Original research article

Sense of community, participation, and life satisfaction among Hispanic immigrants in rural Nebraska

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ABSTRACT

The influx of Hispanic immigrants into rural areas of the United States has created demographic, economic, and social change within communities. Sense of community, a psychological construct that includes membership, influence, fulfilment of needs, and a shared emotional connection between community members, is a vital element in assessing the integration of immigrants into a community. This study used a sequential explanatory mixed methods design to describe and examine sense of community, community participation, and life satisfaction among Hispanic immigrants from two communities in rural Nebraska (N = 180 survey participants; N = 53 focus groups participants). The results indicated that participants felt a sense of community. Sense of community was significantly positively correlated with community participation, r = 0.29, p < 0.01, and life satisfaction, r = 0.31, p < 0.01. Participants identified that being part of the community was more than just sharing a geographic space. It encompassed a feeling of belonging, unity, and acceptance as well as a willingness to help others and participate. Respondents had participated in their communities by volunteering, donating to community organizations, talking to others about community issues, and participating in associations. The vast majority of participants were satisfied with their lives. Using linear regression, sense of community was found to be a significant predictor of both community participation, R^2 = 0.37, F(6, 168) = 16.45, p = 0.000, and life satisfaction, R^2 = 0.13, F(6, 168) = 4.00, p = 0.001. Implications of improving social well-being among rural Hispanic immigrants in the United States are discussed.

Introduction

The demographic, social, and economic structures of rural communities in the United States are undergoing tremendous changes [1, 2]. Hispanics, people from or with ancestry from Spanish-speaking countries either in Latin America or Spain, are now the most rapidly growing population segment in rural America [1, 3–5]. One of the key reasons for this in-migration of Hispanics into rural areas is the availability of jobs due to the globalization of labour predominately within the agricultural and food

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production sector [2, 6–9]. For example, the meatpacking industry restructured and relocated plants out of urban areas and into rural places to allow for quicker and cheaper access to production inputs. The decentralization of these plants created an increased need for labour in rural places [1, 5, 7, 9]. Because of job opportunities and the prospect of upward mobility, many immigrants bypassed traditional immigrant gateways such as New York, Chicago, California, Florida, and Texas and arrived to "new settlement" areas such as those in the rural Midwest. This increase of Hispanic immigrants has economically reinvigorated many rural communities [5,10], and towns that were once comprised of people of German, Czech, or Irish descent have transitioned into becoming communities with high percentages of Hispanic immigrant residents [1,8].

Immigration to a new place requires adaptation – both on the part of immigrants but also on the part of communities. Integration is commonly viewed as the most favourable response pattern for intercultural contact [11, 12], and it refers to a dynamic two-way process by which newcomers become part of the social fabric of communities as well as the inherent adaptations that occur in the community among established residents. Integration can be challenging for individuals and communities. Regrettably, there are multiple barriers to integration including (1) social, cultural, and class differences between new and established community residents [13, 14], (2) discrimination, segregation, exclusion, and fear of newcomers [9, 14–17], (3) separate and distinct social networks between newcomers and established community residents [16], (4) structural barriers that limit access to information, services, and opportunities [13, 16, 18], and (5) a lack of community resources, especially language accessible services and resources for those who may be undocumented [8, 19]. Failing to integrate newcomers has both short and long-term consequences such as declines in individual health and well-being; underutilization of skills; inefficient allocation of resources; and an inability to survive and grow [20, 21].

Communities can play a pivotal role in helping newcomers to adjust. Some communities have actively developed strategies to welcome and integrate immigrants [2, 22] such as by addressing government and leadership structures, enhancing educational systems and opportunities, fostering economic development, and ensuring equitable access to resources and information [23]. Previous research has documented that integration, the mixing of cultures and experiences, is the foundation for building community cohesion, fostering social networks, and improving newcomers' knowledge of and access to resources, information, and services [21, 24, 25]. Unfortunately, sparse research exists on the integration of Hispanic newcomers to non-metropolitan areas [8, 19], and few studies have examined the successful adaptation of Hispanics in rural communities in the United States [14].

Sense of community

Sense of community is a psychological construct that was first studied by Sarason in 1974 [26], and later refined by McMillan and Chavis in 1986 [27]. "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" [27, p. 9]. This concept of feeling connected to others and being part of something greater than oneself is a basic human need. Sense of community refers to how a person (as an individual) may experience community life [28]. Clearly, the way that people perceive their community influences their lives, and this concept of "community" implies that members will take action to improve their lives and resolve community issues collectively [29].

Psychological sense of community consists of four components: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. Membership refers to a feeling of being part of the community and has five core elements: (1) boundaries, (2) sense of belonging, (3) personal investment, (4) emotional safety, and (5) a common symbol system. Influence implies that a member has some influence over what the community does and that the community may affect what the individual member does. People are attracted to communities where they feel that they can contribute, and growth is most likely to occur in communities that offer members the most benefits. Integration and fulfilment of needs suggests that being part of the community has to be a rewarding experience. Finally, a shared emotional connection suggests that the more quality interactions members have with each other and the more members give to a common goal, the more they will feel connected to the community [27]. These four components are interactive, interdependent, and contribute to an individual's connection to a community.

Sense of community contributes to growing human, social, cultural, and political capital in communities [30]. It protects health, fosters well-being, motivates community change, and promotes resilience [24, 28]. Previous research has demonstrated that community context matters, and that sense of community is associated with length of residence in the community, satisfaction with the community, and the number of neighbours a person can identify by name [27]. Sense of community has traditionally been found to be higher among women, people who are married, homeowners, and people with children [31].

In particular for immigrants, sense of community may buffer negative effects associated with immigration and adaption to a new community [24, 32]. Because immigrants have left their communities to establish themselves in a new place, they also have to re-establish a sense of community. Unfortunately, there have been few studies that explore sense of community among Hispanic immigrants in rural areas [8, 19, 32].

Community participation

Many studies have found that community participation is essential in building social capital in a community [33–36]. Sense of community can spur community participation [36]. According to some scholars, sense of community and participation develop concurrently: sense of community leads to greater participation in community life, and

greater participation in community life leads to a greater sense of community [24, 36, 37]. Community participation has been described as a motivator of collective efficacy [33]; moreover, Arai and Pedlar [38] found that participation was associated with perceptions of group accomplishment and the ability to influence change. Community participation has also been shown to increase life satisfaction [36].

Unfortunately, not all people have equitable opportunities to participate in their communities. For example, Hispanic immigrants may face real and perceived challenges to participating based on their English-language proficiency or immigration status [39]. They may also be unfamiliar with organizations, systems, and how to engage within their new community. A lack of transportation – including the lack of public transportation and inability to access a driver's license – has also been noted as a challenge for many Latinos living in rural areas [14, 40]. Finally, in some cases, Hispanic immigrants may feel "outsider syndrome" or be purposefully left out due to discrimination [14, 41–43].

Satisfaction with life

"Experiencing a meaningful life is considered critical to psychological well-being" [28, p. 181]. Sense of community is positively associated with life satisfaction [27, 29, 32, 36, 44]. Hispanic immigrants may report a positive life satisfaction regardless of the challenges they face. Perhaps, they may feel more economically stable, free from violence, or perceive a higher quality of life in their new community in the United States compared to their country of origin [14, 45]. A study in rural Midwest showed that Latina immigrants were satisfied with their lives despite the high number of challenges they reported [14].

Previous research has demonstrated that life satisfaction is generally high among Hispanics, and in particular among Latin American immigrants, the overwhelming majority report being happy with their lives in the United States [46]. Another study found that Hispanics over age fifty had greater life satisfaction than non-Hispanic whites of the same age. Part of this difference was attributed to higher levels of spirituality among Hispanics [47]. Among Latino immigrant men, life satisfaction was positively associated with familism (familismo), spirituality, work satisfaction, and perceived health, and it was negatively associated with perceived discrimination [48]. Additionally for Hispanic immigrants, having tension with neighbours has been found to be especially stressful and is negatively correlated with residential satisfaction [10].

Purpose

This study responds to the call to employ a mixed methods approach to measure sense of community [24, 28], and addresses a gap in the literature about sense of community among immigrants, particularly those in rural areas [32]. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to: (1) examine sense of community, community participation, and life satisfaction among Hispanic immigrants from two communities in rural Nebraska and (2) assess the effect of sense of community on community participation and life satisfaction among Hispanic immigrants in these same communities.

Materials and methods

Participants

To be eligible to participate in this study, individuals had to be at least 19 years of age (the age of majority in the state of Nebraska), be of Hispanic or Latino descent, be a first or second-generation immigrant, and live in either Columbus, Nebraska (total population: 22,584; 20% Hispanic) or Schuyler, Nebraska (total population: 6196; 70.9% Hispanic) [49]. For this analysis, only the results from first generation Hispanic immigrants are presented, resulting in a total of 180 individuals who completed the survey and 53 participants in the focus groups.

Survey participant demographics

A majority of participants were female (60.7%), married (62.9%), had not completed a high school education (59.6%), and did not speak English well or at all (72.1%). The mean age of participants was 40.4 years old, *SD* = 12.1. Participants were mainly from Mexico (48.9%), Guatemala (25.0%), and El Salvador (10.0%) (Table 1).

Focus group participant demographics

Focus group participants were demographically similar to the survey participants as indicated in Table 1. A majority of participants were female (69.8%), married (69.2%), and did not speak English well or at all (67.3%). Most were from Mexico and Guatemala (60.4%).

Procedures

Because sense of community among Hispanic immigrants in rural areas in the United States is an under-researched area, this study required both breadth and depth. Therefore, a sequential explanatory mixed methods design [QUAN → qual] [50] comprised of surveys and focus groups that addressed sense of community, participation, and life satisfaction was used in this study. Data collected was complementary [51], and mixing occurred throughout various phases including study design, sampling, analysis, and interpretation. For example, quantitative results were used to design the research questions for the qualitative phase, and qualitative results were used to enhance and provide depth to the quantitative results. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Survey procedures

Individuals were recruited to complete the survey by research team members at community locations including local grocery stores, restaurants, and partnering community organizations in each of the communities.

Table 1 – Demographic characteristics of participants				
Characteristic	Survey participants		Focus group participants	
	N (%)	M (SD)	N (%)	M (SD)
Sex				
Female	108 (60.7)		37 (69.8)	
Male	70 (39.3)		16 (30.2)	
Country of origin				
Mexico	88 (48.9)		21 (39.6)	
Guatemala	45 (25.0)		11 (20.8)	
El Salvador	18 (10.0)		6 (11.3)	
Other (e.g. Cuba, Peru, Venezuela)	29 (16.1)		15 (28.3)	
Age (years)		40.4 (12.1)		40.3 (11.0)
19–24	19 (10.6)		2 (3.8)	
25–40	75 (41.7)		27 (50.9)	
41–60	76 (42.2)		21 (39.6)	
Over 60	10 (5.5)		3 (5.7)	
Age at time of immigration (years)		24.1 (11.8)		26.0 (11.9)
Relationship status				
Married	112 (62.9)		36 (69.2)	
Not married	66 (37.1)		16 (30.8)	
Length of time living in United States (years)		16.3 (9.4)		13.7 (9.1)
Length of time living in current community (years)		11.1 (7.6)		10.7 (7.8)
Education				
Not high school graduate	106 (59.6)		25 (47.2)	
High school graduate/GED	28 (15.7)		9 (17.0)	
At least some college	44 (24.7)		19 (35.8)	
English proficiency				
Very well	22 (12.3)		4 (7.7)	
Well	28 (15.6)		13 (25.0)	
Not well	90 (50.3)		23 (44.2)	
Not at all	39 (21.8)		12 (23.1)	

The survey consisted of 92 questions addressing sense of community, community participation, life satisfaction, discrimination, and knowledge and use of community resources. Participants could complete the survey on their own or with the assistance of a member of the research team (available in both English and Spanish). Surveys were completed between November and December 2016 in both communities, and individuals received a $5 gift card for completing the survey.

Focus group procedures

Individuals were recruited to participate in the focus groups through members of the research team; flyers placed at laundromats, the public library, and other local businesses; and by community organization partners in each of the communities. A total of six focus groups (three in each community) were conducted in March 2017. A semi-structured interview guide, which was developed in English and translated into Spanish by bilingual investigators, was used. Questions discussed during the focus groups centred around what community means, what makes a person feel part of the community, hopes for the community's future, and opportunities to improve integration in the community. Focus groups were conducted at community locations including a church, the public library, and local businesses. They were held in morning, afternoon, and evening times to give participants with varying work schedules an opportunity to participate. Oral consent was obtained from each participant prior to conducting the focus groups, and each group took approximately 1–1.5 h. Bilingual facilitators led the groups in Spanish, and individuals received a $25 gift card for their participation. A digital audio recorder was used to record each focus group conversation and later produce a verbatim transcription in Spanish.

Measures

Sense of Community (SCI-2)
The Sense of Community (SCI-2) consists of 25 items and four subscales based on the theoretical components of psychological sense of community: membership, influence, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection [52]. The first item, "How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?" was not

used as part of the scale, but rather as a validating item. The 24 items of the Sense of Community scale are assessed on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 3 (completely). Sample items included, "I can trust people in this community" and "It is very important to me to be a part of this community". The total scale had excellent reliability, $\alpha = 0.93$. The reliability for the subscales was adequate: membership, $\alpha = 0.76$, influence, $\alpha = 0.81$, fulfilment of needs, $\alpha = 0.74$, and shared emotional connection, $\alpha = 0.83$.

Community participation
Community participation was measured using twelve items. Ten items were adapted from element 4D.4 of the World Bank's Social Capital Assessment Tool, Household Survey [53]. Respondents were asked whether or not they had engaged in any of the following activities over the last year: actively participated in an association, made contact with an influential person, made the media interested in a problem, participated in an information or election campaign, talked with other people about a problem, contacted an elected official, made a monetary or in-kind donation, notified the police or court about a problem, or volunteered for a community or charitable organization. An additional two items assessed participation in city or town planning processes and being registered to vote. Response options were dichotomous, no (0) and yes (1) for all questions except being registered to vote. For this item, the options were no (0), yes (1), and not eligible (2). Slightly more than 44% of the total sample was not eligible to vote. Therefore, these cases were set to 'missing' in order to compute the frequency for registered to vote. A total community participation score was derived by summing the positive responses for all twelve questions, $M = 3.44$, $SD = 2.70$. Community participation had adequate internal consistency in this sample, $\alpha = 0.80$.

Life satisfaction
The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) was used to assess satisfaction with a respondent's life as a whole based on one's own standards [54]. The SWLS consists of five items measured on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items included, "In most ways my life is close to my ideal", and, "The conditions of my life are excellent". There was good internal consistency in this sample, $\alpha = 0.84$.

Covariates
Age (continuous variable, measured in years), sex (0 = male, 1 = female), education (0 = did not complete high school, 1 = completed at least high school), English proficiency (0 = non-English proficient, 1 = English proficient), and length of residence in the community (continuous variable, measured in years) were used as covariates in the regression models.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis
Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, version 23. Descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analyses were conducted. Pearson's correlations were used to assess bivariate associations between study variables. Linear regression was used to assess the effect of sense of community on community participation and life satisfaction while controlling for covariates.

Qualitative analysis
A phenomenological approach was used to "describe the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" [55]. The interpretation focused on the four constructs of psychological sense of community. One team member developed the initial coding scheme, which then was reviewed by an additional investigator. After a discussion of emerging themes, each investigator independently applied the final coding scheme to the transcripts. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion among investigators. Analysis was conducted based on the Spanish transcripts. In order to present the results, participants' statements have been translated into English.

Results

More than 200 first-generation Hispanic immigrants, mainly from Mexico and Guatemala, living in rural Nebraska participated in this study. The results indicated that 88.1% of survey participants and 86.8% of focus group participants felt it was important or very important to feel a sense of community with other community members. Participants identified that being part of the community was more than just sharing a geographic space with others. Instead, it encompassed a feeling of belonging, unity, and acceptance as well as a willingness to help others and participate. The following are some statements from focus group participants about the meaning of the community:

> Para mí es como una gran familia en la que todos debemos participar.
> [For me it's like a big family where we all should participate.]

> Ser parte de una comunidad para mí significa, más que nada, tener una buena comunicación con los vecinos.
> [To be part of a community for me means, above all, having good communication with neighbours.]

> Yo creo que la palabra "comunidad" encierra muchas cosas que son bonitas. Realmente, la palabra "comunidad" para mí significa "vivir en comunidad", o sea, llevarse bien. Yo diría que ser parte de una comunidad es vital. Yo pienso que ser parte de una comunidad es importantísimo porque, como digo, en la unión está la fuerza, siempre pensar en que uno puede ayudar al otro.
> [I think the word "community" signifies many beautiful things. In reality, the word "community" for me means "to live in community", or to get along well with others. I say that being part of the community is vital. I think that being part of a community is very important because, as I said, the power is in being united, thinking how one can help another.]

Pienso que es ayudar a quien sea. Cuando uno mira alguien que necesita algo, tratar de ayudarlo porque todos pertenecemos a la comunidad.
[I think it's about helping anyone. When you see that someone needs something, try to help them because we all belong to the community.]

Para mí significa estabilidad, seguridad e integración. Yo siento que ser parte de una comunidad te da cierta estabilidad, te da cierto sentido de seguridad, sabes que entre vecinos se cuida uno o está al pendiente. Siento que el sentido de integración en una persona es muy importante, sentirte parte de algo, en este caso parte de la comunidad.
[For me it means stability, security and integration. I feel that being part of a community gives you some stability, it gives you a sense of security, you know that neighbours care for one another or at least keep an eye out for them. I feel that the sense of integration is very important to a person, to feel part of something, in this case part of the community.]

On average, participants' sense of community was 1.89, $SD = 0.52$, out of a maximum score of 3, meaning that participants "mostly" felt a sense of community. The scores for the subscales of sense of community were as follows: membership, $M = 1.69$, SD = 0.59; influence, $M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.62$; integration and fulfilment of needs, $M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.55$; and emotional connection $M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.61$. Below are some examples of participants' comments relating to the four core components of sense of community:

Membership
Me siento parte de la comunidad porque siento que así como otras personas me aceptan a mí, y que yo conozco muchas personas.
[I feel like part of the community because others accept me and I know many people.]

Influence
En diez años…¿por qué no puede haber un alcalde latino? ¿Por qué no puede haber un gobernador latino? ¿Por qué no puede haber un presidente de la corte latino? O sea, en diez años yo lo que voy a ver, es que la comunidad latina habrá progresado profundamente…donde la comunidad latina va a ser en igualdad total.
[In ten years…Why can't there be a Latino mayor? Why can't there be a Latino governor? Why can't there be a Latino chief justice? I mean, in ten years what I will see is a Latino community that has progressed profoundly…where the Latino community can be equal in everything.]

Integration and fulfilment of needs
Para mí la comunidad es un grupo que tiene un propósito en común. Entonces para nosotros – yo pienso que para la comunidad de aquí de Columbus es vivir tranquilos, es vivir bien, vivir lo mejor que se pueda. Yo creo que hay voluntad de las dos partes, o sea tanto de los americanos como de los hispanos.
[For me, the community is a group that has a common goal. Then for us – I think the community here in Columbus [our goal] is to live peacefully, to live well, live the best that we

can. I think there is a willingness on both sides – that of the Americans as well as the Hispanics.]

Emotional connection
A mí desde pequeña me enseñaron a respetar a los vecinos, llevarnos bien, colaborar si es posible. Allá en Venezuela vivíamos, yo le decía a mi mamá que éramos la casa de lo que teníamos todo porque los domingos que todas las tiendas están cerradas, iban a la casa, "necesito un limón", "necesito un pedazo de cebolla", o esto; y eso es bonito, porque, sin querer, uno está colaborando con los vecinos…Ahora cuando llego acá, en el tiempo que cayó una nevada bien fuerte estaba yo quitando la nieve y vinieron parte de los vecinos a ayudarme a quitar la nieve. Eso es bonito, llevarnos bien.
[Since I was a little girl, I was taught to respect the neighbours and get along well with them, and help as needed. Over there in Venezuela where we lived, I told my mom that we were the house that had everything because on Sundays when all of the stores were closed, people came to our house, "I need a lemon", "I need a piece of onion" or whatever. This is beautiful because unintentionally we were helping our neighbours…Now, when I arrived over here it snowed really hard, and I was shovelling the snow when some of the neighbours came to help me. This is nice – to get along well.]

Respondents had participated in community life through a variety of ways. For example, 61.7% had made a monetary or in-kind donation, 45.7% had volunteered for a community organization, 41.9% had made others aware of a problem, and 40.2% had actively participated in an association (Chart 1).

Focus group participants described some of the ways that they had been involved, such as through their children's school or the church.

Bueno, yo me gusta ofrecerme de voluntaria en la escuela de mi hija, porque así también me informo de cualquier cosa y actividades que tengan.
[Well, I like to volunteer in my daughter's school because I also learn about what's going on and whatever activities they have.]

Participo en la iglesia con un grupo de señoras que también ayudan a la misma comunidad. Ayudan donando comidas para los funerales, cuando hay funerales, y no importa si son para hispanos o anglosajones.
[I participate in the church with a group of ladies who also help the community. They help by donating meals for funerals, when there are funerals, and it doesn't matter if they are Hispanic or Anglo-Saxon people.]

Focus group participants noted the importance of participating in the community. By getting involved, participants felt that they would have a stronger connection with the community and be able to share information with others. Participants believed that more people should get involved in community activities.

Yo pienso que la gente tiene que empezar a cambiar su mentalidad y tienen que involucrarse más en las cosas
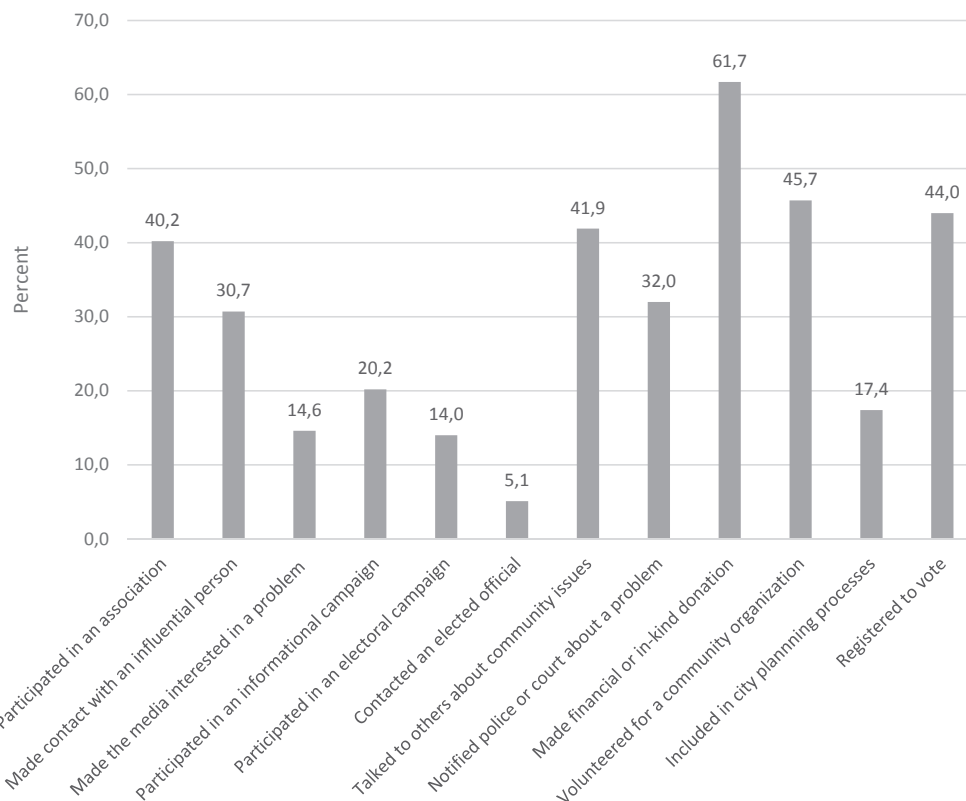
Chart 1 – Percentage of respondents who had participated in various forms of community life

del lugar donde viven. Más que todo porque yo pienso que información tal vez no hay suficiente, pero sí la hay. Que la gente adquiera ese compromiso y diga, "Estoy viviendo aquí y tengo que aportar un granito de arena al lugar donde vivo."
[I think that people have to start changing their mentality and they have to get more involved in things in the place where they live. More than anything because I think sometimes there isn't enough information, but there is some. People need to make that commitment and say, "I'm living here and I have to leave my mark on the place where I live."]

Pues uno se siente parte de la comunidad cuando uno participa. Si uno participa en las cosas de la comunidad, claro que es uno parte de la comunidad, si uno se hace para afuera y que no ayuda en nada, cómo el ayudar en cosas de la escuela, de la iglesia, pues sí, claro que no es uno parte de la comunidad o se siente fuera. Eso depende de cada persona, cómo quiera ser o lo que quiera hacer o cómo quiera. Si quieres integrarte a la comunidad, tiene que ser de ti para fin de que formes parte de la comunidad.
[Well, one feels part of the community when one participates. If one participates in the things of the community, of course you are a part of the community, but if you exclude yourself and don't help with anything, like helping out with things from the school, in the church, then yes of course one is not part of the community or feels like an outsider. That depends on each person, how you want to be, or what you

want to do, or whatever. If you want to be integrated into the community, it has to be from you so that you are part of the community.]

Traer nuestras ideas y poder inspirar a otras personas a hacer lo mismo, para nosotros ir formando más la comunidad.
[We need to bring our ideas and inspire others to do the same to keep creating community.]

Pienso que la participación, todavía podemos hacer más; involucrarnos más tanto los padres en las escuelas, como en eventos de la comunidad.
[I think that regarding participation, we can do more – get more involved as parents in the schools and in community events.]

Three fourths of survey participants were satisfied or extremely satisfied with their lives (75.5%). Only 10.1% expressed dissatisfaction with their lives. The following are examples of some of the statements from the focus groups where participants expressed satisfaction with their community:

Schuyler lo considero como mi casa, un lugar bastante tranquilo, un lugar donde todos nos conocemos, nos ayudamos. Es como una familia. No importa el lugar de donde tú eres – puedas ser, mexicano, salvadoreño, guatemalteco, somos una sola familia.

[I consider Schuyler like my home; a tranquil place, a place where we all know each other, we help each other. It's like a family. It doesn't matter where you are from – you may be Mexican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, we are one family.]

Esta comunidad te brinda estabilidad, trabajo, gente buena, gente que ayuda, uno se siente bien.

[This community gives you stability, work, good people, people who help, that makes you feel good.]

At the bivariate level, sense of community was significantly positively correlated with community participation, $r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$, and life satisfaction, $r = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$ (Table 2).

Table 2 – Correlations between Sense of community, community participation, and life satisfaction

	Sense of community	Membership	Influence	Reinforcement of needs	Shared emotional connection	Community participation	Life satisfaction
Sense of community	1.00						
Membership	0.88[b]	1.00					
Influence	0.92[b]	0.76[b]	1.00				
Integration and reinforcement of needs	0.83[b]	0.66[b]	0.66[b]	1.00			
Shared emotional connection	0.85[b]	0.61[b]	0.75[b]	0.56[b]	1.00		
Community participation	0.29[b]	0.30[b]	0.30[b]	0.10	0.28[b]	1.00	
Life satisfaction	0.31[b]	0.26[b]	0.29[b]	0.25[b]	0.28[b]	0.14	1.00

[b] $p < 0.01$.

Two multiple linear regressions were computed to assess the effect of sense of community on (1) community participation and (2) life satisfaction. Sense of community was found to be a significant predictor of both community participation and life satisfaction among rural Hispanics after controlling for demographic covariates. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 – Regression models predicting community participation and life satisfaction

	Community participation			Life satisfaction		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Sense of community	1.46	0.33	0.28[c]	3.18	0.84	0.28[c]
Age	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.10
Female	−0.43	0.35	−0.08	−0.48	0.89	−0.04
High-school education or more	1.06	0.39	0.19[b]	−0.66	1.00	−0.06
English proficient	1.89	0.43	0.32[c]	2.37	1.11	0.18[a]
Length of residence in the community	0.10	0.02	0.27[c]	−0.07	0.06	−0.08
(Constant)	−1.45	0.92		20.29	2.37	
F		16.45			4.00	
Model significance		0.000			0.001	
R^2		0.37			0.13	

[a] $p < 0.05$; [b] $p < 0.01$; [c] $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

This study described sense of community, community participation, and life satisfaction among Hispanic immigrants in rural Nebraska. Our study demonstrated that Hispanics in rural areas want to feel a sense of community with other community members. Emotional connection was rated the highest of the four components of sense of community. Participants understood "community" to be more than a geographic place. They believed that community meant a feeling of belonging, unity, acceptance, and a willingness to help others. Study participants had actively participated in associations, made financial or in-kind donations, talked with other people about problems or issues, and volunteered for community

and charitable organizations. Most participants were satisfied with their lives and found their rural community to be peaceful, safe, and good for families. Sense of community was significantly positively associated with community participation and life satisfaction both at the bivariate and multivariate levels. This study extends previous research demonstrating that sense of community may influence participatory behaviours and life satisfaction among rural Hispanic residents in the United States, and it has important implications for community development, community practice, and policy.

There has been considerable debate as to what constitutes community; however, living in close geographic proximity does not inherently create a cohesive "community". Instead, a sense of community is socially constructed through people sharing and interacting with a common purpose. Although previous research has demonstrated that immigrants and other community residents may live in parallel worlds; in the same geographic space but separate and unconnected lives [42,56], this study did not find such a distinct separation. Clearly, enhancing a sense of community is critical to community integration efforts. Therefore, integration strategies must be intentional and incorporate the needs of immigrants, their families, and the greater community. These strategies must acknowledge that integration is a continuous bidirectional process that takes time. Increasing interactions between the established community and newcomers could enrich mutual understanding and heighten visibility of the immigrants' world among members of the greater community.

Many Hispanic immigrants come from more collectivistic societies and have strong conceptions of family, community, and the importance of helping one another [32, 57]. The fact that many Hispanic immigrants are moving into rural areas to reunite with family or friends highlights these strong familial and social ties. This may help explain why emotional connection was scored the highest among the four components of sense of community. Cultural frames of reference could be assets for community development initiatives and fostering a greater sense of community. By connecting community initiatives to newcomers' cultural values and practices, communities can provide scaffolding to newcomers to achieve a better understanding of the community, its history and development, and how to engage, which may result in a greater sense of belonging and increased participation in the long-run.

This study found that sense of community was a significant predictor of both community participation and life satisfaction among Hispanic immigrants. Sense of community may help to create conditions where people feel like they matter, have influence, and can make change. In essence, it enhances a sense of responsibility and reciprocity to fellow residents. Every person brings specific talents and skills to a community, but immigrants may be left out of traditional mechanisms for participation due to lack of information, English proficiency, immigration legal status, or even due to cultural, ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination [12, 40–43]. Consistent with previous research, this study found that more educated Hispanics, those who spoke more English, and those with

longer residency in the United States may be more likely to participate in community initiatives [58]. However, communities should develop proactive mechanisms to foster participation among all immigrants, not just those who may be more educated, speak more English, or have longer tenure. Finding ways to engage newcomers, particularly those who may be less likely to participate is vital. Community programmes such as those that teach civics and English for English-language learners, which are often the first interaction people have, are cost-effective [59] and should be expanded to benefit more individuals. These programmes not only teach tangible skills, but also inform individuals about what may be happening in the community.

Often tacit knowledge embedded in living in a community is taken for granted, but when one emigrates, this lack of knowledge becomes woefully apparent [24]. Integration is not the job of just one organization. It is the responsibility of an entire community. Hence, communities may consider creating a network of community navigators to help newcomers better understand community systems such as public education, healthcare, or city government. Community navigators may be integrated as part of local immigrant affairs or newcomer services offices, social service agencies, or within companies that hire a large immigrant workforce. Churches, community organizations, and government entities could partner to inform and promote engagement and participation of immigrants. These partnerships could teach newcomers about how communities are structured (e.g. who are the elected leaders, what do they have jurisdiction over), how to engage (e.g. how could a person communicate their concerns with elected leaders, how to get on the mailing list for information about city planning processes, or how to register to vote), and how to be a leader (e.g. what is the process for appointment to leadership positions, how could a person develop an association or community organization, or what are the boundaries for local neighbourhood associations). Additionally, collaborative programming could focus on ways to increase a sense of community such as by (1) hosting community dinners where both established residents and newcomers can be together, (2) presenting community storytelling where people can learn the history of the space and its residents and gain a greater appreciation for the community, (3) developing community gardens where people are focused on common goals, and (4) holding family-centred activities [44, 60].

One of the communities studied (Schuyler, Nebraska) has a history of culturally and socially diverse residents getting along with each other and having immigrants reporting satisfaction with their lives [19]. Over the last 40 years, the immigrant community in this town has grown in part due to the job opportunities at a local meatpacking plant. However, unlike other rural meatpacking communities, there has been an active initiative to organize immigrants, which has changed the social, cultural, and political landscape of the community. For example, the mayor of this community has been a vocal supporter of the immigrant community. Since 2016, two Hispanic immigrants have gained a seat on the

city council, and another was elected to the local school board. Community organizing is a valuable strategy for influencing policy and changing structural conditions that may limit opportunities for immigrants.

Community must be valued, not just as a means to an end, but instead as a contributor to the good of society [61]. Using the SCI-2 or other measures to assess sense of community could provide a guide for developing community-building initiatives. By collecting this type of information, a community could learn more about how its residents, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic, feel. It could also indicate potential areas for improvement, further discussion, and future planning.

Community planning should not just focus on economic opportunities, but instead it should incorporate social opportunities as well. Fostering stronger connections among immigrants and their new communities is vital for community, economic, political, and social development, particularly in rural areas. Rural communities stand to benefit from the involvement of Hispanic immigrants who breathe new life into systems that may be stagnant or declining. Given the demographic trends indicating slow growth or even declines among the non-Hispanic White population in rural areas, immigrants will continue to be an important lifeblood to these communities [62]. Therefore, integrating Hispanic immigrants is not just a good thing to do, it is imperative; as the future of many rural places will depend on their contributions.

Ensuring that policies at the local, state, and national levels do not exclude or disenfranchise immigrants is vital. For example, information should be accessible in the languages most commonly spoken in the community, not just English. Elected leaders should work to promote positive perceptions of immigrants and use inclusive language when speaking about community newcomers. This may help to create a "welcoming culture" not just in the community, but also throughout local government by setting a tone of inclusivity. Hiring multilingual and multicultural staff to mirror the community that they serve is critical. Government entities should be deliberate in seeking input from newcomers about policies and their potential impact. Furthermore, not requiring information on immigration status to access services and not engaging local police in enforcing national immigration laws could help to promote a culture where immigrants feel safe and secure.

Limitations

This study was limited by the cross-sectional design and small sample size for the survey, as well as not reaching saturation with the focus groups. Participants may have responded in a socially desirable manner, thereby introducing self-presentational or acquiescence bias. The results presented may not be representative of all Hispanic immigrants; those in urban centres, those outside of the Midwest, or subsequent immigrant generations (i.e. second generation immigrants). Finally, the active organizing efforts and vocal support of leadership in Schuyler, Nebraska may have had a positive effect on immigrants' sense of community and participation in community

life, particularly at a time when negative rhetoric about immigrants is so prevalent.

Future research

More research is needed to understand the role and relationship that physical space (i.e. sociospatial considerations) plays in Hispanic immigrants' sense of community and life satisfaction in the rural Midwest, including the changing use of communal spaces within the built environments (e.g. parks, streets, or community centres). Multilevel analyses that align with ecological models to explore sense of community may prove useful in developing and evaluating community practices and policies. Potential individual and community enablers and barriers to sense of community such as language, culture, political involvement, and education need to be further explored among Hispanic immigrants in rural communities. Moreover, understanding the integration experience and sense of community from the viewpoints of both Hispanic immigrants and non-Hispanic residents in rural areas, could be beneficial for developing tailored interventions to improve sense of community and community participation.

Conclusion

This study extends current research on sense of community, community participation, and life satisfaction among rural Hispanic immigrants. Clearly, community is more than just a place. It is an intricate network of social relations within a place, but based on the concepts of unity, reciprocity, and collective well-being. Sense of community is important to community integration and contributes significantly to both community participation and life satisfaction. Sense of community is an indicator of community social health and well-being. Assessing sense of community provides a roadmap for developing community-building initiatives and tailored programming. Actively welcoming and engaging immigrants into community life may be a powerful factor to increase life satisfaction and enhance well-being among rural Hispanic immigrants in the United States.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests regarding this article.

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