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Fragmented Ties, Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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Cecilia Menjívar’s book challenges previous notions of immigrant social networks as cohesive and unified collectivities by examining the instability of informal networks of Salvadoran immigrants in San Francisco. Building on an extensive bibliography of research on social networks, Menjívar moves beyond an understanding of such networks as predetermined structures to examine them as dynamic processes affected both by social forces and the individuals involved. She convincingly argues against academic overemphasis on the resilience, strength and cohesiveness of such networks through analysis of the destabilizing effects of both macrostructural forces and internal differentiations such as social class, political views, generation and gender.

The framework of Menjívar’s sociological study is shaped around the experiences of fifty Salvadoran immigrants, all of whom were over the age of eighteen when they left El Salvador and had been in the United States fewer than five years at the time of her study. Additionally, the author includes data collected through a survey of 150 other immigrants and notes the importance of informal discussions, observation and personal experiences as a Salvadoran-American herself. This combination of quantitative research with qualitative analysis results in a well-written and engaging text that introduces readers to the multifaceted experiences of Salvadoran immigrants and provides concrete evidence of the problematic nature of the social and family networks on which they often depend.

Menjívar begins her study with a discussion of social networks scholarship and a critique of both the historical-structural frameworks approach and the social networks perspective. She contends that idealized representations of social networks conceal the multiple tensions and conflicting interests within them. According to the author, issues such as the socioeconomic status of the receiving population and its possible undermining effects on social and family networks remain conspicuously absent from most studies of immigrant social networks. She continues with a discussion of El Salvador, providing a brief and necessarily limited periodization of its history and the events leading up to the institutionalized terror, psychosocial trauma and mass emigration of the 1980’s. Another chapter is dedicated to the expensive and often perilous journey, or transmigración, of most Salvadorans through Guatemala, across Mexico and eventually into the United States. It becomes clear to readers in the first half of the book that the reasons for leaving El Salvador are quite different than the reasons for traveling all the way to the...
United States; this point provides an important segue to the centrality of informal social networks to the growth of the Salvadoran-American population.

Menjivar continues her discussion of social networks by examining the context of reception facing immigrants and its effects on the structures of opportunity available to them. She begins with an explanation of government policy toward Salvadorans and the significance of the decision to treat them as economic immigrants, refusing them refugee status and rarely granting asylum. The importance of legality and efforts towards gaining residency are but one factor among many for the author, but such processes are further studied in Susan Coutin’s book Legalizing moves: Salvadoran immigrants’ struggle for U.S. residency published the same year. Menjivar continues with an analysis of the effects of local economic conditions on newly arrived immigrants and then moves into a discussion of the receiving community, explaining that it “channels the effects of macrolevel forces to the lives of immigrants and links the microlevel world of everyday life to broader forces” (78). It is in this section of the book that the author successfully supports the notion that assumptions of immigrant unity based on a common nationality are simply a misrepresentation of the situation. Factors such as socioeconomic background, political affiliation and religious beliefs can serve as a means of association, but they can also become a source of tension and insurmountable differences within the immigrant community.

At this point, Menjivar reminds readers that the existence of such networks can be rendered meaningless if members do not have access to desirable information or resources. Building on Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, the author discusses the many ways in which the production of such social capital is undermined. She provides several examples of how the inability to repay debts undermines even the closest networks and often the expectations of newcomers and the established community lead to disappointment. Such deterioration of social networks necessitates the type of analysis found in Menjivar’s study, one that seeks to understand the structures of opportunity available to immigrant populations as integral to both the stability and viability of their social networks.

The most distinguishing contribution of Menjivar’s book comes in the later chapters in which she discusses the significant effects of gender and generation on the perpetual renegotiation of social networks. Her analysis highlights the transformative effects of immigration on traditional gender roles in the Salvadoran community from a number of different perspectives. The author continues with a professional, yet emotionally charged examination of the effects of material and social conditions on age expectations and responsibilities traditionally rooted in sociocultural norms. This provides readers with a valuable understanding of the complex and difficult circumstances facing Salvadoran immigrants.

Though Menjivar describes her study as a “deviant” and “anomalous” case, she fails to convincingly distinguish the Salvadoran immigrant experience from that of other immigrant groups not afforded refugee status and facing difficult socioeconomic conditions. It is difficult to identify this point as either a strength or a shortcoming of the book. On the one hand, her study provides valuable insight concerning the dynamic complexity of social networks in general, but it also suggests that the Salvadoran community is just one among many who share a common experience living on the margins of U.S. society. There remains no doubt however that this book is a valuable contribution to both the field of social networks research and to a greater understanding of one of the fastest growing minority communities in the United States, a community too often overlooked by researchers and society in general.


Michael Millar received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 2002 and is now an Assistant Professor of Spanish and American Studies at Western Michigan University. Professor Millar also works as an Area Studies consultant for Prudential Intercultural Services. He has published and presented several articles on Central American cultural production and has recently expanded his research to include the literary work of the Central American diaspora in the United States. Contact him at michael.millard@wmich.edu

REFERENCES


