



Building Social Capital Between the U.S. and Mexico: Then and Now

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Building Social Capital Between the U.S. and Mexico: Then and Now</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 12 No. 2</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>122036</i>
Page Number:	<i>36</i>
Year:	<i>2009</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

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Katherine Selber

Introduction

In the recent movie *No Country for Old Men* actor Tommy Lee Jones plays Sheriff Bell of the Texas border who remembers the region before the eighties and compares it with the violence-torn killing fields of psychopathic killers and drug dealers leading to current times that are the focal point of the movie. While the story begins with Sheriff Bell dreaming of the old days when the region was a lazy, quiet and simple place, the movie ends when he proclaims that then “he woke up”. For those who currently live along stretches of the border region, that awakening is all too real and they are living this nightmare now as both governmental infrastructure and other elements of civil society are threatened by factors beyond the usual historical border challenges.

The people of the U.S.-Mexico border area have had a long history of change, adaptation, and to date survival. Along this almost 2,000 mile border, the record of conflict has been a prolonged one reflected in age-old boundary disputes, clashes over resources, and myriad social issues such as illegal immigration. At times, the region has risen to marshal unique ways of dealing with these legal, social, and health problems. Authors in an earlier era have referred to the border as a distinctive sociological area similar to an ecological system that has served to underscore the formation of new ways of local, bi-national cooperation (Martinez, 1988; Selber, 2004; Selber, Herbert & Williams, 1986, Stoddard, 1976). Until recently an inexplicable, sublime sense of a holistic community connectedness has often transcended the “twin cities” of the region, reaching across the border’s actual demarcation. Researchers of the area have often pointed to its economic interdependence, vulnerability to external and national-level policy-makers, and a vast network of communication among the region’s leaders and citizens all of which served historically to underscore the interconnectedness and uniqueness of this area in dealing with its challenges (Sloan &

West, 1976; Stoddard, Martinez, O. & Martinez, M., 1979; Selber 2004). However, now this connectedness seems less true and the harsh realities of drug lords, kidnappings, murders, and terrorists acts akin to Taliban type killings in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) have risen to unprecedented numbers in parts of the region. The era of the NAFTA debate and even the post 9/11 security debate competes not with free market ideals for more open borders but a palpable sense that at least parts of the region are being lost to a ravaged, no-man zone lost to infrastructures and bureaucracies. The border communities of today may also be losing their informal ways of problem solving and mitigating national policies that were only sometimes workable for them; what remains today is a sense of escalating danger and challenges that are overwhelming the system.

This paper examines the author’s experiences in the late seventies and early eighties in Mexico as a university professor, a health and human services program developer, and researcher. The history of challenges of the seventies and eighties are briefly depicted as a context for her academic and community development work. The author’s views are based on her experiences living and working in Mexico during the late seventies and early eighties yielding a more qualitative perspective.

A Backdrop of Historical Factors Impacting Mexico and the Border Region of the Seventies and Eighties

One such challenge that has long characterized the border region has been that of illegal immigration (Camara & Van Kemper, 1979; Cockroft, 1986; Fox, 1978; Lemay, 1994). Throughout most of the last century the immigration of illegal aliens has been perhaps the most contentious problem facing the two countries. In the seventies, the U.S. media’s description of the phenomena as a “silent invasion,” a “national crisis,” and a “burden” reflected this concern (Bustamante,

1977; Fernandez & Pedroza, 1981). Studies have often cited a host of causes of illegal immigration, often referring to these as the “push-pull” theory (Cornelius, 1978; 1982; Selber, 2004). According to this theory, factors such as economics, laws, social factors, and national politics operated within the U.S., Mexico, and the border region itself to create the conditions favorable to “pull” illegal immigrants to the U.S. and to “push” them away from Mexico.

Historically, the United States has used varied responses to deal with the concern of immigration of illegal aliens. One such method has included increasing security measures in the border region. Timothy Dunn (1996) explored the region’s build-up of security in response to this issue, advancing the premise that the slow ratcheting-up of border control mechanisms represented a Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) strategy of “militarization” by U.S. agencies. He argued that organizations used a broad range of preemptive, preventive measures of social control such as short term military policing, technology, equipment, and fences to deal with challenges such as illegal immigration (Selber, 2004). The increased identification of national security interests as a rationale for action and the militarization of agencies such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were thought to be evidence that this strategy was in play in the border region, especially during the seventies (Dunn, 1996). Now this strategy may be even more in play due in large part due to an upswing in violence primarily related to drug trafficking in the area. Among the region’s challenges, illegal immigration has been perhaps the most debatable and protracted of all. This issue rose to significance due to a number of socioeconomic and political factors during the 1970s and 1980s that provided the backdrop to my experiences in Mexico.

One evident factor that fueled concern in the border region was the increase in population along the border. During the decades 1950-1980, the population growth in the border region rose to

over 52 million people with more than half of those living within only twenty miles on either side of the border. This is a dramatic dynamic that developed during this time and in Texas was evident with the population doubling from 7.7 million to 14.2 million. From the early sixties, internal migration to the northern border in Mexico continued to mount adding pressure to the border infrastructure that could not keep up with the demands for services and jobs. Within the northern Mexican border, internal migration rose from 3.5 to 4.5 million in the seventies, with a high concentration of those migrants living in the larger urban areas such as Ciudad Juarez. During the same three decades, the population of the twin cities of El Paso-Ciudad Juarez grew more than five times to a high of about one million (Martinez, 1988). The creation of hundreds of “maquiladoras” or manufacturing and assembly plants that began in the mid sixties accounted for much of this influx to the northern Mexico side with 680 plants being opened by 1984. With these work settings springing up almost over night, thousands of Mexicans were encouraged to leave their rural and urban settings to seek work in these low-skilled positions. The opening of plant sites was so routine that in Ciudad Juarez during the late seventies and eighties the title of the “assembly capital of the world” was often used in the media. The 159 plants in the city employed about three-fourths of the economically active population that was in the area (Martinez, 1988). The existence of these plants brought with them much promise but also many challenges to the existing hard and soft infrastructure such as water, sewage, utilities, transportation, housing, and of course education and health and human services.

Illegal immigration continued to be a challenge during these same decades growing steadily. By 1977 the number of illegal immigrants apprehended had reached the million mark again with a short reprieve during the years of the Bracero program. The increase averaged around

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25 percent a year or 85,000 (Cornelius, 1978; 1982). This increase can also be attributable to the “push factors” of the economic conditions in Mexico during the seventies. During this period, the trade relationship was imbalanced with 69 percent of all Mexican exports going to the U.S. and about 61 percent of the goods imported to Mexico coming from the U.S. It was no surprise that the economic concerns in the late seventies in Mexico impacted the entire border region. In fact, some have argued that the economies were so intertwined that the U.S. had a history of exporting its recessions and inflationary periods to Mexico and causing even more illegal immigration (Cornelius, 1978). In 1976, Mexico’s 2 percent growth rate was not enough to even absorb population growth. Unemployment rose sharply and the impact of inflation eroded real incomes with inflation rates at two to three times higher than in the previous decades (Cornelius, 1978).

In addition, the first devaluation of the peso in twenty-two years occurred in September 1976 with the peso’s value being decreased by almost half. Concretely, this meant that a Mexican immigrant working in the U.S. could then send back to his family a U.S. dollar worth 22.95 pesos instead of the 12.50 pesos of before the devaluation. Rapid inflation, high unemployment in Mexico and the devaluation yielded an environment that encouraged further migration north (Cornelius, 1978). The devaluation had other impacts on the U.S. side as well. For example, an article in the Dallas Morning News in 1977 declared that El Paso had a 12.7 percent unemployment rate, the highest jobless rate in the U.S., in large part a result of the devaluation in Mexico (Dallas Morning News, 1977).

Structural factors in Mexico such as unemployment and underemployment also played were consistently present and created pushes north and increased pressures on the border. In the late seventies 45-55 percent of the Mexican working-age population were unemployed or under-employed and labor wages were sharply in contrast in the two

countries. In 1976, Mexican workers earned on the average one-sixteenth of what an equivalent U.S. job paid translating to immigrants making in three months in the U.S. what would have taken them one year in Mexico. As an article in the U.S. News and World Report summarized, “This country [Mexico] has too many people, not enough jobs, and an uncertain, if not perilous, future.”(U.S. News and World Report, 1977, p.27). During the seventies, Mexico’s high natural birth rate and a young population with almost half of its 64 million people less than fifteen years of age were further structural factors that added to the push of workers north.

These “push-pull factors” resulted in pressures on the Mexican government’s infrastructure including health, education, and social services not to mention services such as roads and housing and environmental safety issues (Cornelius, 1978). These issues poised on the border led many to demand that the U.S. close the border altogether to stop the flow of immigrants into the U.S. Thus, at the end of the 1970s, Mexico’s safety net was as porous as the border itself.

A less tangible factor causing higher levels of illegal immigration was also at play. With the modernization of the Mexican economy during this period, the general social and economic gains from the previous decades brought a “revolution of expectations” similar to other parts of Western society (Corwin, 1974). The role of media generated expectations is often undervalued in such discussions. The border region has always seen high levels of contact between citizens and a sharing of media outlets such as television and newspapers. This provided people on the Mexico side with a sense of a hope for a better life, encouraging the long-term not temporary settlement of people in the region.

With that rising tide of expectations was a rising level of crime to go with it. The police in Mexico of the era of the seventies and eighties were almost uniformly noted as poorly trained, not professional and corrupt. The standards for

conduct and procedures of arrest were variable and even repressive and coercive in nature. Although the media was not as free to criticize the police during this era, the common opinion was that the political ties of police to both the political parties and local and federal politicians influenced actions (Macias & Castillo, 2002). As well, the seventies saw the more pervasive increase in organized crime involvement in such activities. During the eighties Mexico's federal response was to attempt to create and strengthen an institutional response to rising crime. A new comprehensive federal approach to crime was given some attention at the federal level under both the Zedillo and Fox administrations but the public noticed little results and it remained as in many of Mexico's responses one of slow change and rhetoric ushering in more of a reliance on a military response to organized crime. Budgets did not follow the institution building federal initiatives and thus limited progress was made. It was not unusual during the eighties to see federal troops in institutions such as banks and at the border as well. This reliance on military in contrast to police action reflected the fact that even then the military in Mexico was better trained and more responsive. Kidnappings at the time of the early eighties were only beginning to happen with some frequency and were primarily dealt with using private sector resources of the wealthy that were among those mainly at risk.

This big picture of economic and societal factors provided a backdrop for my years in Mexico. The oil revenues of the time were beginning to spur some changes and engender some pride and hopefulness among Mexico's population. Scholarships were more prevalent and used to send academics to study abroad and return with ideas and technologies to build capacity in the country. Certainly Mexico was viewed then as a safer place than current media attention indicates.

An Academic in Mexico: The University Community as an Agent for Change

This was the backdrop of my experiences in

Mexico. I often thought that it was "the best of times and the worst of times". When I arrived in Mexico in 1977 the National University of Mexico (UNAM) was on strike for wage issues and a plethora of student related price and academic complaints. The university was in a close down mode and professors were not officially crossing the strike barricades. Instead we worked from temporary offices off campus and away from unions and student protesters. Heavily unionized workers were, like many government employees, calling for price controls and anti-inflationary measures. After several months when the university reopened, the safety gage of placating a growing student body to ward off unemployment was back in place and students were engaged in the process of higher education once again.

These were somewhat exciting times for Mexico because of the more recognized value of its oil producing status. The University's School of Psychology was the epicenter of a new group of U.S. educated doctoral level professionals who were armed with social science tools of cognitive-behavioral therapies and a sense of the empirical importance of evidenced-based practices even back then. Many of them were trained at the University of Kansas in Lawrence and had vowed to return to their home country to assist in its development. This cadre of empiricists was in stark contrast to many of those from a Marxist philosophical approach that had taught in the main University (UNAM) for a generation. Not only were their philosophies different, but the thirst for change and action was also culturally different from the University's bureaucracy. These U.S. educated doctoral level academics were used to action-oriented research learned in the evaluation boon of the U.S. War on Poverty era and were equipped and determined to make a difference.

I joined that group to assist in bringing the "new" technologies of helping to a third world country that was linked by its border to the United States. Fresh from a graduate program of my own, I was given a joint appointment to the

National University (UNAM) and the then National Institute of Psychiatry (CEMEF/INP). My responsibilities were to assist in program development at the federal level and bring models of partnership with the community to the University. Molding entities into an engine for forming strong models of problem solving that were community-based and effective was what I knew how to do. Social problems were plentiful and there was a strong recognized need for action and partnership.

A Model of Partnerships and Technical Assistance

The University was where the U.S. educated practitioners and academics returned to but not to be in an ivy tower. The model that many of them had been mentored under in the U.S. was one of being in a university setting amid many federal contracts for program development and evaluation. That was the model they sought to implement upon their return. Developing these same partnerships across universities and Mexico's federal agencies was intended to impact change in the federal arena and push development out into the health and human services institutions. In addition, technical assistance for program development was provided to the federal entities in Mexico. This assistance offered a new perspective driven by an internship and mentoring model where student disciples of our U.S. educated group and their followers could embed in projects to be the foot soldiers of a new way of doing business. Developing the contacts and relationships for promoting partnerships and providing technical assistance came naturally to our U.S. educated team members. This is what they had done in the U.S. and patterns of kinships and friendships were an extension of the Mexican culture. They had been away in the U.S. developing their professional careers through education but their networks in Mexico had remained in tact. The question was could the old kinship patterns remain strong with data driven methodologies that demanded more transparency and accountability.

Health and Human Service Issues

Health and human services in Mexico were highly federalized and centralized at the time. In the hands of a federal bureaucracy in Mexico's capital, federal initiatives could be rolled out into the states and pushed under the umbrella of the National Institute of Child Development (DIF) entity largely under the informal umbrella of Mexico's first lady. Linking the federal Institute of Psychiatry and the National University produced many opportunities for piloting model programs imported from the U.S. and adapted to meet the cultural and fiscal realities of Mexico. In addition, with an upside down pyramid of population and a large percentage of Mexico's population being of child-bearing age the need for maternal health and child development services as well as educational services were seriously underdeveloped. Our group set about to pilot programs for these federal entities.

One such program was an evaluation of health services in Mexico. This was a national project and the first of its kind in Mexico. Logistically with its rural and widely varying regions this project was a challenge. The researchers were armed with checklist and measurement instruments designed to give the federal entity a snapshot of services actually offered across the country and the perception of the services by citizens. The enormity of the project's logistics was soon evident as was the tenuousness of why the federal government had limited insight about the actual services that had been built even in more populated areas. As with many developing countries, development is sporadic, not well documented and yet lunges forward in fits and starts meeting some semblance of pattern of its intended design. What we encountered stunned even the most hardened federal bureaucrat. When over 300 trained observers were sent out nationally the results were concerning. Initial data indicated that there were no clinics in some areas where clinics were supposed to be located and there were some in areas that had not been planned for or been

initially designed to be built. Moreover, clinics that existed lacked electricity, had equipment not supported by local utilities and infrastructure and were being seriously underutilized. Some clinics on the other hand were taxed and at over capacity with waiting lists. The results were nonetheless documented and yet not easy to push up the chain of command.

In a country where rhetoric in the health and human services field was more common than not, this was not viewed as news but as a bombshell. Instead of an evaluation of services the reality was that what had been performed was more a cataloging of services and purely descriptive. However, this provided a much needed reality check for that agency and formed the basis for more projects. This was not politics as usual but a neutral third party accounting of what existed. As the years went by in Mexico I found that this experience was common and indicative of a lack of empirical data for most issues from drug abuse to education, special needs children, and other health related data. Data requires infrastructure building and training and that was only beginning in Mexico during my time there. Data was not dependable, often missing and was not often used to fuel decision-making among health and human service providers.

New Technologies for Human Services

Another issue that our group was at the forefront of was that of providing an impetus for trying new ways of problem solving in the health and human services arena. One example was in the use of non-profit organizations to underpin a more developed civil society that advocated change in treatment modalities and involved key stakeholders in results. This was a radically new approach where the pattern that all services be planned and directed by the federal government had flourished for decades. In the arena of special needs education, autism was a practice area that many of the U.S. educated academics had been trained in. We started a non-profit organization "Centro Educativo Domus" to promote community-based ap-

proaches to special education for children diagnosed as autistic and with mental retardation. Beginning with a group of committed parents of special needs children, we adapted a model of assessment and treatment in a safe neighborhood with a couple designated as "teaching parents". This model formed the basis for a new kind of partnership with parents and the community and was replicated then with federal entities for substance abuse and in particular inhalant abusing teens. Rooted in a philosophy of behavioral management and skills and strengths development originated at the University of Kansas and was there called the Teaching-Family Model. Its adaptation in Mexico to various special needs populations was our model for the community-based movement and was in sharp contrast to the institutional approach that was used with most special needs populations (Quiroga, H., Mata, A., Chism, K. & Ayala, H., 1981). Treatment standards and engaging elements of the community such as schools and judges in treatment decisions was piloted with success. In fact these programs were so successful that Mexican federal officials used them as models for other developing countries in South America that sought technical assistance from Mexican officials.

Platforms of Dissemination

The new pilot projects were heavily data driven and a strong culture was created of dissemination of results. International conferences were organized in Mexico to help others learn from the work and more international networks were established as well. Professional associations such as Mexico's Behavioral Analysis Association was initiated to foster networking and travel to conferences to present data from the projects. New academic journals such as *Acta Psicológica Mexicana* were developed and this also provided more opportunities for rolling out results. These journals were often home for joint articles in English and Spanish written by U.S. researchers and their counterparts from Mexico

and became strong motivational forces for students in the University and for academics advancing their degrees and professional careers. The synergy in this area took on a life of its own and transcended the kinship networks usually relied upon for career advancement. Second generations of professors-mentors and their students from our team began to emerge built from the years of our work and those were important ways of sustaining the momentum. As the first wave of the new group began to gain experience and move up in the hierarchy of organizations such as the University and federal entities, they had more opportunities to drive changes at the policy level and more chances to push the priorities of outcome oriented programs and models. They were intellectuals but in the service of their country and grounded in real world needs not sitting in ivory towers beyond the challenges of real problems to solve.

Reflections on Building Social Capital During This Era

From a vantage point of almost 30 years later and with the current backdrop of a troubled border rife with violence and drug cartels, I see our work there differently now. One of the overwhelming realities of my years in Mexico was the substantial poverty and sheer number of people living in substandard, third world conditions. Although in the years I was there the middle class advance was apparent with more foreign business models and technologies being imported, the sheer size of the childbearing population and its poverty was enough to overwhelm the best government programs. However, according to Friedman (2009) a nation's power is rooted in a substantial economy and a large population and this can overcome poverty. Mexico, at that time however, did not have the economy to underpin the inverted pyramid population and overcome the historical poverty that was evident especially in Mexico City.

Partnerships that strengthen a civil society and social capital formation must be based on trust

and a shared vision and commitment to be long lasting and effective. Although strong partnerships were formed, the political infrastructure has still not overcome some of the transparency issues that plagued it then. Sustained social capital formation is difficult with so many competing priorities and challenges and with a political infrastructure that is plagued with corruption at many levels. The corruption in the systems at local, state and federal levels that existed then, including the criminal justice and law enforcement systems, was anathema to building strong trust in government and free markets and in building enough social capital to raise a nation up. These problems are still apparent even today among law enforcement dealings with gangs and drug cartels.

According to some researchers building social capital in a society is often pushed and engendered by groups that want changes instead of in a proactive way (Montana, 2009). At the time of our work in Mexico, there were no major pushes internally in the country or in the organizational infrastructure for social change. There were however pushes in the U.S. for accountability and evaluation of results that had been fueled by program development work during the War on Poverty era. Many of the members of our team had been trained in the U.S. and thus those changes were imported to organizations in Mexico such as the University and the federal health and human services agencies. These projects became the seeds within the federal organizations for the changes that rippled out from there. There was an esprit de corps that existed among the team as they worked and the idea that they were indeed working for the public good, a critical element of the framework for building social capital, was in place. Ties to U.S. universities and doctoral program mentors and other professional groups became key elements of the bridging that takes place in building social capital. Candor and intellectual growth were the other main elements of the network and a culture began to develop

around these qualities.

One of the qualities inherent in social capital formation is the building of trust and formation of a strong sense of community where reciprocity in relationships exists. During my years as a professional in Mexico I was always amazed at how quickly the culture adapted to the models of community-based approaches to care in health and human services. In hindsight I see now that this moving away from an institutionalized approach to care and to one more community and stakeholder based was a good fit for the culture. Mexico was and still is a culture based on networks of kinship and friendship that fits well with community systems of care and formation of social capital. Engaging in new ways of developing community back then was consistent with the existing culture.

Another element of my time in Mexico related to the double-edged sword inherent in providing technical assistance in a foreign country. The adaptation of U.S. models of care to the realities of Mexico's health and human services became a critical part of what our team worked on. Since most of the team except myself were Mexican Nationals but trained in the U.S. they had exchanged some of the old ways of doing things for more U.S. models such as teamwork and collaborations that they themselves could then advocate for Mexico's infrastructure. Lessons learned from these experiences of model development and adaptation were crucial to our success.

Conclusions

There have been many concerns that have plagued the U.S.-Mexico border region since the early 1900's and have garnered both low and high visibility. These challenges have historically issued in a variety of national and bi-national responses, but sometimes with few gains. The current crisis of drug cartel violence and a deteriorating infrastructure and civil society is seriously impacting the region. In a post NAFTA and, more importantly, a post 9/11 world, the security goals that once competed with free market ideals for more open bor-

ders have now taken on new urgency in the wake of such high levels of anarchy and violence. However, the clear and present danger that currently exists in many border communities is setting new culture and conditions in place that will be hard if not impossible to turn back. The question is can this erosion be reversed and what has been lost among the citizenry and civil society at this time? How can the violence of such events as beheadings and shootings in the streets and kidnappings that have so negatively impacted social capital and civil society in the region be dealt with more long term? Mobilization of the military on both sides of the border may be needed to curtail current violence and re-establish security that is now eroded. However, this is not a long-term single solution for two bordering countries. With the economic conditions facing both countries it is unlikely that there will be recognition by the political structures on either side that there must be other means of addressing the current situation and its resulting damage to the region. Sheriff Bell's recollection in *No Country for Old Men* is a good reminder--- we need to wake up before a total nation collapse is on our doorsteps.

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