

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE LABOR TRAJECTORIES OF HIGHLY EDUCATED LATINO IMMIGRANTS IN FLORIDA

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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE LABOR TRAJECTORIES OF HIGHLY EDUCATED LATINO IMMIGRANTS IN FLORIDA

INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA SOBRE LAS TRAYECTORIAS
LABORALES DE INMIGRANTES LATINOS CON EDUCACIÓN
SUPERIOR EN FLORIDA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the labor trajectories and experiences of Latino immigrant professionals with college degrees who achieved social inclusion after relocating to Florida, United States. In the context of this research, social inclusion was broadly defined as an individual's participation in a new culture or country. The study employed a phenomenological approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews. These interviews explored both socio-demographic factors and the lived experiences that influenced each participant's labor trajectory. A total of 18 Latino immigrant professionals, who had lived in the United States for less than ten years and voluntarily participated, were interviewed. The findings suggest that many of these professionals may face underemployment and low wages in Florida. However, their labor trajectories could improve over time if they succeed in validating their foreign educational credentials, enhancing their language proficiency, changing their immigration status, and pursuing further education and professional training in the U.S. Their social integration appears to be limited primarily to interactions within their work environments.

Keywords: Labor trajectories, Social integration, Latino immigrant, Brain waste, Flexibilization

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Resumen

El propósito de este estudio fue comprender las trayectorias y experiencias laborales de profesionales inmigrantes latinos con títulos universitarios que lograron la inclusión social luego de mudarse a Florida, Estados Unidos. En el contexto de esta investigación, la inclusión social se definió en términos generales como la participación de un individuo en una nueva cultura o país. El estudio utilizó un enfoque fenomenológico, con datos recopilados a través de entrevistas en profundidad. Estas entrevistas exploraron tanto factores sociodemográficos como las experiencias vividas que influyeron en la trayectoria laboral de cada participante. Se entrevistó a un total de 18 profesionales inmigrantes latinos, que habían vivido en Estados Unidos menos de diez años y participaron voluntariamente. Los hallazgos sugieren que muchos de estos profesionales pueden enfrentar subempleo y bajos salarios en Florida. Sin embargo, sus trayectorias laborales podrían mejorar con el tiempo si logran validar sus credenciales educativas extranjeras, mejorar su dominio del idioma, cambiar su estatus migratorio y continuar con su educación y capacitación profesional en los EE. UU. Su integración social parece limitarse principalmente a las interacciones dentro de los Estados Unidos. sus ambientes de trabajo.

Palabras clave: Trayectorias laborales, Integración social, Inmigrante latino, Desperdicio de cerebros, Flexibilización.

1. Introducción

In the United States (U.S.), many Latin American immigrants are professionals with college degrees. The terms “profession” and “professional” in this context are derived from sociology (Durkheim, 1957; Parsons, 1951; Tawney, 1921; Giddens, 1991; and Friedson, 1986), referring to a group of practitioners in any occupation who possess advanced education, high social status, high income, or a combination of these traits. Upon immigrating, these professionals typically expect to improve their working conditions and earn higher salaries. Recently, an increasing number of college-educated professionals from countries such as El Salvador, Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, and Ecuador have been relocating to the U.S. in search of better job opportunities and an improved quality of life. Florida is often a primary destination for these professionals, with some regions of the state seeing a significant concentration of Latino professionals. Latinos now make up 26.4 percent of Florida’s population, and at least 21 percent of Hispanics hold a bachelor’s degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

Florida's population is notably diverse, with significant variation in age groups, countries of origin, education levels, and occupations. The state has a large immigrant population, many of whom originate from the Caribbean. According to the U.S. Census, one in five residents in Florida was born outside the U.S. The largest groups of immigrants by country of origin come from Cuba (23 percent), Haiti (8 percent), Mexico (6 percent), Colombia (6 percent), and Jamaica (5 percent). Collectively, immigrants account for more than a quarter of Florida's labor force. Moreover, the percentage of the immigrant population has been steadily increasing since 1960 (Budiman et al., 2020).

Immigrants in Florida continue to face significant challenges, particularly regarding their legal status. In 2018, 2.5 million immigrants (57 percent) had naturalized, leaving a substantial portion (43 percent) still waiting to legalize their status. These immigrants span the educational spectrum in varying numbers. According to the 2018 U.S. Census, 29 percent of adult immigrants had attained a college degree or higher, while 20 percent had not completed high school. This study focuses specifically on Latino immigrants with college degrees (associate's or higher) for analysis.

2. The Latino Population in Florida

Florida is one of four U.S. states—along with New York, New Jersey, and New Mexico—that has a high concentration of Hispanics or Latinos. In 2018, there were 5.7 million Hispanics living in Florida, representing 26.4 percent of the state's population, according to the U.S.

Census Bureau. This percentage has steadily increased over the past two decades. According to a calculation by the Pew Hispanic Center, in 2020, 52 percent of Florida's Hispanic population was born in the U.S., while 48 percent were born abroad. The largest numbers of Hispanic immigrants came from Cuba (23 percent), Mexico (6 percent), and Colombia (6 percent). The number of college-educated adult Latinos in Florida has been steadily increasing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010, there were 549,190 Latinos aged 25 or older in Florida who held a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2014, that number had risen to 669,459, representing 21.9 percent of the Latino population at that time. During the same period, the number of Latinos with an associate's degree also saw a significant increase of 30 percent.

Job opportunities for immigrants can vary significantly. It is essential to identify and understand the social conditions and individual circumstances that impact an immigrant's ability to find suitable employment. For college-educated immigrants, factors such as gender, country of origin, age, educational background, and the political relationships between countries all play a role in shaping their job prospects.

3. Latino Immigrant College-Graduate Professionals

The term “college-graduate professional” refers to an individual who has obtained a four-year college degree or higher. A “Latino immigrant” is a person

from Latin America who has relocated to the U.S. The legal status of Latin American immigrants in the U.S. can take various forms, including unauthorized immigrant, naturalized citizen, lawful permanent resident (i.e., green card holder), refugee, or asylee. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in Latino immigrants, and among them, a notable rise in college-graduate professionals seeking to settle in the U.S. According to statistical trends, 48 percent of immigrant adults who arrived in the U.S. between 2011 and 2015 were college graduates (Batalova & Fix, 2016).

Among Latino college-graduate professionals, a significant number are employed in low-skilled jobs where their education, professional skills, and experience are underutilized—a phenomenon often referred to as “brain waste.” Currently, most of these underutilized Latino professionals reside in Texas, California, and Florida, with Florida having the largest concentration (Batalova & Fix, 2016).

4. Labor Trajectories

The term “labor trajectories” is well-defined and widely developed in sociological research. It refers to the changes and interconnections in a worker’s career across time and space. This term is commonly used to describe how workers modify their roles over time or progress through different contexts in their work-life (Sheller & Urry, 2006). The concept of labor trajectories has been applied in various ways by researchers in Europe, North America, and Latin America. Studies on labor trajectories focus

not only on the roles individuals play and how they build or change their careers, but also on how structural conditions influence the transformations they experience (Harvey, 1997).

An analysis of a labor trajectory involves reconstructing an individual’s career based on their job-related experiences over time. Researchers typically take a retrospective approach, examining the individual’s labor history to identify connections with companies and market dynamics. They analyze the constellation of experiences in both social and labor contexts to create a comprehensive profile of the individual’s career. Labor trajectories are closely linked to educational trajectories, and together, these constructs exert a powerful influence on an individual’s decision-making process and future career development.

Findings in labor-trajectory studies typically include two major components. The first component is internal, focusing on an individual’s motivations and considerations regarding their career-path decisions. These motivations often consist of a set of reasons why a person chooses to leave a job or take on a new professional role. Since motivations and considerations are deeply shaped by personal experiences, there is a wealth of phenomenological research on this topic (Pisarik et al., 2017; Ahn et al., 2017; Robertson et al., 2019; Robert & Carlsen, 2017).

The second component is external. It encompasses the structural factors that limit an individual’s access to resources or impede their ability

ty to progress along a desired career path. This refers to the external conditions that influence the internal decisions individuals make within the labor market. Due to the nature of this component, there is extensive research on it within the fields of sociology and economics (Castells, 1996; De la Garza, 2000; Urrea, 2010).

Job studies that apply the concept of labor trajectories span a wide range of professional fields and job realities in Latin America. These studies typically follow two main approaches. The first approach is more theoretical, engaging in discussions about job markets, management, administrative models, social change, and life course (De la Garza, 2000; Castells, 1996). The second approach is more empirical, utilizing the concept of labor trajectories to describe the career paths of workers across various professional fields in Latin America (Urrea, 2010).

5. Purpose of this research

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the labor trajectories and experiences of Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals who achieve social inclusion after relocating to Florida, United States, for employment. In this research, social inclusion is broadly defined as an individual's participation in a new culture or country. This participation becomes effective when a person has the opportunities, abilities, and resources to build and maintain relationships, engage in the community, pursue education, and participate in the workforce (Morgan et al., 2007; Merrells et al., 2017; van Bergen et al., 2019).

6. Methodology

A phenomenological approach was employed to identify the labor trajectories of Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, each of which examined the socio-demographic dimensions and lived experiences that could influence the participants' labor trajectories. The socio-demographic dimensions considered were: time, education, English language proficiency, labor experience, gender, age, social networks, family connections, friendships, and country of origin. These dimensions were used to analyze the data and develop categories for analysis.

The study involved interviews with approximately 18 Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals. Following the guidelines of Creswell & Creswell (2018) and Dukes (1984), a phenomenological study using in-depth interviews typically recruits between 8 and 25 participants. Participants were recruited through non-profit organizations that serve Latino immigrant populations in Florida.

The investigator employed convenience sampling along with purposive sampling techniques. The primary method of data collection for this study was individual, in-depth, face-to-face interviews (Seidman, 2006).

Thematic analysis was used in this study to interpret the data collected from the semi-structured individual interviews. This approach is a fundamental method for

qualitative analysis, commonly employed to identify patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data analysis was conducted in two phases. First, a pre-coding stage was performed before initiating systematic analysis of the transcriptions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Second, after completing the exploratory pre-coding, the transcripts were coded to identify clusters of meaning or themes, using a two-step metacoding approach (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

7. Results/Findings

7.1 Demographics

The study interviewed 18 Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals, who were selected based on a demographic survey. The selection criteria included four key factors: (1) participants had to be Latin American immigrants, (2) they needed to be college-graduate professionals, (3) they must have lived in the United States for less than ten years, and (4) they had to be 18 years of age or older. The demographic survey gathered information on various socio-demographic dimensions, including length of time in the U.S., current education level, frequency of English use, labor experience, gender, age, network affiliations, family connections, friendships, and country of origin.

Place of Birth. Among the participants, six were Cuban, five were Colombian, one was Peruvian, one was Nicaraguan, three were Venezuelan, one was Ecuadorian, and one was Honduran.

Age. The participants' ages varied: seven were between 25 and 35 years old, eight were between 36 and 45, one was between 46 and 56, and one was 67 or older.

Gender. Nine participants identified as female, and nine as male. All participants identified as Hispanic or Latino.

Bachelor's degrees. Of these, four participants were medical doctors, three were teachers, two were psychologists, four were engineers, two were lawyers, two were administrators, and one was an economist.

Time Lived in the United States. Nine participants had lived in the U.S. for 1 to 2 years, five for 3 to 5 years, and four for 6 to 10 years.

Current Occupation. Seven participants reported having jobs related to their educational and professional backgrounds, while eleven reported working in positions with little or no connection to their previous education and experience.

Household Composition. One participant lived alone, two lived with children, six lived with a spouse, four with a spouse and children, and five with a spouse, children, and additional household members.

7.7 Presentation of Findings

Theme 1: Reasons for Immigration

Immigration remains a complex and contentious issue, driven by a wide range of economic, political, and cultural factors. These factors include the availability of economic opportunities in the host country, political instability or conflict in the country of origin, and cultural ties between the two regions. For Latino college-graduate professionals, the strong job market in the United States presents a compelling incentive to immigrate. A review of the literature underscores the abundance of employment opportunities for individuals with higher education, particularly those with technical or specialized skills in fields such as engineering and computer science (Castells, 2009; Batalova & Fix, 2021).

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Participants in this study reported a wide range of reasons for immigrating to the United States. Unlike unskilled migrants, who often immigrate due to urgent economic need (Batalova & Fix, & Mittelstadt, 2016), Latino college-graduate professionals tend to immigrate for different motivations. Many indicated that their primary reasons included the desire to learn new business strategies and management approaches or to transition into professional fields with greater technological advancements. Other factors—such as employment opportunities, marriage, and educational pursuits—also emerged in their narratives. Some of these reasons are outlined below:

Theme 2: Obstacles in the New Country

Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals in the United States encounter numerous barriers to success, including cultural, economic, and language-related challenges. Studies have shown that limited English proficiency, coupled with unfamiliarity with the U.S. job market, restricts their access to education and employment opportunities (Batalova, Fix, & Bachmeier, 2016; Beck, 1992; Castells, 1996). In this study, participants frequently reported experiencing workplace discrimination or difficulty accessing social services due to their immigration status. These obstacles often result in poverty and other adverse outcomes, making it challenging for Latino college-graduate professionals to realize their full potential in the U.S.

English Language. Language is a crucial element of social integration, serving as a means to express emotions, aspirations, thoughts, and demands within specific contexts, such as politics and labor. Numerous studies have analyzed how language proficiency influences immigrants' integration (Gogonas & Michail, 2015; Hochman & Davidov, 2014; Goodman, 2012). These studies also highlight the significant role language plays in Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals' ability to access the labor market.

Participants in this study reported that English proficiency is one of the most significant barriers in their search for desirable occupations in the United States. Many also stated that they were actively studying English to improve their

job prospects. While learning English is a priority for most participants, some face challenges in dedicating sufficient time to language study due to family obligations or long working hours.

Immigration. The majority of participants identified immigration status as one of the most significant obstacles to both job acquisition and social integration. Immigration status for Hispanics varies on a case-by-case basis and can fall under several categories, including student visas, marriage-based visas, political asylum, and “temporary protected” status. Additionally, immigration status can evolve over time, further complicating access to employment and social services.

The “Wet Feet, Dry Feet” Policy. The “wet feet, dry feet” policy or “wet foot, dry foot” policy was a consequence of the 1995 revision to the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966. This policy granted Cubans who physically reached American soil a unique privilege not extended to other immigrants arriving without a visa: the right to remain in the U.S. and a fast track to citizenship. Conversely, Cubans intercepted before reaching land were returned to Cuba. Those apprehended on land were granted parole for entry into the United States. President Barack Obama announced the end of this policy on January 12, 2017.

Student Visas. The student visa allows individuals to enter the United States as full-time students at institutions certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). The F-1 visa is the most common type for students pursuing studies at an American college or university, granted once their application has been accepted.

Marriage. After marrying a U.S. citizen, the immigrating spouse can apply for a green card while their application is processed by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). During this period, the immigrating spouse may also apply for “advance parole,” which grants permission to travel. Barring emergencies, USCIS typically takes two to three months to process the advance parole.

Political Asylum. The asylum visa is designed for immigrants seeking protection from human rights abuses or political persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinions (USCIS). This visa is not limited to college-graduate immigrants; it is available to anyone who can provide evidence of persecution.

Cuban Medical Professional Parole. Cuba and the United States have political agreements that benefit college-educated Cubans. The Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program, initiated under President George W. Bush in 2006, grants U.S. officials the discretionary authority to allow Cuban medical professionals to enter the United States. This program places particular emphasis on expediting the revalidation of Cuban physicians’ medical licenses.

Validating Studies. Participants indicated that validating their college degrees was a significant and challenging obstacle. The level of difficulty was closely tied to the type of degree or certification. Participants expressed varying perceptions regarding the recognition of their educational credentials. Some professional fields, such as medicine, engineering, and law, were reported as particularly difficult to validate,

while degrees in fields like education and business were perceived to be easier to validate.

On the other hand, some participants reported that their diplomas and certificates were insufficient for securing jobs aligned with their education and professional background. In some cases, participants mentioned that they had to pursue studies in a different field or work toward obtaining a new professional certification within the same field.

Theme 3: Social Network

Social networks serve as valuable resources for Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals, particularly in securing job opportunities that are not publicly advertised. Through their networks, they gain access to job openings that are often hidden from the general public, giving them a competitive edge over other applicants without similar connections. Additionally, social networks enable them to build relationships with potential employers, allowing them to showcase their qualifications in a more personal and direct manner than through resumes and cover letters (Elliott, 2001).

Latino college-graduate professionals in the U.S. are increasingly using social networks to connect with people in their home countries, fostering a sense of community that transcends national boundaries.

In most cases, participants in this study reported that their social networks, composed of family, friends, and work colleagues, were invaluable in their job search and application process.

For job-seeking immigrants, the effectiveness of these dynamic social networks aligns with a substantial body of empirical research in sociology and economics. According to the literature, connections within these networks in the destination country serve as the primary source of information and direct assistance for immigrants when relocating (Garip & Asad, 2016).

Several studies have highlighted the positive impact of social networks on immigrants' employment opportunities. Social networks offer a platform for immigrants to stay connected with their home countries, maintain relationships with family and friends, and access resources that may not be readily available in their new environment. Additionally, these networks provide a sense of community for immigrants who might feel isolated in their new surroundings (Elliott, 2001). The immigration literature, in particular, has established that social networks play a crucial role in facilitating immigrants' integration into the labor market.

Participants in this study reported that their social networks also contributed to improving their labor trajectories, particularly when they included other college-graduate professionals. These improvements were likely due to direct communication with individuals who had already established themselves in the target labor market. For Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals, guidance from such networks appears to be crucial in securing jobs that align with their educational background and experience.

One does not need to be a college graduate to assist a job seeker with proofreading and revising a resume. Family and friends also play valuable roles within a social network. They may introduce the newcomer to well-established professionals, thereby expanding the job seeker's network. Additionally, family and friends can help by connecting the newcomer with a target company, a helpful recruiter, or a staffing agency. They can also assist in preparing for job interviews and provide essential information about potential employers.

Theme 4: Job Conditions

The job conditions for Latino immigrant college graduates vary based on factors such as their field of study, location, and level of experience. Labor conditions in the United States are often challenging for them, with a range of unique obstacles that make finding and maintaining suitable employment difficult. Language barriers are a significant issue; even with a college degree, immigrants may struggle to communicate effectively with potential employers or colleagues (Batalova, Fix, & Mittelstadt, 2018).

Professional Background. The professional background of Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals reflects a complex interplay of structural and cultural factors that shape their experiences and opportunities. According to a report by Budiman et al (2020), Latino immigrants in the United States are more likely to work in service occupations—such as cleaning and maintenance, food preparation, and personal care—than in professional roles.

These service jobs often do not align with their qualifications and professional backgrounds, leading to a mismatch between their skills and employment.

Some participants in this study reported that they had obtained their higher education degrees and certificates from colleges or universities in their countries of origin. All participants stated that they had previous professional work experience in their respective fields before immigrating to the United States. In most cases, this experience was gained after completing their graduate studies, which they had completed prior to deciding to relocate.

On the other hand, all participants reported having linear labor trajectories in their countries of origin, meaning that their jobs aligned with their professional field of study. Most participants viewed the wages and labor conditions in their home countries positively. However, some participants had become unemployed by the time they decided to relocate to the United States.

Low-Skill Jobs. In the majority of interviews, participants reported that they initially worked in low-skill jobs in the United States that did not align with their education or professional experience. However, most participants confirmed that, over time, they gradually secured jobs requiring higher-level skills. This shift in employment and labor trajectories indicates that participants needed to acquire or improve skills necessary for their new roles. Some participants stated that their educational background eventually aligned with their job in the U.S., often after validating their foreign credentials, improving their English proficiency, changing their immigration status, and pursuing further formal education and job training.

Wages and Job Benefits. Wages and job benefits for Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals vary significantly based on factors such as field of study, geographic location, and level of experience. While Latino immigrants with college degrees tend to earn more than those without higher education, they generally earn less than their non-Latino counterparts with similar qualifications. According to a report from the Economic Policy Institute (Gould & Kandra, 2022), the median hourly wage for Latino workers with a bachelor's degree or higher was \$26.50 in 2020, compared to \$35.00 for white workers with the same level of education.

This research has also corroborated previous findings (Batalova, Fix, & Bachmeier, 2016; Batalova, Fix, & Mittelstadt, 2018) that Latino workers with advanced degrees face even larger wage gaps compared to their white counterparts. However, they are more likely to receive employer-sponsored benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and other job perks—unless they are undocumented. In such cases, they continue to face significant barriers to employment and may not have access to many of the benefits available to U.S. citizens and legal residents.

Most participants in this research reported low wages and unstable job conditions at the start of their labor trajectories in the United States. For some, the type of work they initially performed became a source of frustration and disappointment. Many arrived in the U.S. with aspirations of success and a better life, only to find themselves in jobs with limited opportunities for growth or

advancement. This situation often led to feelings of low self-esteem and diminished self-worth, as participants felt they were not reaching their full potential or being valued for their work. Over time, wages and job conditions gradually improved as participants validated their foreign educational credentials, enhanced their language skills, changed their immigration status, and pursued further formal studies and job training in the U.S.

Theme 5: Entrepreneurship and Employability

New businesses founded by Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals often emerge from a combination of individual agency and structural barriers, including discrimination. While entrepreneurship provides opportunities for individuals across educational backgrounds, it is important to recognize how structural inequality and discrimination in the labor market can push immigrants to start their own businesses when other viable employment options are limited. On one hand, the creation of businesses by these skilled immigrants can be viewed as a positive reflection of their resilience and resourcefulness in overcoming structural barriers and social exclusion (Lofstrom & Wang, 2019).

Educated immigrants often possess the knowledge and skills necessary to launch a successful business, having acquired expertise in specific fields or industries that give them a competitive advantage. However, the lack of stable job opportunities faced by many Latino immigrants after relocating to the United States is often a key motivator for pursuing

entrepreneurship. When these skilled immigrants struggle to find employment that matches their qualifications, feelings of frustration and being undervalued may arise. Starting their own businesses offers an alternative pathway to success and financial stability (Lofstrom & Wang, 2019).

In a challenging job market, starting a business can offer immigrants a sense of control and autonomy over their career trajectory. It also provides the opportunity to pursue a passion or apply specialized skills that may not be in high demand in traditional job sectors. Additionally, entrepreneurship can generate employment opportunities for others, including fellow immigrants who may also be struggling to find work. This is particularly important for immigrants who feel a responsibility to support their families and ethnic communities.

Some Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals in this study reported that life in the United States has offered opportunities to develop specific employability and entrepreneurship skill sets. Employability refers to personal attributes that enhance the likelihood of securing and maintaining a position within an organization. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, involves the ability to become self-employed, initiate personal projects, or start a business as a means of entering the labor market. Both employability and entrepreneurship have proven to be important for these individuals.

Participants in this study often defined entrepreneurship as the ability to start and run their own business, either individually or in partnership with a spouse. The businesses they founded were

typically small organizations or limited liability companies (LLCs). Developing employability skills was also seen as a key strategy for establishing oneself in the labor market, as well as gaining access to a social security system based on solidarity and individual responsibility. In today's job market, guaranteed long-term employment is increasingly rare, and the emphasis on employability has replaced traditional notions of job security. Employability promotes the idea that wages are earned through personal effort, which has reshaped the social imagination. However, employability skills must be applied carefully, as they are rooted in self-management, shifting the responsibility for job security and labor opportunities to businesses and government authorities.

Some participants anticipated a future as entrepreneurs. For many Latino immigrants, starting a business is not necessarily the culmination of their labor trajectories, but rather a means of creating additional income or employment opportunities for themselves. Some participants in this study expressed a preference for developing their employability and entrepreneurship skills later, often after enduring a period of underemployment and low wages. Many spent time pursuing further education, obtaining certificates and licenses, and adjusting their immigration status before starting new businesses. These preliminary efforts were cited as crucial steps that enabled them to transition from being employed to becoming self-employed.

Theme 6: Social Integration

Social integration is the process through which immigrants immerse themselves in a new society, gaining access to rights, obligations, positions, and social status. As part of this process, immigrants learn the host culture by forming relationships with individuals who are already well-integrated into the society (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006). In the United States, as in other modern societies, employment plays a significant role in an individual's social integration (Boltansky & Chiapello, 2007; Castells, 2009; Giddens, 1991).

Social integration can be measured by the number of social contacts made and the resources gained through work. For the participants in this study, employment and earnings provided a tangible reflection of their way of life in the United States.

They described their social integration through their jobs, professional training, educational programs, validation of previously earned educational credentials, and changes to their immigration status. However, a notable theme in their narratives was the limitation of their social interactions, which were often confined to small circles of family, friends, and colleagues.

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Participants in this study expressed diverse perspectives regarding their jobs. For some, a job provides a sense of pride and fulfillment, as they view securing employment as an accomplishment and a way to contribute to their communities. These participants feel that their education and skills are valued and respected in the workplace, and they take pride in the contributions they make to their organizations.

Social integration is a vital process that enables immigrants to engage with members of the host society, helping to reduce social isolation and fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion. This can have positive effects on their mental health and well-being.

For many immigrants, including the participants in this study, social integration primarily occurs through regular interactions in the workplace. Most participants perceived and experienced their integration into American society largely through their interactions with coworkers and others in their professional environments.

8. Conclusion

The evidence from the data collected suggests that many Latino immigrant college-graduate professionals in the State of Florida are underemployed and underpaid. However, their labor trajectories may gradually improve over time if they are able to validate their foreign educational credentials, enhance their language skills, adjust their immigration status, and pursue further formal studies and professional training in the United States. In most cases, participants reported that a network of family, friends, and colleagues played a crucial role in helping them search for and apply to jobs.

These immigrants' representations of their wages and labor conditions are, in the majority of cases, positive, and their perceptions of their futures appear optimistic. Their social integration tends to be limited to their interactions within their work environments. Apparently, these Latino immigrant college graduate professionals do not conceive of social integration in terms of complex cultural interactions with Americans or with other cultural groups in the community.

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