks made up of native-born U.S. citizens? Though both Duguay (2012) and Dudley (2007) argue that non-immigrant social networks are more beneficial to immigrants, their support for these networks do not include how these intergroup social networks are built by immigrants who have limited English proficiency.

#### *Defining Assimilation: The Value of Immigrant Narratives*

Though I have analyzed different theories of assimilation and looked at what factors are necessary for immigrant assimilation in the United States, there is value in looking beyond these pre-established theories of assimilation and exploring how immigrants define their own changing identity as they undergo a process of integrating into a new society. The research process is especially relevant when researching the complex and changing identities of immigrants learning English and integrating into a new society because they are simultaneously losing and gaining an identity (Martin and Daiute, 2013, McKay and Wong, 1996, Peirce, 1995). In Martin and Daiute's article (2013), Latina women who were learning English were asked to share their experiences of integrating. Martin and Daiute found that in their identities as Latinas living in a Latino community in the United States, the women described themselves as successful, established members of their community. However, in their identities as Hispanic women living in the United States, they were still struggling to learn English and become a part of the community. Though they were not proficient in English, they perceived themselves as

assimilated into their immigrant community, but not the larger community. This duality of identity shows the complexities in immigrant's self-identification of integration, which can best be understood fully through an interview process which allows participants to share their own stories freely.

Both Peirce's research and McKay and Wong's research about immigrants learning English explore the complexities that come with learning a new language and integrating into a new society. Peirce (1995) focused on conditions which caused the immigrant women working in Canada to respond positively and conditions which caused women to resist or avoid learning English. Her findings support Weedon's theory that social identity is "multiple, a site of struggle and changing over time," (Peirce, 1995, p. 15). In applying this theory to immigrant women, Peirce also argues these women have agency in their social identity and in what cultural discourses they choose to apply to themselves. For example, her research subject Eva originally saw herself as having no cultural worth because she was not Canadian, but through language acquisition and time spent in Canada, her social identity changed, and she began to see herself in a positive light as a "multicultural citizen" (Peirce, 1995, p. 25).

McKay and Wong's (1996) research builds off of Peirce's and adds to it. In their findings from a longitudinal study of adolescent Chinese immigrants learning English in California public schools, they describe multiple discourses being applied to Chinese immigrants, including the "model migrant" discourse as well as more general racialized discourse towards immigrants.

One of the most important conclusions they come to is that

"the learners' historically specific needs, desires and negotiations are not simply distractions from the proper task of language learning or accidental deviations... Rather, they must be regarded as constituting the very fabric of students' lives and as determining their investment in learning the target language" (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 603).

According to this, understanding the specific needs of English language learners is key in understanding what motivates them to invest or not invest in learning English, and these needs are best defined by the learner himself. These three studies show the complex place which immigrants occupy in society, as well as the complicated process of changing self-identification that occurs as immigrants integrate into U.S. society. They demonstrate the need for studies to allow immigrants to tell their own narrative as the best way to understand the many levels on which assimilation occurs.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### *Study Location*

This research was conducted in the greater Boston area, specifically in the neighborhoods of Cambridge and Brighton. All of the participants currently live in one of these two neighborhoods. According to the 2010 census, foreign-born citizens make up 27% of Boston's population (US Bureau of the Census, 2012). Both Cambridge and Brighton have significant immigrant populations, with foreign borns making up 25.7% of the population in Cambridge in 2009 (Cambridge Community Development Department, 2011) and 30.6% of the population in the neighborhoods of Allston/Brighton<sup>6</sup> in 2010. In Massachusetts, immigrants make up 14.7% of the total state population. The most common country of origin for immigrants in Massachusetts is China, with the second most common being Brazil. In Boston specifically, the Dominican Republic is the most common country of origin, followed by China. Nearly half, 49.4%, of the immigrant population in Boston is from Central and South America, 25.4% is from Asia and 14.6% is from Europe. The immigrant population in Boston is certainly growing- in

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<sup>6</sup> Though Allston and Brighton are separate neighborhoods of Boston, their data is reported together in the census due to their close proximity.

1990, immigrants made up 20% of the total population; in 2010, they make up 27% (Boston Redevelopment Authority Research Division, 2012). This population increase makes a study of immigrants in the greater Boston area important, as their needs and experiences are constantly changing.

Within Boston, 35.5% of residents speak a language other than English in their home (Boston Redevelopment Authority Research Division, 2012) and in Cambridge, 30.3% of residents do (Cambridge Community Development Department, 2011). In both areas, Spanish is the second most spoken language after English, followed by Chinese. Close to 10% of Boston residents, or 55,000 people, lack English proficiency, meaning that they do not speak English at all or do not speak it well. A much smaller proportion of residents, 3,687, were involved in an ESOL program in 2010 (BRA Research Division, 2012). Economic reasons could account for the difference between those who are not proficient in English and those who are currently enrolled in English language classes, such as a lack of time and money to participate in these programs. These programs may not be easily accessible to some immigrant groups, or the immigrant groups may not need English proficiency in their daily lives if they live and work primarily with other immigrants who speak the same native language as them.

### *Sample*

The criteria for participants in this study were men and women who were born in a country where English is not the primarily spoken language and who are currently living in the United States. The sample consists of seven women, with the youngest being 22 and the oldest being 52. The sample is drawn from two free English language programs for adults in the greater Boston area: a high level English conversation group, held in Brighton on Wednesdays from 10:30 AM -12:00 PM; and an ESOL class, held at a church in Harvard Square in Cambridge on

Saturdays from 10:00 AM -11:30 AM. Four participants come from the Brighton class and three from the Cambridge class. The participants have also been in the United States for a varied length of time. On average, the participants have lived in the United States for 3.4 years. The shortest length of time spent living in the United States is 10 months, and the longest is 11 years. The majority of the women in the sample are what Portes and Zhou (2014) define as professional immigrants, or are married to a professional immigrant. All are living permanently in the United States, most immigrated here with their families.

Gender	Country of Origin	Age	Occupation	Alias
Female	Italy	52	Unemployed	Sofia
Female	Italy	35	Web Designer	Martina
Female	Saudi Arabia	29	Unemployed	Amina
Female	Japan	32	Accountant	Yuna
Female	Guatemala	36	Researcher	Sylvia
Female	China	22	Student	Hua Ling
Female	Mexico	27	Housekeeper	Maria

This sample is not representative of the current immigrant demographics in the greater Boston area as described in the research setting. Immigrants from Asia and Europe are overrepresented in this sample, and those from Central and South America are underrepresented (Boston Redevelopment Authority Research Division, 2012). The study is not limited to a specific ethnic group or country of origin, as it is intended to study the similarities that exist for all immigrants living in Boston. The study was not intended to study only women, but in the two English classes that were observed, there was only one man who did not choose to be interviewed. The lack of men in the English classes may have been due to the time and location

of the English classes. The Wednesday morning English class in Brighton met during a typical workday, making it more accessible for women whose husbands were working. The Saturday morning class met in Harvard Square, and the majority of those who attended had accompanied their husbands who had moved to the United States to earn an advanced degree at Harvard and eventually work in the United States. For this reason, this sample disproportionately represents women who are unemployed or working part-time and have come to the United States with their husband as the primary wage earner.

### **Recruitment**

After being granted permission from the Institutional Review Board of Boston College, (protocol #15.112.01), participants were recruited through their English language programs. After being given permission to come to the classes by the respective coordinators of the two programs, I gave a brief presentation to the class about myself and my research and obtained the contact information of interested participants, whom I then recruited for interviews through e-mail and over the phone. Participants were asked to speak to me for 30-45 minutes in English about their experiences living in the United States and learning English. The participants were not compensated for their time spent interviewing, but were told that they would be given the chance to practice their English conversation skills.

### *Variables*

Integration: Integration is the incorporation of new immigrants into the pre-existing social networks of an area.

Assimilation: I am utilizing Alba and Nee's (2003) definition of assimilation, which says that assimilation has been achieved when one's country of origin does not affect their opportunities

and their life chances. I am incorporating my own second factor, cultural comfort, into their definition. This factor, as well as its absence, was seen in interviews and participant observation.

Cultural comfort: Cultural comfort is when immigrants feel a sense of safety and contentedness where they live, and feel that they are able to find and access the resources they need regardless of their status as immigrants. The strength of social networks made up of both fellow immigrants and non-immigrants positively influence cultural comfort because they help connect immigrants to resources.

Social Networks: Social networks are the relationships that exist between people, including neighbors, coworkers, friends and family, and the obligations which reinforce these ties.

Social Capital: Using the definition presented by Putnam (2000), social capital is the value that one's social networks possess in terms of the resources and further connections that these social networks provide the person that is a member in said social network. There is an individual and external aspect of social capital.

Community: Community as defined by Putnam (2000) is social capital situated in a specific geographic location. Therefore, this community is easily accessible. There is also a cohesive aspect in that the communities have shared or similar values.

English Comfort: This concept, drawn from the ideas of Akresh, Massey and Frank (2014) goes beyond mastering the rules of English grammar to include comfort with the use of English in everyday situations, and the feeling that one could effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings to others.

Cultural Consumption: Cultural consumption is the viewing of TV shows from the United States, listening to music from the United States, and reading U.S. media in the form of online and print newspapers.

Cultural Enclave: Cultural enclaves, as defined by Portes and Manning (2008), are tight-knit communities composed of immigrants with a shared identity that have been formed and strengthened out of necessity, following a difficulty with assimilation into society due to a lower economic position.

### *Interviews*

My main instrument of data collection was interviews, which were conducted between January and March 2015. The interviews took place in various locales, ranging from participant's homes to coffee shops to the English classroom after class. The interviews lasted 37 minutes on average, with the longest lasting 46 minutes and the shortest lasting 28. Though there was an option to do the interview in Spanish, all of the interviews were conducted primarily in English. The interviews which were done with participants from Guatemala and Mexico involved a mix of the two languages- approximately 70% of the interview was in English and 30% was in Spanish. I used a semi structured interview format, which followed an interview guide (see Appendix A). The interview was guided by the variables defined above, listed in bold at the top of each section of questions, that each grouping of questions aimed to address. Most of the interview questions were open-ended and asked participants to tell a story which was followed by probes in order to encourage open sharing. The probes used most frequently were continuation probes, which intended to get deeper into the participant's narratives, and clarification probes, which were necessary in all interviews as none of the participants spoke English as a first language (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The interview began with questions intended to gain background information about the participants as well as to make them feel comfortable. I chose to do it in question form instead of as a questionnaire in order to build rapport with the interviewee. These questions involved

shorter answers to questions such as “How long ago did you move here?” and “Where were you born?” The questions gradually began to move towards their experiences first as English Language Learners through questions about their classes and programs they have been involved in, and then moving to their experiences as immigrants living in the greater Boston area.

In my interviews, I asked many open-ended questions, in which I asked participants to “tell me a story” or to “describe a time.” This was done to allow immigrants to define their own narratives. This type of qualitative research practice is known as “narrative inquiry,” in which researchers ask about and analyze the stories told by participants. According to Daiute and Lightfoot (2004), the study of narratives is imperative because in order to understand the development of an individual, it is necessary to look at the many different levels on which it can occur. The introduction of narratives to the interview process allows for the exploration of the complexities that go along with the construction of self, especially constructing one’s identity around a specific context such a recent immigration, as described earlier in the literature review (Martin and Daiute, 2013; McKay and Wong, 1996; Peirce, 1995). In partially incorporating this theory into my own research by asking participants to “tell me a story,” I will understand what factors immigrants themselves find to be necessary for integration.

### *Data Collection*

The times and meeting places for all of the interviews were established over e-mail or over the phone during the recruiting process. Almost all of the interviews took place over coffee or food, establishing a friendly atmosphere that would encourage open and honest conversation. As the primary researcher, I conducted the informed consent procedure for all participants. This involved moving orally through all sections of the informed consent document with the participants and explaining relevant points, as English is not their first language. I provided a

Spanish language informed consent form for the two participants who spoke Spanish as a first language. Before beginning the interview, I emphasized that I was most interested in what the participants had to say about their experiences living in the United States, and not that they had perfect grammar or English language skills so that participants would feel comfortable sharing their stories with me despite their level of English proficiency. All interviews were recorded on a recording device.

In addition to interviewing, I also engaged in participant observation at the two ESOL classes. In the conversation group in Brighton, I took a peripheral membership role and observed the class for 6 weeks in January and February while I was in the process of recruiting participants. I could not fully participate in the class as I was not learning English, but I was often asked to answer questions about U.S. culture, especially surrounding college and education in the United States. In the ESOL class in Cambridge, I took an active role in the class as an assistant to the teacher for 10 weeks from October to December (Adler & Adler P., 1987). When she was unable to come to the class, I taught the class for her. This happened twice throughout my observation. By engaging in participant observation, I aimed to understand what role the English classes played in immigrant integration and community building. This observation also provided an important rapport building between the participants and me.

In an effort to remember my initial impressions of each interview without interference (Luker, 2008), I completed a post-interview worksheet immediately. The most important part of this worksheet was the connections I saw to other interviews as I attempted to make sense of my data before the formal data analysis. Additionally, I kept a field journal of each interview which I completed within 24 hours of each interview. This was particularly helpful for interviews which

had significant conversation before and after that was not recorded but was still important, as well as for making preliminary connections.

### *Data Analysis*

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Names and other identifiers were removed from the transcripts to maintain participant confidentiality, and the recordings of original interviews were destroyed. Participants were given aliases in order to maintain confidentiality. During the transcription process, I paid close attention to major themes and emotions mentioned as well as the connection of themes between interviewees and made note of these on the post-interview worksheet.

Using the methods described by Rubin and Rubin (2012), I did a first run of coding to isolate important concepts and ideas and kept a notable quotes file. I used some pre-established codes which came from the participant observation I did such as “English classes providing more than just English instruction,” and others which came from my literature review, such as “immigrant identity.” I established other codes as I went through the transcripts. I then did a second round of coding through the transcripts as new codes emerged from each interview. I also noted when a participant said something that seemed to directly contradict another participant. In coding these transcripts, I relied upon the notes that I had made on my post-interview worksheets about connections between participants to identify common themes. Using these common themes, I created a hierarchical code outline which allowed me to further analyze larger code groups, such as “Past and Present Community,” which I was then able to split into more nuanced concepts and ideas.

### *Researcher Position*

In my role as both a researcher and an interviewer, it is important to consider my own position in relation to the interviewees as well as my own biases. Most obviously, I am a native born citizen of the United States and not an immigrant. In this sense, my interviewees and I do not have the shared experience of being immigrants which may have affected their level of comfort with me or they may have felt that I would not understand their experience. However, it could cause interviewees to explain more to me than they would have if I had the same experience as them. My position as a citizen of the United States may have led to a response bias, in which interviewees may not have fully expressed their opinions about life in the United States to me as they may not have wanted to offend me or make a mistake in their description of life in the United States. It is my hope that my position as a woman gave me a more privileged view into the lives of immigrant women that I interviewed because of our shared gender identity.

In my position as an observer in their English language classes and a native speaker of the language, interviewees may have felt embarrassed to make English mistakes in their responses, preventing them from fully expressing their ideas. I aimed to prevent this by saying from the beginning of the interview that I was more interested in their experiences living in the United States than in their level of English. I also told the interviewees to take as much time as they needed in responding to my questions. Additionally, throughout the interview, I did not correct any of their language mistakes though many participants told me to do so, and I did not use any type of dictionary or electronic translator to attempt to understand what my interviewee's responses meant. I believe that the complexity of answers that I got despite the language barrier shows that the language factor did not drastically affect my research. Nonetheless, my inability to conduct the interviews in all of the interviewee's native languages certainly limited the response I was able to get from them.

### *Limitations*

A major limitation in my data collection, as mentioned above, was my inability to conduct interviews in the native languages of all participants. Interviewees with a higher level of English proficiency may have been able to express more of their experiences than interviewees with a lower level of proficiency. The English spoken by all of the interviewees was not perfect, which may have led to a misrepresentation of their experiences in their interviews, or a misunderstanding of their experiences in my coding and data analysis.

The size of the sample is also a limitation of the study. The 7 women in the study represent only a small percentage of the immigrant population in Boston in terms of their nationalities and their economic positions, making the findings ungeneralizable to the female immigrant population in Boston as a whole. With the exception of one participant, all of these women are professional immigrants or are married to a professional immigrant. A larger sample would likely have been more representative of the population. Furthermore, the sample was drawn from ESOL classes in the greater Boston areas. Drawing my sample from this population may have led to sample bias. Though both of these classes were free and open to the public, they did require resources to be able to participate in them- namely, a way of finding out about them, public transportation to reach them, and 3-4 hours of free time a week to be able to attend them. This may have excluded certain immigrant groups, such as lower-class immigrants, from participating in this study as they do not have access to the resources necessary to attend these English classes and were therefore not recruited.

## **IV. DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

Social networks play a major role in immigrant assimilation due to the connections, social capital and cultural comfort that they provide, as evidenced by the literature on the subject. But for immigrants who have come to a new country and are not yet able to speak the language perfectly, forming these networks may be difficult, especially when trying to form them with Americans who are native speakers of the language. With this problem in mind, the following three questions shaped my data analysis:

1. How do immigrants build the social networks which facilitate assimilation? What role does English language ability play in the formation of these networks?
2. Which social networks- those made up of immigrant or those made up of Americans- are most beneficial to immigrants in terms of assimilation?
3. What changes could be made in English language learning programs to facilitate immigrant assimilation?

In searching for the answers these larger questions, I spoke to immigrants about their social networks in the United States - which people helped them in their hardest times in the United States, who helped them when they first arrived, and those that they spent most of their time with. This was investigated within the context of their English language learning, an experience that all participants had in common. In particular, this study looks at the networks that immigrant women made throughout their time in English language learning programs, and how their social networks changed as their English language skills improved.

There was not a consensus in the literature about which social networks were the most beneficial to immigrants in their assimilation- those that were made up of Americans that could give them intimate knowledge of American culture, or those that were made up of other immigrants who had similar experiences and understood their complex position and needs. This

analysis aims to determine which network is more beneficial in terms of assimilation, particularly for female immigrants living in the greater Boston area. Finally, based on the experiences of the women I interviewed, I will discuss changes which could be made to the current ESOL programs in the greater Boston area to facilitate immigrant assimilation.

### **The Experiences of Immigrants in the Greater Boston Area**

When asked to describe their experiences when they first came to the United States, all participants expressed negative emotions. The most common were fear, loneliness, and feeling lost. In her response to the final question of the interview, “Is there anything else you would like other people to know about the experience of an immigrant living in the United States?” Sofia, 52 from Italy, responded immediately and with strong emotion, saying that “...the feeling is fear. Fear. Fear. Doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor, yes. I because I talked with other people and yes the first feeling is, ‘oh, my god.’” Maria, a 27 year old housekeeper from Mexico, recounted a similar emotion saying, “It’s hard. Sometimes, some moments I feel really weak about being here. About deal with people with the different society, yeah. It’s not easy.” Amina described feeling very sad in the early months of her life in the United States: “And the first three months, I always crying. I need my family and I need to visit them because in Saudi Arabia, I go to them every week...Here, I feel tired and I feel lonely. That’s why I feel it’s difficult.” Amina’s negative feelings came primarily from the loss of her social networks, especially her extended family. In answering a question about the hardest part about life in the United States, Sylvia, a 36 year old researcher from Guatemala, also identified it as the loss of her social networks and her family,

“My day by day in Guatemala was based in relation with the people...I have job, other coworkers to talk with, of course my mother and my grandmother. In my house, I have

somebody who was helping me to clean up the house and she lives in the house ... I had a really active social network. And one day by other, all this disappear for me.”

The lack of social networks was one of the major factors that caused the immigrant women in my sample to feel insecure about their new lives in the United States.

Another cause for this insecurity is the lack of English language skills. Martina, a 35-year old web designer from Italy, discussed her arrival to the United States, saying, “At beginning, I feel lost. A bit. Because I couldn’t say what I feel.” Sofia echoed this statement more emphatically, saying, “And the difficulty about explain, explaining yourself. Is terrible. Awful, really, really...” Hua Ling, a 22 year old Chinese student, spoke from her own experience and from the experiences of the immigrant women she works with, saying “I think a lot of people who don’t know English feel vulnerable. And one of the ways that... a lot of Chinese people describe not knowing English is that they’re mute, they are deaf, and blind.” These emotions shift from sadness to frustration when English language learners are unable to express how they feel to others. Yuna, a 32 year old accountant from Japan, recounted this experience; “I have a lot of ideas in my brain but I can’t say exactly what I want. Yeah. Every time, I feel frustrated. Frustration a lot. I can’t express my feelings.” I witnessed this frustration and sadness throughout the interview process as the women would try to express particularly complex emotions or situations, and would become angry at their own inability to do so. Often, they would continue to persevere through and explain the thought however they could.

Language and the ability to communicate with others play an important role in one’s overall emotional state. As Sylvia from Guatemala explained, being able to communicate with those around you is important for practical reasons, but also for personal reasons. In describing her experiences living in a new country where she didn’t speak the language, she elaborated on

the relationship between being able to share your emotions with others in words and your overall emotional state:

“If I have a trouble, I feel like I’m unhappy and I go to a friend and I talk about it. And when you was talking about it, you can figure out that it’s not so bad... In the normal days, the problem with the language is not just how to deal with your environment or how to find a job or how you make the other understand but it’s a key for your mental health... it’s important for your relation all around you but also for your mind and your feelings.”

Without the ability to always express how they feel in words, immigrants feel sad, isolated and insecure in their new environment.

Based on the lived experiences of the women in my sample, the two factors which cause them to describe feelings of sadness and fear about their time spent living in the United States is losing their social networks and the difficulty of making new ones, and the inability to communicate effectively with people in the United States. The next sections will investigate how the women in my sample have responded to the major problems in their transition to a new country and have found new social networks in the United States.

## **Immigrant’s Formation of Social Networks**

### Social Networks Formed with Other Immigrants

Modern assimilation theories, such as segmented assimilation theory, have pointed to the strength that immigrant networks can have and the benefits they provide for immigrants. These networks provide social capital for immigrants as well as a community which understands the unique needs that the immigrants have because they have had the same challenges and overcome

them (Portes and Zhou, 1993). English language plays a role in the formation of these social networks and the exchange of social capital within immigrant groups.

### *ESOL Classes*

The English classes that the women in my study participated in were one of the most important places for these networks to be formed. From my interviews as well as participant observation, it became clear that what immigrants gain from their ESOL classes goes beyond the opportunity to practice their English conversation and learn the rules of grammar. Though English language learning certainly occurs in the two English classes which I observed, these classes also served a larger purpose for the immigrants who attended them- they are a place where immigrants can form social networks with other immigrants. Sofia, 52, from Italy said that the multicultural group that attended the conversation group in Brighton as her favorite part- “For me is very interesting meet some people who went from other countries like China, Japan, Argentina, Brazil. I meet really a lot of people and talking I understand something about they culture... because every people is different from other person.” Yuna from Japan described the relationships she formed in a previous English class, and how these relationships continued even after the class ended, “The previous class is already ended but we made a group for conversation. Just girls! So we all go. Yeah, it’s fun.” She also named English class as an easy place to build relationships. When asked about her experience making friends in the United States, Yuna immediately said her English class, “I made friends in the English class, so it’s easy for me to make friends, to meet people.” In my time spent observing the class in Cambridge, the three women in the class made plans to go swimming together at the Harvard pool because they all had memberships but didn’t have anyone to go with them. In this way, the English language

classes brought together different immigrant groups and provided them with the opportunity to build relationships with one another. Later in the analysis, I will investigate the benefits that the relationships formed in English class have for immigrants.

### *Immigrant Enclaves*

Another place where these social networks are formed is immigrant's communities, which are most often enclaves made up of other immigrants. As was outlined in the research setting, the neighborhoods of Brighton and Cambridge have diverse immigrant populations made up of immigrants from many different countries. Therefore, immigrants to the Boston area often do not live exclusively among other people from their country. Martina described this intercultural community in her neighborhood in Brighton: "I live with my family, we are in apartment, but we are lucky because near our house there are a lot of people we can met... its beautiful because we are not alone. There are no people from Italy, no. From China, and Indian people, and French. Yes, it's beautiful." Martina said that she and her family would spend time with the other immigrants in their neighborhood; for example, they had just had a potluck for the Superbowl where each immigrant group brought food a from their country to share with the others- she and her family had made *affogato*, Italian espresso with ice cream. This multicultural community made up of others in the same position gives immigrants a sense of belonging in their new life in the United States and makes them feel less alone.

Community is also built within immigrant enclaves composed of immigrants from the same country of origin. Hua Ling described the community in the Chinatown neighborhood of Boston where she grew up.

"I live on the 9th floor at the end of the hall so I walk through everyone and a lot of times when I get off the elevator, a lot of old people hang out there. I always missed the

sense of community, the sense of village when I was in China, but coming here, living in the public housing and living on the 9th floor with a lot of elders and they always hang out, I feel like that's also the village feeling that I missed.”

The community that is formed with neighbors, regardless of country of origin, provides cultural comfort because immigrants feel that they someone they could go to if they were in need, as well as a large social network that could connect them to resources that they may not know about. This provides a sense of cultural comfort in their new life in the United States. The ability to access these resources, which immigrant networks provide, is an important factor for assimilation because it blurs the boundary between native-born Americans and immigrants by granting immigrants access to the same resources as Americans.

#### *Desire to Give Back*

An important trend that was present in relation to immigrant integration is the desire to give back to their community. This is a sign of successful assimilation because an immigrant has accepted the community as their own to the extent that they want to help it through giving back. It was discussed earlier that the women in this sample have lived in the United States for different periods of time. An interesting connection was present between two of the interviewees who had lived in the United States the longest- Hua Ling from China who had lived in the United States for 11 years and Sylvia from Guatemala, who had lived in the United States for 2 years. In speaking about their future goals and what they hope to be doing in 5 years, both women readily described a desire to give back to others from their countries of origin that were immigrating to the United States. Hua Ling, who is just finishing her college education, wanted to use her identity as an immigrant and in particular, her insider knowledge of China and the United States to help those in the same position that she was, “For me, I’m now struggling because I have the

knowledge in the Chinese community... and I feel... a moral obligation to give back... But there's another side of me that I want to go out, maybe to another country to explore things I love." Hua Ling's desire to try and strengthen her community in the future, to the extent that she would sacrifice her own hopes for it, shows the strength of the immigrant network that she is a part of.

A desire to give back was also felt by Sylvia, who worked as a researcher in her home country of Guatemala. In responding to the question about her hopes for the future, she said, "I need to do a bit research to find out what is happening with the Guatemalans. Maybe this is going to be a key for me to understand what I need to do here, for me and for the Guatemalan people." Later in our conversation, she discussed a feeling of guilt that came from not living in Guatemala and contributing to society there. However, she described a hope that the work that she could do living in the United States would be more beneficial to the Guatemalan people than it would have been if she had stayed there. Both Hua Ling and Sylvia viewed their identities as immigrants to the United States as giving them a unique position and perspective that they should use to help those in the same position, and that their successful assimilation into the United States should ultimately serve their new communities by serving new immigrants to those communities.

Both Amina and Sofia were actively seeking out volunteer placements at the time of their interviews. In her discussion of her goals for the future, Amina, a 29 year old from Saudi Arabia, said she wanted to find a way to volunteer. "I would like to have something volunteer or do something. When I go to Saudi Arabia, I told the people 'Yes, I did the volunteer, I did something for the people. Yeah. I learned something. I enjoyed something with the people.'" She described a future hope of getting a master's degree in the United States to be able to work with

autistic children, and wanted her volunteer placement to give her experience with that. In my observation of the English class in Brighton, Amina and Sofia were working with the coordinator of the class to find a volunteer position that they could go to on a daily basis. Though both hoped that a volunteer position would be a good place to make friends from the United States, they also were choosing to spend their free time serving a community that they had not lived in for more than two years. The desire that all four women have to give back to their immigrant communities as well as the greater Boston community shows how beneficial their communities have been because they want to give back to them.

### Social Networks Formed with American Citizens

Modern assimilation theories have begun to include networks built among other immigrants as a factor which facilitates assimilation, in addition to the formation of social networks with American citizens who have intimate, insider knowledge about the culture of the United States. In traditional assimilation theories, such as those pioneered by the Chicago School, one of the major markings of assimilation was integrating into the social networks of American citizens. These networks are undoubtedly still important for immigrant assimilation in the greater Boston area (Kao et al, 2013). The way immigrants form these networks with native-born Americans will be investigated in the following section, as they seemed to be one of the most elusive social networks for the women in my sample to become a part of.

### *Successful Formation of Networks with Americans*

As new people in a new country, the women in my sample had no connections to United States citizens when they first arrived- all their relationships had to start from nothing. None described having extended family or friends that lived nearby. The formation of social networks with Americans was described as especially difficult for most in my sample; however, some

women were successful. One way that immigrants were able to access and build community with Americans was through their children. Martina, 35, from Italy described her difficulty in making friends with her neighbors in Brighton, but eventually was able to form new social networks through those of her son and daughter: “Because kids are a bridge. You know? You know a lot of people cuz also for our neighborhood, we met through the children because children play together so we also, so I go.” Sylvia responded that she made friends primarily through her daughter who attended a bilingual middle school in Cambridge. She described one friendship in particular that she made with an American man, “His older daughter is the same age as my children so we can talk,” she explained. Though many of the parents she met were also immigrants, others were Americans who were interested in building multicultural social networks for themselves and their children. These parents provided Sylvia with valuable information about the Cambridge community- she said he opened the door to a parent conversation group that will be discussed later, which she has planned to go to, but has not attended yet due to the language barrier between her and the other parents.

Another way that social networks between Americans and immigrants are formed is through programs intended to form these connections. These programs, which bring together native and foreign born groups, are intended to facilitate the formation of social networks between the two groups. An example of this is a conversation partners program, often found at colleges, where a non-English speaker and an English speaker meet often to practice English and learn more about each other’s culture. Yuna, from Japan, told me about a relationship with a conversation partner that was assigned to her in a conversation partners program: “I made an American friend, she’s my conversation partner. And I invited her to my house and she made American food for us. It was nice to hear more about life here.” Hua Ling from China described

making American friends through a community center in her neighborhood that brought together a diverse mix of people. In describing the program, she said "...they have a youth center and they also have ESL class so after school I used to go there to learn English and also to join different youth activities." Sarah was one American friend that Hua Ling made during her time spent at the youth center: "I met a really good friend...she's African American and I introduced...green apple milkshake to her. In Chinatown." The relationship between Hua Ling and Sarah demonstrates a cultural interchange in which both girls learned more about the culture of the other.

Included in these programs that are meant to bring together different cultures are the ESOL classes that immigrants take where they can meet and interact with native English speakers. In the classes that I observed in Brighton and Cambridge, the instructors were either native-born American citizens or, in the case of one instructor, had immigrated to the United States when they were very young. These classes give immigrants access to a relationship with a U.S. citizen who has intimate knowledge of both English language and U.S. culture. Though social networks made up of primarily United States citizens were difficult for most interviewees to find, those that were successful did so through their children and through programs specifically aimed towards that interaction.

#### *Difficulty Forming Networks with Americans*

Although the foreign-born and the native-born population interact on a near-daily basis in the greater Boston area, the women in my sample described that forming relationships with Americans was extremely difficult. Furthermore, the lack of social networks between immigrants and U.S. citizens caused the former to feel that they were not part of American community life. In her answer to the question, "Do you feel like you're a part of U.S. culture?" Martina

responded, “No, not really because the people that we met are, aren’t American. And, eh, we [my husband and I] find more difficult to meet Americans.” Though Martina’s husband was half-American and half Italian, she still did not feel that they had truly been accepted in to America culture. In describing a time when she felt like an outsider in the United States, Amina said, “Yeah, because I don’t have friend from American. And I don’t know what happening. Yeah and I feel like strange, yeah. In the community. Sometimes, no. It’s okay. I will do something.” The lack of American friends affected their view of their integration into U.S. society.

This point is clarified in the investigation of immigrants celebrating American holidays. Even when immigrants openly express and practice their acquisition of American culture through the celebration of American holidays, the lack of native-born social networks to share these holidays with causes them to feel that they are excluded from the native culture instead of feeling that they were more a part of it. When Yuna described her Thanksgiving celebration this year, I asked if celebrating holidays made her feel like was really a part of American culture, “It’s hard to answer because on Thanksgiving, we celebrated just our family. So we don’t feel we are part of the culture because we were just with us.” In describing her own Thanksgiving celebrations, Sylvia expressed the same sentiment. She was born in Guatemala and is married to Robert, an American citizen who has lived abroad for most of his life. In describing what she did for Thanksgiving this year, she said, “I went to Mexico! I leave my husband and my daughter and I went to Mexico, yeah. Yeah, not yet because I think it’s... the family of Robert aren’t here. Then maybe I feel if I’m going to be around them, I need to celebrate the same that they do.” Without the social network of her husband’s American family present, Sylvia did not feel the same obligation to celebrate American holidays that she imagined herself eventually feeling if the family lived closer. It is the presence of these native-born social networks that would cause

Sylvia to feel a connection and obligation to American culture. Without them, she felt no impetus to connect to this American cultural practice. Therefore, despite the presence of strong immigrant networks in their community and the integration of American cultural practices into their own lives, it is the social networks formed with native-born Americans and the ability to share cultural practices with them which cause immigrants to feel that they are a part of American society.

The difficulty that immigrants find in forming close relationships with citizens of the United States can be attributed in part to the disparity between the English language level of native-born U.S. citizens and foreign-born immigrants. In comparing her social networks in Guatemala and her social networks in the United States, Sylvia described a noticeable difference.

“I had a really active social network. And one day by other, all this disappear for me. And this is...not just being outside your place, is the language too. No, cuz at this day I don't feel free or sure or confident to go outside to a bar and drink a beer and have friends there. Now that's something I used to do in Guatemala. Okay, it's Friday, see you husband, see you daughter, I'm going to go outside to make friends. But with the language, I think it's not easy for me.”

Participants also named their lack of English language skills as making it difficult for them to be involved in opportunities that their communities offered where they could make friends and find out more about local culture. For example, Sylvia reported a feeling of discontent because she did not know about the youth culture of the United States, and didn't know what types of problems her 10-year-old daughter would soon face. Though there were groups in the Cambridge community that discussed these issues, she didn't feel comfortable attending due to her lack of English skills, “I need to open this door and use its this space...is there are a lot of groups that

talk about the kids in the school. Or lets to know our rights as parents in Cambridge. There's a lot of this group that with my lack in English, I didn't use this. But I think I need to use it, it's just time to use it." Her perceived lack of English skills prevented her from joining these groups which would make her feel more secure about her life and her daughter's life in the United States.

Without a level of confidence in using the English language, it is difficult for immigrants to build social networks with people from the United States. With the exception of one, all of the participants interviewed named conversation as being the most difficult aspect of English or the aspect that they most wanted to improve in their English language class. Sofia, a member of the Brighton conversation group, said that, "I found [an English class focused on] talking and listening more than grammar. Because my difficulty...difficulties are above all about listening and talking. Maybe I have the words in my mind but...yes." Yuna described having the knowledge of English from studying it when she lived in Japan, but not feeling confident enough to speak it with native speakers. "We didn't have an opportunity to speak English in my country so I know the word or grammar but I couldn't use it, yeah. I am still not confident." The inadequacy of their English conversational skills, combined with a lack of confidence in using them, certainly affects immigrant women's ability to interact with the American population and build community with them.

Cultural differences may also account for the difficulty of building social networks between Americans and immigrants. Martina was able to make friends with Americans through her children; however, an evening spent at their house didn't go as she had imagined: "It's difficult to meet American people because there are more different things... We went to American family but at 9... the woman turn off her brain... And she said we want call a cab? We

are more party people.” The cultural differences between the two groups and their differing ideas of a night out made it difficult to form friendships. Though social networks with Americans are desired by immigrants and could connect immigrants to more social capital, in reality they are difficult to form.

#### *View that English Leads to Upward Mobility*

The view was widely held by the women I interviewed that increased English knowledge would lead to better job prospects and eventually, upward mobility. Wanting to get a better job was one of the most cited responses among my participants to the question “What motivated you to join this English program?” Hua Ling, who was close to fluent in English, described the need for her mother to improve her English so she could get a better job. When she told me her hopes for her mother, Hua Ling said, “I would work and give her the space to learn English so she can switch her job. Cuz her job now, I think she won’t be able to do it for a very long time. Cuz she’s a stitcher.” Sylvia, who works as a researcher, needs to close a significant gap between her professional level and her English language ability. “I want to have a job... With my professional level I have, it’s not the same as my English level. Maybe I can apply for a job and they are asking to have a really good skills in English.... I’m an anthropologist and I have a master’s degree, I need to write [in English] to do my professional work.” Moving one hand up and the other down as she spoke, she portrayed the large disparity that there is between the two. This is a unique challenge for the professional immigrants that make up the majority of this sample because their jobs require a much higher level of English proficiency than labor migrants. At a friend’s suggestion, Sylvia thought about going to clean houses to supplement her husband’s income, but said that with master’s degree, she did not want to have that status. This was a major difference from Maria, a labor migrant, who worked as a housekeeper and didn’t need a higher

level of English to be able to do her work. In the opinion of the immigrant women that I interviewed, it is English language ability more so than connecting to strong social networks with a lot of social capital, will lead to upward mobility.

### **American or Immigrant: Which Social Network is the Most Beneficial?**

In their lives in the United States, immigrants build social networks, social capital and communities with both immigrants and Americans. As described above, building social networks with Americans is more difficult for immigrants due to the cultural differences and a lack of proficiency in English. Building social networks with other immigrants is easier, especially when immigrants live amongst each other in enclaves and attend ESOL classes. In the greater Boston area, which social networks are more beneficial to immigrants in terms of facilitating their assimilation- those formed with Americans or those formed with other immigrants? Using interview data and participant observation, I argue that immigrant networks are more beneficial because they provide a safe space for the practice and improvement of the English language and American cultural norms. Though networks with native-born Americans have many benefits for immigrants, their current inaccessibility to immigrants in the greater Boston area negates these benefits.

#### Immigrant Networks: A Safe Space

One of the immigrant networks presented above is formed between immigrants in their English classes. Relationships with other English language learners are important to immigrants because they provide them with an environment where they can practice and improve their English without fear of making mistakes. Amina, 29, from Saudi Arabia told me about a close friendship that she made with a Japanese woman in a previous English class: “She doesn’t speak English good, very well, and I doesn’t speak English very well... It doesn’t make us ...uh...shy!

Yeah. I speak bad, I made mistakes, and she speak bad and she made mistake. It is...that is okay for us.” As many participants described, making friends from the United States who they could practice their English with was very difficult. Though the conversation partners they met in their English classes are not native speakers of English, they provide a safe space for conversation practice. As Maria, 27, from Mexico explained, “Yeah, they have different accent and there is not native speaker English. But, that encourage me to speak.” Their English classes opened the door to a social network which allowed them to practice their English freely and without perceived judgement, and this shared experience of English Language Learning led to a relationship based on a mutual understanding of each other’s experiences. These same relationships were not formed with non-immigrants because they did not have this shared understanding.

The social networks built amongst immigrants where they live and in English classes also provide immigrants with a community that understands their unique situation of living in a new country and knows what services they most need. In describing what networks her family used when they first got to the United States, Hua Ling said, “We asked a lot of neighbors. And my grandparents live here for a long time so they know where to get the housing applications, like get started on the waiting list for public housing.” Growing up in the tight-knit immigrant enclave of Chinatown, she was surrounded by others who had the same experience of immigration as she did, and knew which resources to connect her to. Maria, from Mexico, said that the Brazilian immigrants that live in her apartment building in Brighton helped her find an organization that connected her to important resources: “For the health insurance, I went to...a little organization who helps Portuguese speaking mainly migrants about everything. And they helped me to fill all the forms to apply to Mass Health Insurance.” The immigrant network

helped her find and gain access to these resources necessary for immigrants<sup>7</sup>. As seen in my participant observation, these immigrant networks also helped people find ESOL classes. The instructors in both Brighton and Cambridge would encourage the students to bring their friends to class, and during my time observing, many students did so.

Sylvia said that she preferred immigrant social networks to American social networks because she felt more comfortable with others that have the same experience as her. When asked what language she speaks with the majority of her friends, she responded, “Spanish. That means that I don’t speak so much with outside people. No. That’s a problem I have a couple of friend who speaking Spanish and I prefer their company. I try to find them and talk with them.” This, she explained, was because they spoke the same language and had the same cultural experiences. Though she acknowledged that these friendships weren’t helping her to improve her English, they were the friendships that she felt more comfortable with and which made her feel happier and less lonely in the United States.

#### American Networks: Beneficial, but Inaccessible

The ESOL classes in Brighton and Cambridge were both instructed by Americans. Therefore, in addition to social networks with other immigrants, they also provide access to native-born American citizens who can provide immigrants with more information about U.S. culture and give them a safe place to ask questions about life in a new country. Both English classes which I observed incorporated information about the United States into English instruction. At the high level conversation class in Brighton, the class on Martin Luther King Day discussed civil rights, and the students listened to and read Martin Luther King’s speeches as a way to practice their English. The instructor also brought in a Boston police officer to give a

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<sup>7</sup> Mass Health is the form of Medicaid given by the State of Massachusetts to the poor and vulnerable (Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

presentation to the class about their rights as immigrants, and took the students to the Massachusetts state house to meet with a senator who worked for immigrant rights. This cultural information was also incorporated into other programs that the women participated in. In a previous English class, Yuna told me that, "...for my listening practice I'm watching Gossip Girl on Netflix."

In the ESOL class in Cambridge, the cultural instruction was less structured but still part of the course. At the end of almost every class, participants would approach the teacher or me with questions about life in the United States. One Japanese mother asked me to explain what she would need to buy for her daughter for Halloween. Another Chinese participant was looking for recommendations on what stores she should go to in order to buy warm clothes for winter. The instructors also hosted Thanksgiving and Christmas parties during class with traditional American food and decorations. In this way, social networks formed with the American teachers of the ESOL classes modeled appropriate cultural behavior and norms to the immigrants in the classes by showing them what types of foods to make and what types of activities typically happen in these typical American social interactions. American social networks also have an insider knowledge gained from living in the United States for much more time than immigrant networks could which allows them to have more information about more resources available in the United States.

Though building social networks with native-born citizens is beneficial to immigrant assimilation, especially in terms of the first-hand knowledge about America culture that these networks possess, it is difficult to discuss the social capital that social networks between immigrants and Americans provide because so few of the women in this sample were able to form them, though they wanted to. However, this leads to an important conclusion- though

American social networks are beneficial to immigrant women in facilitating their process of assimilation especially in terms of the social capital they provide to immigrants in the greater Boston area; these benefits are nullified if the networks that contain them are not accessible to the immigration population. Almost every participant described the feeling that they weren't completely a part of the American culture because they did not have American friends, and would likely have expressed more positive emotions about their time spent living in the United States if they were able to make native-born friends. However, these networks and the capital they contain were inaccessible to the immigrants in this sample due to a lack of interaction between the two groups and the language barrier that existed between them. This was unexpected, especially with the sample being made up of primarily professional immigrants who would be more likely to interact and form relationships with Americans in their jobs than labor migrants.

#### Boston Perceived as Accepting to Immigrants

There was an interesting paradox within the data having to do with American-Immigrant relations. Only one of the participants said that she had been able to make lasting friendships with Americans; in comparison to the other participants, she has spent the longest amount time in the United States. However, despite a lack of American friends, the majority of the participants viewed the greater Boston area as an open place which is accepting of other people from other cultures and of immigrants. Sofia described this, saying, "I found American people here in Boston very friendly, very friendly and uh okay... I saw in Boston there are many center to helping to help foreign people and immigrants and I think it's really good, really." Yuna made a comparison between the United States and her country of origin, Japan, saying,

“...to feel that I’m a part of here, it’s easy. But in my country, if you come to my country, it will be hard for you to feel you’re part... you’re a member of Japan or part of it... Japan is an isolated country and we don’t have opportunity to meet foreigners...But here, everyone used to meet foreigners or people with accents.”

Sylvia also felt that there was an acceptance of different ways of speaking English, saying, “I don’t worry because now there are a lot of people doing this here in the United States. Then the English, or the American people are being less and less strict about how they want to see the English writing.” Her perception of the greater Boston area based on her experiences is that American people are accepting of imperfect English because they are so accustomed to it.

However, though immigrants do experience the United States as a place which is open to people from many different cultures, that openness does not translate to easily made friendships with American citizens. Logically, a society which is so accepting of immigrants should allow friendships to be made easily between immigrants and Americans, but this was not the case according to the women in my sample. This could be due to the lack of comfort with the English language described that prevents immigrants from having the confidence to begin conversations with Americans. This perception of the United States and of Boston could also be influenced by the stories that immigrants heard about the United States before immigrating, instead of by their real-life experiences. The gap which exists between the perception and experience of American society could also speak to a larger societal issue, which is the lack of spaces and opportunities for immigrants and Americans to interact. Though Americans are largely accepting of people from other cultures and would like to form relationships with those from other cultures and other countries, there are no means for them to do so.

## V. DISCUSSION

In looking at the difficulties described by immigrant women who have migrated to the United States, it is clear that though social networks made up of Americans would benefit immigrant groups and would make them feel more integrated into U.S. society, they are ultimately inaccessible to immigrant groups. Immigrants are instead finding a place to belong within an immigrant enclave, which are often resource rich and knowledgeable about immigrant's unique situations. The lack of interaction between the two groups does not create a positive environment that more immigrants would be able to eventually assimilate into; instead, it creates a divide which will continue to lead to divisions between the two groups.

In order for successful immigrant assimilation to occur, there is a need for immigrants to feel an increased sense of cultural comfort. This means that they will more secure in their lives in the United States, something which was not felt by any of the immigrants interviewed. Instead, many felt discomfort about their lives in the United States. Security would come from the ability to access resources that they need for themselves and their families to thrive. This sense of security would allow the participants in this sample to make more friends and become more involved in their communities because they have a strong network to facilitate that. Increased cultural comfort would come from more interaction with Americans because, as evidenced by the interactions between students and teachers in ESOL classes, the insider knowledge possessed by Americans about life in the United States is necessary for immigrants to find certain resources easily. However, this cultural comfort must also be accompanied by a certain level of English comfort, as the ability to communicate in English facilitates the formation of connections between native English speakers and immigrants.

A possible way to increase cultural comfort is suggested by Dudley (2010). This article looked at immigrants to Canada that participated in various volunteer experiences in the community that they lived in. These volunteer opportunities allowed them to have interactions with native-born Canadians who were English speakers, and allowed them to practice their English through interaction with clients and other volunteers. She found that for many immigrants, the experience was beneficial to their integration, primarily due to the social contacts that they were able to develop and the insight into Canadian culture that they were able to gain. Dudley suggests a volunteer experience that is integrated into ESOL programs so that instructors would be able to choose placements where immigrants would have a lot of opportunities to speak with native English speakers. Integrating volunteering into the ESOL experience of immigrants in the greater Boston would be beneficial in addressing the major needs of immigrants: their lack of American social networks and the language barrier that exists between them and native-born citizens. Furthermore, a volunteer experience would provide a low-stress situation in which immigrants feel the same level of comfort that they feel practicing English with their non-native speaking friends. This would lead to increased English comfort as well as an increased cultural comfort through more interaction with Americans that are native speakers. Combining a volunteer experience with an ESOL program would incorporate and strengthen the social networks that all of the immigrants in my sample found in their ESOL classes. However, the possibility of being involved in this volunteer experience is limited to participants similar to those in my sample; particularly, professional immigrants who are not the primary wage earners in their families that would have the free time to spend volunteering.

A second implication of this research is the necessity for English programs in the greater Boston area to focus more on conversation and building immigrant's confidence in their

speaking skills. The ESOL class which I observed in Brighton was a high-level conversation group, but the classes focused more on reading and pronunciation than the practice of free-flowing conversation. Similarly, the ESOL class I observed in Cambridge emphasized reading comprehension and grammar. Though these are both important aspects of language learning, the opportunity to practice conversation with the native English speaker that was moderating the group and the other immigrants in the class would allow immigrants to improve their conversation and their confidence, which would make it easier for them to speak to American citizens and form relationships with them.

A final recommendation which comes from my data analysis is the need for communities to provide more opportunities where immigrants and Americans can interact. This could be through the creation of organizations specifically targeted to facilitating that relationship and the assimilation process, such as community centers. As successful relations were built between immigrants and U.S. citizens with children as the facilitators, the school environment could be a natural place for these relationships to be built. This could be in the form of events for parents such as school auctions or by incorporating immigrant parents into pre-existing parent groups. It could also be through other avenues, such as book groups organized by libraries or encouragement of immigrant involvement in local government. In any program, the emphasis should be placed on increased interaction outside of one's own cultural group as well as acceptance of all levels of English language ability within the groups so that immigrant women would feel more comfortable and would be able to build relationships with the Americans there.

#### *Further Research*

The immigrant population and their experiences are constantly changing as new groups of immigrants enter the United States. President Obama's executive order on immigration,

passed in November of 2014, promises to decrease the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States and streamline the legal immigration process in an attempt to benefit the US economy. One aspect of the executive order will “extend employment eligibility for spouses of certain high-schooled workers” (The White House, 2014). This would benefit an estimated 180,000 immigrants in 2015, and 55,000 in the years following. The main population that this aspect of the executive order would benefit would include many of the women in this sample who are currently unemployed or self-employed and who immigrated to the United States for their husband’s job. As more and more immigrant women are on the path to becoming naturalized American citizens, there is a need for continued assessment of their process of assimilation through qualitative and quantitative research. As immigrants begin to make up a larger and larger part of the total population of the United States, their successful assimilation becomes extremely important in the overall health and prosperity of the nation. Therefore, continued research into the field of immigrant assimilation is necessary, especially in multicultural cities such as Boston which attract a large immigrant population.

The research presented here could be expanded upon in further studies that utilize a larger sample that would be more generalizable to the total immigrant population of the greater Boston area. This larger sample would need to include the male population to investigate if the formation of social networks is affected by gender. There is also a need for continued studies of labor migrants in order to better understand how English plays a role in the formation of social networks while at work. Additional research could also explore how immigrant’s identity and self-perception change as they learn a different language and assimilate into a new society, especially in terms of parent’s relationships with children. Finally, there is a need to look at the

American side of assimilation, and investigate the ways in which Americans attitudes and actions towards immigrants affect their ability to assimilate and be successful in American society.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Immigrant women living in the greater Boston area occupy a complex position as they assimilate into the society of the United States. They are adjusting to life in a new country and a different culture, without the support of the social networks from their home countries, simultaneously learning to communicate effectively in English. The research done with 7 immigrant women living in the greater Boston area shows that these processes are intertwined- the ESOL classes where immigrants go to learn English help immigrants form social networks with other immigrants, which provide them with the resources they need to assimilate successfully into the United States. On the other hand, their lack of English language skills and the few opportunities for interactions with American people make it difficult for them to form these strong networks with native-born citizens. The lack of immigrant accessibility to American social networks in the greater Boston area leads me to conclude that it is immigrant networks, that have a shared understanding of immigrant needs and are easily accessible, are more beneficial to women that are assimilating into life in the United States because they provide a safe space where culture and language can be practiced and improved, leading to eventual assimilation. There is a need for more opportunities for immigrants to interact with American citizens, such as through volunteer opportunities, in order to build a more cohesive society where the division between immigrant and American is less apparent and has less of an impact on the opportunities one is given.

These findings present a small look at current state of immigrant-American relations in the greater Boston area. Though these findings are not generalizable to the greater immigrant population, the qualitative data provides valuable information about the needs of the female immigrant population whose voice, with its imperfect grammar and pronunciation, is not often heard. The voices of these women, as expressed in the above pages, add necessary first-hand experience to the ongoing conversation about immigrant needs and the way to facilitate assimilation of an ever-growing immigrant population into the society of the United States.







## **APPENDIX A- INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Introduction**

What is your name? How long have you lived in the United States

Where are you currently working? How long have you worked there? What do you do there?

### **Immigration History**

Where were you born?

When did you come to the United States? How old were you when you moved here?

Did you move to the United States alone? If not, who did you come here with?

Do you have a family here? Can you tell me about them?

Did you live anywhere before living in Cambridge/Brighton? If so, where? Why did you decide to move to Cambridge/Brighton?

### **Cultural Enclave**

Where do you currently live?

Who do you live with? Do you live with other immigrants, family members, alone?

What language do the people you live with primarily speak? What language do you speak with them?

What language do you speak with your children?

What language do the majority of your friends speak? What language do you speak with them?

How do you maintain your culture here? Do you make food from (*your country*), read the news about (*your country*), watch TV shows or listen to music from (*your country*)?

Do you share aspects of your culture or stories about your culture with your friends who are not from the same country as you?

People you live with

Friends

Co-workers

### **Participation in English Language Learning**

Is this the first English Language program you've been involved in?

If not, what other English programs have you been involved in before?

If yes, why did you decide to begin this class?

Why did you decide to join this current English language learning program? What motivated you to come and improve your English?

What have you learned from this class?

Can you tell me about a time when you were successful in communicating in English in a difficult or confusing situation? How did that feel?

### **Beginnings in the US**

Can you tell me about your first few months in the United States? What was it like living in a completely new country?

What was the most difficult part about the transition?

Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt confused in the United States?

What services did you use or what programs were you involved in in your community, if any? (*such as- help finding an apartment, help registering your children for school, etc.*)

### **English Comfort/Cultural Consumption**

Can you tell me about the TV shows and movies that you normally watch?

*(If the answer doesn't have to do with U.S./ English TV shows... then ask)*

Do you have any favorite English language TV shows that you watch or have watched?

What do you like about them? What characters, situations, etc do you find funny or entertaining about them?

Can you tell me about the music that you like to listen to?

*(If the answer doesn't have to do with US/English music...then ask)*

Do you have any favorite bands or artists that sing in English to listen to? What is it that you like about their music?

How often do you speak English daily?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt challenged because you had trouble with speaking English?

### **Integration/Cultural Comfort**

How did you meet most of the people you're currently friends with?

You're part of an English Learners program. What other services do you currently use? *(Ex-social work, adult education classes, childcare, schools for your children, etc).*

Do you celebrate US Holidays? What did you do for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Thanksgiving?

Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt like you were very much a part of United States culture, when you felt like you were really a part of the country?

Can you tell me a story about a time you felt like an outsider in the United States, like you didn't belong here?

What are some needs that you see yourself or your family as still having that you need more help or support with? *(homework help for your children, help knowing how to buy or rent a car, learning more English).*

What do you see as some challenges or barriers to these hopes?

What hopes do you have for your family, for your children? Can you tell me how you picture their future or what you hope for their future to be?

How do you picture your future in the United States? What do you hope to accomplish? How do you see yourself in the future- where will you be living, what will you be doing? How will it be different than your life now?

### **Conclusion**

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences as an immigrant, something that you feel is really important for others to know about the experiences of immigrant here?

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