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Experiences of Discrimination in an Emerging Latina/o Community

In this article I explore how members of an emerging community of Latina/o immigrants in Pittsburgh, a small but rapidly growing population, understand and respond to discrimination. Both documented and undocumented Latina/o immigrants reported experiencing discrimination and facing challenges in addressing these experiences. However, personal context has an impact on specific grievance processes. I specifically explore three main topics: (1) the difficulty expressed by many Latina/o immigrants in using the name–blame–claim continuum for discriminatory acts; (2) how discriminatory incidents tend to reinforce the intrinsic inequality at the root of discrimination; and (3) how acts of discrimination and the responses to them actively shape the Latina/o identity within their own community and by their American-born counterparts. [discrimination, emerging immigrant communities, Latina/o immigrants, identity]

José¹ was nervous as he told me about the day his workplace was raided by police officers asking for documentation. The treatment by the officers felt abusive: they entered the company yelling “as if looking for a mass murderer,” and humiliating him. The officer in charge refused to accept José’s driver’s license as identification and called US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Despite receiving confirmation of José’s legal status, the officer summoned him to the police station, where he dismissed his signed Social Security card and continued to ask for proof of legal status. The officer further demanded José to bring forward the coworkers who had left when the police arrived. For José this was a deeply traumatic experience. In his words, he felt less of a person after it happened and considered it a reflection of how society regarded him.

Just remembering about that my nerves are on edge . . . I thought about suing, but I felt so frustrated, so helpless that I didn’t want to do anything. I only wanted to lock myself in my room and see nobody. He almost succeeded in making me feel like garbage. For a while I felt like that: so insignificant, so like nothing.²

In this article I explore how Latina/o immigrants in an emerging immigrant community in Pittsburgh understand and respond to discrimination. Both documented and undocumented Latina/o immigrants reported experiencing discrimination and faced challenges in addressing these experiences. However, personal circumstances impact specific grievance processes. I specifically explore the difficulty expressed by many Latina/o immigrants in blaming others for discriminatory acts, and how these discriminatory incidents tend to reinforce the intrinsic inequality at the root of discrimination. Acts of discrimination and the responses to them actively shape the identity held by Latina/o immigrants themselves and their American-born counterparts.

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Background

A grievance is the belief in “entitlement to a resource which someone else can grant or deny” (Kritzer 1980, 510). The most common view of the grievance process has been that once a grievance is identified, the aggrieved party can place fault for the injury on another person (blame), after which a claim can be made. If that claim is rejected, a dispute is born (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1980). When this occurs, five responses have been traditionally recognized: ignoring the grievance (“lumping”), avoidance of the aggrieving party, negotiation, mediation, and arbitration (Nader and Todd 1978). Other responses identified in the literature, usually occurring before or instead of a claim, include unilateral ones aimed at managing the occurrence and outcomes of the grievance, confronting the aggressor to correct or conciliate, or distancing and engaging in punitive reactions (Emerson 2008). These are best identified when disputes are observed from the very moment in which a situation is perceived as problematic or troubling (Emerson 2008, 2011).

Simply asking for rectification could address more than 25 percent of grievances (Trubek et al. 1983), but socially disadvantaged individuals are less likely to make such claims (Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin 2009; Engel and Munger 2003; Gilliom 2001; Kidder 1980; Morrill et al. 2010). This disparity is driven by a number of social, cultural, and structural factors such as fear of adverse consequences (Bumiller 1987; Gleeson 2010; Sáenz et al. 2011), self-blame (Coates and Penrod 1980; Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1980), and cultural expectations of self-reliance (Bumiller 1987; Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1980).

In this article I study the experience of an emerging community of Latina/o immigrants in Pittsburgh who face a specific type of grievance: discrimination. Discrimination, the unequal and disadvantageous treatment between individuals based on an ascribed or perceived trait (Quillian 2006), has a negative impact on mental health, income levels, and educational attainment (Araújo and Borrell 2006). Behaviors that constitute discrimination range from daily hassles to sporadic but acute stressors.

Discrimination may be caused by prejudice, which is a negative emotion toward a target group based on a poorly founded belief about members of that group (Taylor and Pettigrew 2000), although this is not the case with all forms of discrimination (Quillian 2006). The two main issues that trigger discrimination against Latina/o immigrants are legal status and language (Lopez, Morin, and Taylor 2010). Prejudice against this group is partially fueled by what Chavez (2008) calls the Latino Threat, the inaccurate construction of Latina/o immigrants as immutable, unwilling to integrate into the larger society, and devoted to a reconquest conspiracy that threatens American culture. This construct is driven by a self-sustaining cycle in which prejudice triggers augmented surveillance of this “dangerous” group, which reinforces suspicions and, therefore, prejudice in the mainstream community (Romero 2006).

In contrast to this view, the assimilation model indicates that subsequent generations of immigrants naturally transition into political and cultural incorporation (Smith 2003; South, Crowder, and Chavez 2005). Somewhat in between the aforementioned models, a transnational model recognizes that immigrants (or “transmigrants”) exist in constant interaction across borders, which has direct impact on their identity formation and adaptive processes (Blanc, Basch, and Glick Schiller 1995). Assimilation is thus shaped by both the reception of natives and immigrants’ actions; rejection (as in discrimination) and assimilation simultaneously feed and hinder each other as they are processed by native-born Americans and immigrants (Coutin 2003; Massey and Sánchez 2010; Sáenz et al. 2011).

One aspect of the immigrant experience shaped by this push-pull process is legal consciousness, understood as a cultural practice of the law. This framework aligns with a view of legality occurring most often through everyday life experiences outside the formal

realms of the law. Legality thus operates “as both an interpretive framework and a set of resources with which and through which the social world (including the part known as law) is constituted” (Ewick and Silbey 1998, 23). Scholars have observed that, among immigrants, an individual’s legal status has a direct effect on legal consciousness (Coutin 2000; Gleeson 2010). Undocumented immigrants, for instance, live in “spaces of nonexistence” (Coutin 2000), where individuals are forced to remain invisible and with restricted mobility (De Genova 2002). For undocumented individuals, everyday acts (e.g., driving) become illicit and sometimes devastating, and fear, exclusion, and vulnerability become defining presences. Age at migration also impacts legal consciousness: younger generations socialized in the protected school environment are more willing to openly discuss their legal struggles and expectations (Abrego 2011). The legal consciousness of those who are not Latina/o is also impacted by the push and pull triggered by migration. For instance, nonelites often spearhead support for criminalizing Latina/o immigrants, which serves the purpose of positioning the Latina/o community as marginal and dangerous (Longazel 2013). Discriminatory and assimilatory practices thus shape a legal consciousness that is closely tied with the construction of Latina/o identities.

Research indicates that Latina/o immigrants exhibit extremely low self-reporting of discrimination. Stuber and colleagues (2003) reported 37 percent, while Pérez, Fortuna, and Alegría (2008) found that 25 percent of Latina/o immigrants reported discrimination. Interestingly, 40 percent of migrants who are white-collar workers reported discrimination (Pérez, Fortuna, and Alegría 2008), perhaps because higher acculturation is coupled with higher expectations of acceptance.

Most general research on the legal consciousness of Latina/o immigrants, and particular research on responses to discrimination, has taken place in areas with traditionally high numbers of Latina/o residents. However, currently 20 percent of those who are Latina/o, and who are mainly immigrants, live in emerging communities (Cunningham et al. 2006). In contrast to places with traditional Latina/o settlements, where transnational communities provide immigrants a safety net and a culturally congruent experience (De Genova 1998), Latina/o immigrants in emerging communities experience extreme social isolation and a scarcity of culturally appropriate social services (Cunningham et al. 2006; Documét and Sharma 2004; Documét, Kamouyerou et al. 2013). As expected, others living in these areas have limited exposure to Latina/o immigrants and their cultures.

The following sections present situations that elucidate the intersection of legal consciousness and the construction of immigrant identities through the experience of discrimination in one such emerging Latina/o community in Pittsburgh. I examine how immigrants’ specific social contexts and life experiences shape the ways in which they understand and practice legality, as well as how this legality in turn shapes their conceptions of self.

An Emerging Immigrant Community

Data for this article was collected from Latina/o immigrants in Pittsburgh, a city that has experienced a dramatic Latina/o population increase (Barcus 2007). In 2010, more than 19,000 Latina/o individuals lived in Allegheny County (US Census Bureau 2010). Although a small percentage of the total population (less than 2 percent), this represented a 70 percent increase from 2000 (US Census Bureau 2000, 2010).

As a group, Latina/o immigrants are not recognized as sufficiently significant to be treated as one of Pittsburgh’s constituent migrant populations (Alzo 2006; Gordon 1971). The general perception remains that no Latina/o individuals live in the area, which is heightened by the scattered settlement of the population, although a few clusters have recently formed (Jones 2005). This is reflected in the meager mention of any Latina/o in the mass media

before 2000 (Jones 1999). This lack of awareness, coupled with the recent arrival of many Latina/o immigrants, has resulted in higher levels of social and cultural isolation (Documét, Green et al. 2008; Documét, Kamouyerou et al. 2013; Documét and Sharma 2004). Latina/o immigrants in Pittsburgh are most visible through their organizations. The oldest of these represent professionals, with more recent ones focusing on service provision and welfare concerns for higher-needs populations. The emergence of new organizations is often mentioned negatively as a symptom of the rapidly growing Latina/o population.

Latina/o populations throughout the United States are heterogeneous in origin, educational attainment, English fluency, and occupation. In Pittsburgh, however, previous waves of immigrants comprised considerable numbers of highly educated Latina/o professionals and with comparatively more representation from South America and the Caribbean. Newer immigrant waves to Pittsburgh better resemble national trends (young, less educated, undocumented, and non-English-speaking). Local Latina/o immigrants often see their community as divided in two, mostly separate, groups: professionals and service workers.

Methods

The data in this article comes from a broader ethnographic study I conducted from 2007 to 2009 on how Latina/o immigrants deal with grievances. I interviewed twenty participants chosen from records kept by local organizations and through snowball sampling. I selected fourteen of the interviewees by stratified purposive sampling of two strata according to type of occupation: blue or white collar. I purposely sampled the remaining six participants according to their status as spouses of American citizens (see Table 1). The interview data were heavily complemented with participant-observation conducted mainly in spaces where Latina/o residents commonly participated, giving priority to those where grievances were more likely to arise or be aired (i.e., service organizations, community meetings, rallies). I also attended public and private events that had a heavy Latina/o presence.

In the interviews I asked participants about “problems” they had experienced while living in the area. I allowed for spontaneous identification of such problems, and then probed on four main issues: domestic problems, debts, discrimination, and problems with the law. The question about discrimination specifically read, “Have you ever suffered unfair treatment due to your age, sex, race, religion, national origin, or income?” I inquired for detailed information about the actors, context, events, and actions taken, as well as on the beliefs and attitudes that supported those actions.

I digitally audio recorded interviews, and then thematically coded these and text files using Atlas.ti. I used predefined codes, along with codes that I identified as emerging following a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006). Of the 199 total grievances collected, 37 were on discrimination; these are discussed in this article.

Although minimizing bias was a conscious effort, finding the most marginalized Latina/o immigrants remained difficult, so self-selection bias could not be avoided. On another point, recollections were filtered by the limits of memory or the willingness of individuals to share certain or all details.

Exploring Discrimination: Findings and Discussion

During fieldwork, conversations about discrimination arose easily. These discussions with blue-collar immigrants were not restrained, but tended to occur only in contexts explicitly related to the topic (e.g., racial profiling). Among white-collar immigrants, I often experienced impromptu discussions about discrimination in spaces where the topic was not necessarily expected (e.g., social gatherings).

Table 1. Interviewees, ethnographic data ($N = 20$)

Category	Legal Status: [*] <i>At entry</i> → <i>Current</i>	Region of Origin	Gender	Level of Education
White-collar workers ($n = 7$ interviewees)	Visa (NI) → US citizen	South America	M	Graduate
	Visa (NI) → Visa (I)	Mexico/Central America	F	Graduate
	Visa (NI) → Visa (I)	South America	F	High school
Blue-collar worker ($n = 7$ interviewees)	Visa (NI) → Visa (NI)	South America	F	College
	Visa (NI) → LPR	South America	M	Graduate
	Undoc. → LPR	South America	F	Graduate
	Undoc. → Visa (I)	South America	M	College
	Visa (NI) → Overstay	South America	M	Graduate
Spouse of US citizen ($n = 6$ interviewees)	Undoc. → Undoc.	South America	F	Other
	Visa (NI) → LPR	Mexico/Central America	M	Some secondary
	Visa (NI) → US citizen	Mexico/Central America	F	Some secondary
	Visa (I) → LPR	South America	M	High school
	Visa (NI) → LPR	Mexico/Central America	M	Some secondary
	Visa (NI) → Visa (I)	Mexico/Central America	F	High school
Spouse of US citizen ($n = 6$ interviewees)	Visa (NI) → US citizen	Mexico/Central America	M	Primary
	Visa (I) → LPR	South America	M	College
	Visa (NI) → LPR	South America	F	College
	Undoc. → LPR	Caribbean	M	High school
Spouse of US citizen ($n = 6$ interviewees)	Visa (NI) → LPR	South America	F	High school
	Undoc. → LPR	Mexico/Central America	M	High school
	Visa (NI) → Visa (I)	South America	F	High school

Note:^{*} LPR: legal permanent resident; (I): immigrant; (NI): non-immigrant.

Table 2. Responses to occurrences of perceived discrimination

Response	Primary	Secondary	Total
Lumping	17	4	21
Avoidance	4	6	10
Negotiation	1	0	1
Assume fault	7	2	9
Talk back	3	4	7
Other	5	6	11

Of the thirty-seven discrimination grievances collected, thirteen were presented by white-collar workers, sixteen by blue-collar, and eight by spouses of non-Latina/o Americans. On average, interviewees reported two occurrences of discrimination. Only three interviewees did not report any cases of discrimination. Congruent with the literature, all white-collar interviewees identified at least one event.

The prevalence of discrimination across all strata, and its perceived basis on Chavez’s (2008) idea of the generalized “Latino Threat,” was evident in 24 cases, in which participants identified “being Latina/o” as the main reason for discrimination. In seven cases, evenly distributed across strata, language was identified as the reason for the discriminatory experience. In six cases, immigration status was cited as the main reason for discrimination. Paradoxically, none of these six individuals were undocumented. Other factors identified as causing discrimination were gender, class, and “personal reasons.”

Ignoring the grievance, known in the literature as “lumping,” was the most common response to discrimination. In nine cases, the respondent assumed fault. In only one case was there an explicit claim. Other respondents tried to minimize the impact of discrimination, and mentioned creating preventive measures or using social networks to resolve or prevent future discrimination (see Table 2).

The following sections provide details on the discriminatory experiences of Latina/o immigrants in Pittsburgh. To explore how participants construct their understandings of the legal, and their available options, I first argue that the common interpretation of discriminatory incidents is impersonal, which prevents access to the name–blame–claim continuum. Next, I explore how these incidents and their outcomes shape participants’ own constructions of self, which illustrates barriers to processing. I finish with a discussion of some of the alternative dispute processing mechanisms that were undertaken, how they impacted the construction of immigrants’ identities, and their unequal availability across the Latina/o community.

An Impersonal Affair: Who’s to Blame?

In 2007, a note signed by “the National Alliance” (a white supremacy group) was left at the door of the only Catholic Church in Pittsburgh that offered Spanish mass and where a social services office catering exclusively to Latina/o immigrants operated. It read: “Get rid of all non-whites. Stop immigration.” Many feared this was the beginning of a trend of prejudice because of the increasing Latina/o population. At the same time, it was difficult to assess what to do. Despite its prejudiced message, it was impersonal in both its authorship and its recipients: it was not clearly linked to specific individuals. With the cases of discrimination collected for this project, most participants had difficulties identifying an aggressor, which complicated their ability to process the grievance. After all, a narrative of grievance that can be analyzed and eventually resolved requires identifiable protagonists (Drexler 2007).

Pedro, a highly paid professional, was required to periodically update his work visa (H1B) to retain his legal status. This was done through an external attorney (paid regardless of outcome), who could only be contacted through a human resources liaison. However, that liaison was not familiar with the dependence of a foreign employee on a visa, the immigration process, or its multiple deadlines. Given this lack of knowledge or understanding, the success of a renewal process is a priority only for the employee, who has the least power to push it forward.

On one occasion, the attorney, without checking with him, filed Pedro's visa renewal with outdated documents. The application was denied. The attorney contacted Pedro's boss to inform him of "Pedro's negligence" and his contract termination. Pedro had to take unpaid time to return to his home country to solve the problem, and faced loss of trust from his boss who accepted the attorney's perspective. Although no single person acted with prejudice to harm him, Pedro's immigration status produced disadvantageous treatment within his company. With small numbers of immigrants and little experience with sponsored visas, the liaison's and the boss' ignorance about Pedro's plight as a foreigner was neither uncommon nor unexpected. In Pedro's words, "Things would've been different if I had been American. It's like subtle discrimination, something like that."

Juan, a Mayan immigrant working in hospitality, also faced difficulties naming and blaming his aggressors. Leaving his work at a hotel one day, young adults driving by yelled to him to "go back home" and pulled down their pants. In Juan's perspective, it was his distinct indigenous physiognomy, along with unfounded prejudice against the unknown, that prompted this treatment. Juan decided just to leave without responding to his harassers, but expressed feeling extremely impotent. Being strangers, Juan could not name his aggressors. Additionally, he refused to blame them, and instead assigned blame on "this world in which we still live," a broader structure that fosters prejudice and allowed them to do this without punishment.

Even when participants were able to clearly name someone as responsible for a discriminatory act, they often found it hard to assign blame. When Paola, originally from Central America, became a US citizen, her coworkers signed a congratulatory card. Two wrote demeaning messages: "Now that you are a citizen, you'd better start paying taxes," and "Once a beaner, always a beaner." Paola could name the two writers, but refused to assign blame on them: "The guy is eighty, he's not going to change. The other one is ignorant, it's not her fault." In her view, age and ignorance explained the situation. Since it was "not their fault," and thus should not be blamed, she felt unable to make a claim.

The conflation of the perception of discrimination as impersonal and the perception of being defenseless was common. When participants perceived discrimination as something that could only be blamed on impersonal social dynamics, such as prejudice or ignorance, they reacted both with frustration and reluctance to do anything about it. While experiencing injurious experiences of what should be a "claimable right" (Nader and Todd 1978; Trubek et al. 1983), participants found those authoring the grievance as not at fault, and thus not blamable. The implications of this limitation can be devastating for a Latina/o struggling to find a place in society.

Reinforcing Power Imbalances

One woman I interviewed answered the open-ended question about discrimination with a story about her difficulties buying a house as a foreigner. She required extra paperwork, which she accepted as fair but also bothersome, and had two sales fall through on her. When she found out that the owner of one of the houses on which she had signed a sale agreement had decided not to move out of the house after all, her reaction was literally

to yell: “¡Discriminación!” After some probing about what was it that she perceived as discriminatory, she said to me that she did not really think it was discrimination, but that was how she phrased it in her frustration: “It was more how furious I was, I think that’s why I labeled it as discrimination . . . but it was unfair.” Although she had no reason to believe that the seller’s actions were discriminatory, her reaction helps understand how discrimination is symbolically grasped: in her mind, the irritation of experiencing a process that was complicated by her being a foreigner, coupled with the frustration of facing an unfair incident against which she felt helpless, demanded the discrimination label. These elements—difference and helplessness—were common in discrimination narratives.

When discussing a specific case of backlash against Latina/o immigrants within a small town, Longazel (2013) argues that establishing a binary code of “us versus them” in community narratives creates a scenario in which moral panic supports racial stratification. In becoming transnational migrants, individuals acquire first-hand experience of at least two places: the place left and the place of arrival. Social norms and expectations in these two places are often different and at times contradictory (Coutin 2007; Nuijten 2005). In Pittsburgh, discriminatory experiences often reinforced these differences. Participants’ narratives often appropriated and replicated difference, with constant references to place; to “us” and “them,”; and to the reasons for this distinction. Accounts of discrimination drew on these constructions of self and where they belonged (or not) as individuals and as community.

Rafael, the first and only Latino worker at a construction company, was told by a white American coworker that it was in his best interest to stop driving his truck to work because it had a Mexican flag. The man was concerned that Rafael would bring other Latinos, which would leave him and the other Americans without a job. Rafael embodied the Latino Threat. Imposing a certain authority by limiting Rafael’s autonomy—banning his truck—was a battle in the bigger war of establishing who was to populate the social margins. It was an attempt to restrict Rafael’s appropriation of public space (Romero 2006), thus keeping him as an embodiment of all Latinos at the margin.

Implicitly or explicitly, this was the message that most participants took on when experiencing discrimination: they were transgressing invisible boundaries and should stay at the margins to avoid repercussions. It occurred when Latina/o participants were not served in a shop or restaurant, when they were not paid well, when they were not accepted as renters. A usual reaction from participants in these circumstances was to avoid discriminatory institutions and encourage others to do the same. Although a punishment in commercial terms, this response effectively separated Latina/o individuals to a different space, physical and metaphorical. As such, those racial assaults were successful in limiting their movement and access to all spaces of public life (Lefebvre 1996; Romero 2006); they could remain different, but only as long as they stayed outside. This segregation of spaces of social interaction can promote prejudice (Massey and Denton 1993; Potter 1989; Seitles 1998). Furthermore, it widens the differences within the Latina/o community, as those with undocumented status, lack of education, or limited English proficiency face greater restrictions.

The separation of spaces was particularly evident in the service sector, with documented migrants working alongside undocumented ones. Latina/o participants who fit this role reported experiencing lack of acceptance from both Latina/o and other coworkers, being perceived as transgressors by everybody. Their existence threatened the structure sustained by the clear separation of spaces in a context where being Latina/o and being documented were “mutually impermeable” concepts: “You can be one or the other, but not both” (Flores 1997, 256). In the hospitality industry, for instance, documented and undocumented workers

did similar jobs. Undocumented workers, however, were often at the mercy of contractors who underpaid them, retained paychecks, and did not offer benefits or insurance. Teresa, a legal migrant working in housekeeping, suffered a debilitating work-related back injury. She said that while at first she tried to avoid claiming anything from her employer, when she became unable to move, she asked for coverage from workers compensation. In doing this she faced a storm from two sides: (1) the annoyance of her manager, who worked mostly with undocumented migrants, so he was not used to this type of claim, and (2) the backlash from some of her undocumented coworkers, who blamed her for the differential treatment.

Adolfo reported a similar response when he called the American Civil Liberties Union to report a case of work discrimination. When the complaint became public knowledge at work, the undocumented Latinos were upset and feared migration authorities would be called in retaliation. Non-Latinos also disapproved at first, but eventually supported his decision (and some even joined in the complaint). Making use of this legal tool highlighted Adolfo as a person out of place, being both documented and Latino. His actions were a successful political practice of citizenship, but not of ethnic belonging; and his Latino coworkers remained doubly left out as both Latinos and undocumented.

The separation between ethnic groups fostered by discrimination, and the resultant power imbalances, was symbolic as well as physical. Participants consistently reported that experiencing discrimination impacted their images about themselves and society; for some, this created a lasting disturbance. Undocumented participants also commonly reported that they and their families felt fear (Sáenz et al. 2011). In Pittsburgh, given its small and scattered Latina/o community, this feeling was strengthened by the difficulty of accessing resources that could provide guidance or hope. However, all participants reported feeling varying degrees of fear, which underscores the symbolic inequality embedded within discriminatory acts. Such acts can be directly caused by a discriminatory party, but are often the result of the system of inequality in which discrimination exists (Gleeson 2010).

Pablo reported being denied pay for a job, but when he demanded it, as suggested by a friend, he was told he was not paid because he was undocumented. His immigration status was previously known by the contractor, who nonetheless said Pablo would have to “find an attorney” if he wanted his money:

And as soon as he said attorney I got scared and thought: I didn't act in bad faith, I did my work. . . . Honestly I was scared in the sense that I didn't want any problems with the law. . . . So I preferred then to just leave everything in God's hands.

Pablo's vulnerable immigration status allowed the contractor to highlight the underlying inequality between them by selectively invoking the legal apparatus.

Fear, as noted above, is not a monopoly of the undocumented. The legal status of all transnational migrants to the United States is weak in varying degrees: legal immigrants are overly dependent on visas and their sponsors, which can place them in exploitative situations (Banerjee 2006). Fear was reported by doctors, construction workers, lawyers, housekeepers. A doctor told me about being denied service at a bar:

It was a moment of great frustration. I felt at the moment that I couldn't do anything. Who can I complain to? A Puerto Rican told me to “get used to it.” I left and said it was discrimination. . . . The problem is that I asked myself: Where am I going to go? An attorney is going to cost time and money, and I

don't know any. . . . [Long silence.] A little bit of fear, really. If I do this, it will be to make a claim and then end up in court and that could soil my record. And perhaps this is a crazy guy and he is going to go after me, shoot me in the head. . . . I'd rather bite a finger and leave it like that. It was really out of fear.

This doctor mentioned a multitude of reasons for not doing anything. He cited fear of the aggressor, his own vulnerability, and the pressure to maintain "a clean record." There was also the problem of lack of knowledge about what making a claim actually entailed. Finally, there was the unequal system mentioned by the Puerto Rican man in which he was near the bottom, a seemingly permanent and unchangeable situation.

This case underscores something else about the system of inequality in which discrimination is embedded: inequality creates a burden of action for those at the bottom, which can be perceived as heavier than the expectations from the rest of the community (Nunez-Smith et al. 2007). As a migrant, this doctor depended on keeping a clean record, which caused him to avoid making a claim. Although legally he could make it, staying in the United States depended on a constant renewal of his documents, which made him vulnerable. The expectations on his behavior were thus higher than those on American citizens in comparable circumstances. I heard a related line of reasoning across legal statuses and levels of education: the threat of discrimination put a burden on participants' self-image and their behavior. Having built their lives in the United States on a transient status (undocumented or visa holder), the threat of having to leave that life was constant and concrete. However, the potential impact of this threat was not evenly distributed across participants: once again, the heavier burden was at the bottom. Pablo, undocumented and dependent on his monthly paycheck, had to move to a church when the contractor did not pay him; his fear of having problems with the law was compounded with the fear of destitution. The Latina/o participants with more social and educational resources did not face such extreme situations.

Excessive scrutiny of Latina/o individuals was evident regardless of class standing: every participant encountered barriers to claiming and the resultant negative consequences. However, documented Latina/o individuals, and those with higher-class standing, were better equipped to find ways of dealing with discrimination that successfully minimized its impact, or prevented future instances. Some cases that achieved this are discussed in the following section.

Finding Alternative Ways of Dealing with Discrimination

The most common responses to discrimination, lumping and avoidance, are not optimal. As discussed, avoidance segregates the spaces of social interaction. In some cases, particularly damaging for those with few resources, it can further empower those performing the discriminatory acts. For example, workers who are not paid must often leave their workplace, thus becoming doubly aggrieved. Finding alternative options can be difficult.

When discussing possible responses to discrimination, I often heard about a lack of alternatives, regardless of class strata ("At work I had to tolerate it"; "If it's discrimination, what are you going to do?"). Not all responses, however, were passive. Rafael, the man threatened for having a Mexican flag on his truck, explained his decision to stay at work: "He tried to make me mad so I [would leave] the job, so I said no." Rafael understood the double loss of giving in to his coworker's threats: endure discrimination *and* lose his job. Choosing to stay was an act of self-definition that demonstrated Rafael understood his options when facing discrimination: he refused to accept the separate spaces suggested by his aggressor, thus actively engaging in an action of belonging.

Other alternatives counteracted the marginalizing force of discrimination by positioning participants, either in their self-image or in others' images of them (or of the Latina/o community in general), as belonging. These included alleviating the negative impact that the discriminatory experience had on self-image or minimizing triggering prejudice to prevent future instances of discrimination.

The most openly political response to discrimination during fieldwork took place in 2007 in a series of encounters between the Latina/o community (including many individuals who were undocumented) and local authorities. These meetings, intended to address racial profiling, were born from the sense that unlawful police stops were increasing in the Latina/o community. The explosion in the number of defendants in immigration offense cases, from three in 2001 to no less than thirty-nine in 2007—a nearly 1,200 percent increase, which greatly surpassed the Latina/o population growth—supported these claims.³

The meetings were a new, political way for the Latina/o community to engage with local authorities, and in a space where everyone could negotiate how this new community was to be integrated into a region where its presence was still a novelty: Was Pittsburgh going to adopt the discourse of the Latino Threat that fueled much of the anxieties behind discrimination, or was it going to offer acceptance? If the police opted to maintain racial profiling, occurrences in which Latina/o immigrants were stopped would multiply, reinforcing their image as dangerous and verifying Latina/o inferiority (Longazel 2013; López 2010). Organizing the meetings was challenging: being an emerging community, Latina/o individuals were scattered. However, media visibility increased after these events (Lord 2007; Sherman 2008a, 2008b, 2009). The media focused on racial profiling and presented a positive image of the Latina/o community, a contrast from when the media presented this community as “threatening,” and successfully cast their image as marginal (Longazel 2013; Romero 2006; Sáenz et al. 2011). In 2010 the Pittsburgh police department enacted a policy prohibiting officers from asking for immigration status.

Despite these positive results, few Latina/o participants chose to make public instances of discrimination. José, whose experience introduced this article, was an exception. His initial reaction to discrimination by the police officer had been to feel depressed and unvalued. However, through others' support, his interpretation of the situation changed. Rather than reading it as a self-reflection (unvalued) and reflection of society as a whole (racist), José thought of the event as rooted in one police officer's—one man's—prejudice. According to José, once he assigned blame on the officer, he felt better and was inspired to do more. José eventually shared his story with hundreds of people in a voting rally, and considered suing for wrongdoing. What he wanted to achieve, José said, was to make his aggressor understand the pain he had inflicted.

In this process, José fought helplessness and frustration by publicizing his situation and placing blame on the individual rather than on society. By going to the rally, José also underscored the collective nature of his grievance and the shared inequality. Finally, José showed interest in attacking the cause of his grievance—prejudice—by making the police officer “understand.” In his handling of this grievance, José defined his individual, Latino, and immigrant identities.

Most participants, however, were not as public. Instead, some found alternative ways of overcoming their helplessness. Rafael, who had the Mexican flag on his truck, laughed as he told me that one day he saw the coworker who aggrieved him with a flat tire, looking for help. Rafael slowed down, made sure the man saw him, and drove by without stopping. The next day, the coworker complained to him about this. “It's enough to have to listen to you here,” Rafael answered. While Rafael had to be polite with this coworker during work

hours, by refusing to help him he underscored his independence and exercised some power, albeit small, over his nemesis.

Paola, who received the “congratulatory” note when becoming a citizen, also found an unscripted response. Paola “softened” the relationship with the man who insulted her by asking for his help with a job and then recommending him for public recognition for it. He later told her that nobody had done this for him, and expressed great gratitude. Although these actions seemed to be focused exclusively on improving her personal situation, this is not how she understood it:

It’s all about a person’s intentions. Ignorance is battled with education. . . . I hope that when they see me, as they see how I act and how I relate to others in the office, that perhaps I am the small example that they need so that the next time they see a [Latina/o] person, they say, “Oh yes, I know this woman and she is this way or that.” Perhaps how they view me makes them act differently with another person. [Latina/os].

It was important for Paola to recognize that although her main problem was with common misconceptions about Latina/o people, which, in a region with so few of them, were mostly built from generalized prejudice rather than personal experience. Prevention, perhaps not for herself but for others, was important in her rationale; she recognized that most non-Latina/o Americans in Pittsburgh had never met any Latina/o people. Paola’s response to discrimination was a political act, which she understood as collective in its intention and its impact on the shared construction of Latina/o identity.

Other individual responses to discrimination included drawing on personal networks, particularly among those with higher-class standing. For example, María, a graduate student, complained that customer service representatives often “refused to understand” her accent. As a solution, she asked her husband to conduct all of the family’s phone conversations to prevent future discrimination. Instead of avoiding the situation, as María did, Pedro attempted to modify the image that potential aggressors had of him: he and his white-European wife decided to always enter the United States through immigration as a couple, after they noticed that Pedro was stopped, sometimes for hours, when he entered by himself. They believed officials profiled him as assimilated when with her but as threatening without her.

In both of these cases it was paramount that María and Pedro had personal resources to allow for these responses: María’s husband is proficient in English, and Pedro’s wife is white-European. Unfortunately, resources with which to confront discrimination are unequally distributed across the heterogeneous Latina/o community, leaving some, usually blue-collar migrants, worse equipped.

Conclusions

Most participants in this study reported personal experiences of discrimination, regardless of their legal status and class standing. Being an emerging immigrant community colored these experiences and the collective picture of discrimination. In some cases, as Pedro’s with his company, the lack of familiarity of “others” was at the root of acts perceived as discriminatory. In others, such as Rafael’s or Juan’s, broader and widespread prejudice and fear were at the center of discriminatory acts. The small and scattered numbers of Latina/o immigrants impacted reactions to discrimination, most notably through fear, which was reinforced by the limited social resources available to those aggrieved. At the same time,

some participants acted in ways that impacted their local image in general, such as through informal education (Paola) or at public events (José).

Overall, the reactions to discrimination varied widely but shared some commonalities: there were multiple barriers to naming, blaming, and claiming discriminatory incidents. These incidents, as well as responses, were part of personal and collective processes to form an identity for Latina/o immigrants in Pittsburgh. Discriminatory incidents encouraged a separation between Latina/o victims and their aggressors. The most common responses of letting go and avoidance reinforced this divide, physically and symbolically, in the construction of the Latina/o community as separate and marginal. More active and political responses produced a more nuanced Latina/o image that integrated with the broader community. The circumstances of each individual influenced how these challenges and self-identification were experienced: individuals with more resources were better able to devise unconventional responses to discrimination.

Discrimination incidents and how they are dealt with illustrate the push and pull of the collective creation of a Latina/o identity that flows between marginalization and assimilation, fear, and acceptance. This potential for developing a Latina/o identity can be particularly fruitful in the context of an emerging immigrant community as the one studied. Prejudice does exist in Pittsburgh and is certainly explicit in many of the discrimination incidents collected. However, as many participants indicated, the definition of the local Latina/o identity was often perceived as still malleable and receptive to change. As Paola said, maybe “with the next person they will have a different perception.”

Notes

1. All participant names are pseudonyms.
2. All interviews and communications were conducted in Spanish. Translations are mine and are edited to increase readability without compromising content or intent.
3. US Courts 2001–2007, Federal Judicial Caseload Statistics (<http://www.uscourts.gov/statistics-reports/analysis-reports/federal-judicial-caseload-statistics>)

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