What It Means to Be Latina in Hamilton, Ohio

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the discrimination faced by Latinas in the city of Hamilton, Ohio as related to the researcher by four Latina informants. The literary review includes a basic examination of discrimination from a sociological perspective, including two current theories of outgroup bias when dealing with racial or ethnic minorities; a political science/anthropological approach to language politics; and a Master’s thesis written at the conclusion of a project similar in nature and content to this research. A brief introduction to the city of Hamilton follows, including census data on the racial, economic, and educational makeup of the city and some factors (e.g., the local Sheriff) that influence its Anglo-American citizens’ treatment of Latinos and gives the immigration debate in Hamilton a unique character. Next, the four informants are introduced; this section includes the women’s native nationalities, description of employment, familial status, and any other characteristics that are salient to her experiences as a Latina in Hamilton. The seventeen subsequent pages document the discrimination that these women (or, in a few cases, people they know) have dealt with, broken down into five sections as determined by the perpetrator of the discriminatory behavior: government bureaucrats, police, employers, businesses, and private citizens. Other issues that the women felt have a significant impact on their daily lives, such as national and linguistic pride, anxieties associated with motherhood, and the current attitudes toward and treatment of undocumented immigrants make up the next section; this is followed by several possible courses of action posited by the informants that may not only ameliorate the discrimination against Latinas in Hamilton but might also serve to strengthen the community in general. In closing, Miami University, particularly the Hamilton campus, is acknowledged as a leader in the community with the ability—and responsibility—to take the necessary steps to put some of these ‘solutions’ into practice and work for the betterment of the Hamilton community.
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Introduction

To be Latina in Hamilton, Ohio, is to face significant levels of discrimination on an almost daily basis; sources of this discrimination include state and local government agencies, police, employers, businesses, and citizens of Hamilton. It has reached a level that is unacceptable by either moral or social standards. The purpose of this research is to document the discrimination against Latinas in Hamilton, as well as other experiences and patterns significant in their lives, as experienced by four individuals who were willing to share their stories. It is my hope that by bringing these women’s stories to light a better understanding of the ethnic tensions in Hamilton can be reached and steps can be taken to ameliorate the discrimination that Latinas in Hamilton currently face.

My goal is to achieve a better understanding of this unique cultural group that is so prevalent and yet so invisible in our community, and to share this knowledge with both the academic community and, possibly, practitioners of social services in the city of Hamilton. I hope to gain insight into possible sources of assistance for this community; for example, services such as childcare or English language education. As part of the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country and in Butler County, Latinas are a considerable subset of the population, yet they often go under- or unrepresented in social discourse. By documenting their experiences and placing them within a wider social context I hope to bring about a positive change in this austere situation.
Literary Review

When exploring instances of discrimination and its repercussions it is crucial to define the terms essential to the discourse. Ferrante’s (2006) introductory Sociology text defines discrimination as “intentional or unintentional unequal treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of attributes unrelated to merit, ability, or past performance with the aim of denying equal opportunities to achieve socially valued goals” (311). Ferrante goes on to explain the difference between individual and institutionalized discrimination, the former being relatively self-explanatory as behaviors carried out by an individual, whereas the latter is defined as “the unchallenged rules, policies, and day-to-day practices that impede or limit minority members’ achievements and keep them in subordinate and disadvantaged positions” (2006: 317). Through the course of my research I collected testimony of both types of discrimination, individual and institutionalized. Because this testimony was collected from the women who experienced the discrimination and there was no follow-up with the persons who carried out the behaviors, it is impossible to say for certain whether all of the discrimination documented here was intentional; regardless, the actions definitely qualify as “unequal treatment,” since in many cases the women were able to tell me how Anglo-Americans were treated in nearly identical situations.

A precursory question to ask when examining discrimination is why the discriminatory practices are occurring in the first place, or what their underlying causes are. Current social science theories that address this issue include the racial threat hypothesis (Giles and Buckner, 1993) and vitality theory (Barker and Giles, 2002), both of which are informed by Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) theory of ingroup outgroup bias.
The racial threat hypothesis holds that the increase of racial minority group members leads to majority group insecurity, overt racism and discrimination, while vitality theory examines the majority group’s perception of outgroup social and political power. Barker and Giles (2002) applied their theory to Anglo-American perceptions of Latinos and the formers’ subsequent feelings toward the English-only movement: “vitality theory suggests that English-only policies represent strategies undertaken by the dominant Anglo-American majority to maintain the status quo in language and social status” (354). Their results showed that Anglo-Americans who perceived an increase in Latino group vitality were more likely to support English-only initiatives (364), and that these people were more likely to be “older, less educated, blue collar or non-working participants” (365). This finding is significant to my research because these descriptors can be broadly applied to a large sector of the Anglo citizens of Hamilton (see below). Furthermore, Barker and Giles (2002) hypothesized that, “Perhaps these participants were more likely to experience a sense of ‘threat’ to social identity and to social status from a growing Latino presence than their younger, more educated, professional counterparts” (365). This theory and others like it operate on the basic assumption of resource scarcity, that there is a limited amount of social, political, and economic resources and that different groups must compete against each other for a share of these resources. For this reason the majority group in any society is always ‘threatened’ by minority groups in their quest for enhanced opportunity.

One facet of social dominance that the majority group often controls is language. In his work *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Politics of*
Language, Stephen May explores many issues I found pertinent to my research with Latinas. May argues that language discrimination is part and parcel of the injustice against minority groups enacted by the majority (19) and that, in order to better represent the interests of all citizens and promote political democracy the nation-state should accommodate minority languages and cultures, because doing so would encourage “ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic democracy” (17). The ultimate goal of ethnic minority groups who immigrate to a new country, contrary to popular belief, is to assimilate. They want to be accepted as full members of society without having to compromise their ethnicity; “[arguing] for a more plural and inclusive conception of national identity and culture which recognises their contribution to and influence on the historical and contemporary development of the host nation-state” (May, 2001: 86). This argument applies quite well to Latinos in the United States; they endeavor to assimilate into American culture and have access to all of the same rights and responsibilities as Anglo-Americans, including “the right to maintain one’s membership in a distinct culture, and to continue developing that culture in the same (impure) way that the members of majority culture are able to develop theirs” (May, 2001: 124).

For her Master’s thesis at the University of Cincinnati, Lea M. Webb (2000) utilized limited participant observation and open-ended interviews to explore some of the legal and social barriers that Mexican immigrant women face in rural Kentucky. Through the perspectives of feminist and critical legal scholarship, Webb explores the invisibility of immigrant women in the heartland, issues of “physical location and mis/identification,” and negotiations of personal autonomy (Webb, 2000: 4). From this
thesis I drew techniques of how to go about conducting qualitative research with marginalized women as well as examples from Webb’s work that supported my own findings (see Maria’s issues with the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, below). Webb points out the current lack of much scholarly work on Latinas in the Midwest, as well as legal scholarship’s shortcomings by not taking advantage of a qualitative approach since, she argues, the very nature of the practice of law is qualitative in many ways (Webb, 2000: 6). Webb placed her work in an activist context, another approach which I sought to emulate by, as she writes, “actively address[ing] women’s issues throughout the research process as well as afterward” (Webb, 2000: 9). This activist approach befits the anthropological context in which I am placing my work and the goals of the project that I have outlined. Other issues that Webb’s research brought to light and that also came up in my own research include service providers’ inattentiveness to immigrant women/Latinas, issues associated with motherhood, and the all too typical stereotypes that are attributed to immigrant women regardless of their actual life history or educational achievements.

**Hamilton, Ohio: A ‘New Ellis Island’**

Located in southwestern Ohio, Hamilton is the county seat of Butler County and has a population of a little over sixty thousand. The official census in 2000 documented the city as having a large white majority (88.9 percent) with little racial diversity (“Hamilton, Ohio”). The official percentage of those claiming Latino or Hispanic ethnicity in the last census was 2.6 percent of the population, roughly 1500 people (“Hamilton, Ohio”); however, civic leaders estimate that there are between four and five
thousand undocumented immigrants—many of them Latino—living in Hamilton, mostly on the East side in the city’s Fourth Ward, a historically poor, minority neighborhood (Smith, 2006: A1). Many attribute the influx of Latino immigrants over the past decade to Butler County’s unprecedented growth; the county’s population grew fourteen percent from 1990 to 2000 and was estimated to have grown another five percent from 2000 to 2005 (“Butler County, Ohio”). Butler County and the city of Hamilton particularly are growing because of their central location between the sprawling metropolitan centers of Cincinnati and Dayton (Smith, 2006: A1). The housing boom that is associated with this growth has attracted many Latino immigrants to the area, both documented and undocumented, to fill the positions on construction crews, a job traditionally held by Latino immigrants. In conjunction with the rise in Latino laborers comes an increase in Latino businesses, which cater particularly to members of their language group, including restaurants, grocery and convenience stores, barber shops, and car dealerships (“Carmen”).

This relatively sudden increase of Latinos in a historically white city has prompted a backlash against Latinos, who are often labeled as Mexican regardless of the person’s actual country of origin and automatically assumed to be illegal immigrants. This phenomenon mirrors the backlash that is taking place across the United States in places with profiles similar to Hamilton—traditionally white, rural, conservative areas—and is fueling the current immigration debate in politics. Nevertheless, there is one factor that makes Hamilton’s situation unique: Sheriff Richard K. Jones, elected to the position of Butler County Sheriff in January of 2005. Sheriff Jones has made illegal immigration
a key issue of the Sheriff’s office and has taken steps to enforce federal immigration law in Butler County with a focus on the city of Hamilton. His now infamous sign outside of the Butler County Jail reads “Illegal Immigrants Here” with an arrow pointing to the jail. Jones claims the sign was erected in the hopes of drawing attention from the federal government and to improve federal enforcement of immigration law in the area (Smith, 2006: A1); however, many argue that the large reflective sign only serves to enflame bigotry and discrimination against Latinos and is a ploy intended to help Sheriff Jones secure a legislative appointment when his term as Sheriff is finished.

In addition to ethnic tensions between Anglo-Americans and Latinos, class may also play a role in the treatment of Latinos in Hamilton. Hamilton is not a very wealthy city: the median household income in 1999 was $35,365, approximately 14 percent below the state average of $40,956; the median family income for Hamilton ($41,936) is approximately 17 percent below the state average ($50,046). Over 13 percent of the population was living below poverty level in 1999, versus 10.6 percent statewide; for families, the percentages were 10.6 versus 9.2 percent for Hamilton and Ohio, respectively. The lower median socioeconomic status of Hamiltonians may be due to their comparably lower levels of education: the percentage of high school graduates in Hamilton is 73.3 percent, with only 12.2 percent of the population holding Bachelor’s degrees. Statewide, 83 percent of the population are high school graduates and 21.1 percent hold Bachelor’s degrees (all statistics, “Hamilton, Ohio”). Both of these factors—lower income and less education—may contribute to a heightened competition
for resources and Anglo-American Hamiltonians feeling more threatened by the influx of Latinos to the area.

**A Representative Sample?**

In order to determine the anthropological significance of being Latina in Hamilton it was necessary for me to go straight to the source and talk to Latinas about their lives in Hamilton. I succeeded in setting up interviews with four women, all of whom work and/or live in Hamilton and are first generation immigrants. Though these women had some characteristics in common, they each had unique histories and experiences that set them apart from each other. Sadly, I do not believe that my sample was closely representative of the general Latina population of Hamilton, in that every woman I interviewed is in the United States legally, all of them have reliable jobs, three of the four speak English fluently, and at least two of the four have been to college. The women I spoke to are much better off than many Latinas in Hamilton, especially first generation immigrants; regardless, each of them still had stories of discrimination to share with me that belied their myriad qualifications and inherent value as intelligent, hard-working women.

Though I describe them as interviews, the meetings had an incredibly open format and rarely followed a question-and-answer pattern. I explained to each woman that I was conducting this research for my honors thesis and wanted to know what was important to her, what she wanted me to know about being a Latina in Hamilton. I acknowledged that the main focus of the paper would probably be discrimination (which turned from probable to definite as I conducted more interviews) but also listed some broad
discussion topics (such as language barriers, balancing work and family, and differences between Hamilton and other places she had lived) as themes that may or may not be salient to each woman but might lead her to a point she felt more strongly about. After my short introduction I rarely asked questions, except for brief requests for clarification or relevant questions that came to mind in relation to something she had said; I simply sat back and listened, often in sheer amazement and sometimes in horror, as the four women gave me an inside view into their lives as Latinas in Hamilton.

“Carmen”

The first woman I spoke with, I met Carmen at a locally organized Latino festival in Hamilton. She is a naturalized U.S. citizen who owns her own restaurant in Hamilton, which she runs with her husband. A native of the Dominican Republic, she lived in Boston before moving to Hamilton, where she has lived for the past three years with her husband and school-aged daughter. In Boston she worked in a restaurant, which gave her the experience necessary to open her own business in Hamilton. Carmen, though not completely fluent in English, speaks and understands English at a very advanced level. She speaks with an accent, as do all of the women I interviewed, but is far from difficult to understand. Our interview, which lasted approximately an hour and twenty minutes, took place at her restaurant after-hours. Carmen was eager to help me get my project underway and gave me the names of several women who might be willing to speak with me; one of these turned out to be the second woman I interviewed.
“Julia”

Julia, a native of Puerto Rico, is a U.S. citizen who lived in Miami for many years before moving to Hamilton five years ago. She works for a government agency located in Hamilton, where her bilingual abilities are an asset to her position. She is also a single mother with two school-aged daughters. Our interview took place at her office, which not only kept the interview shorter—about forty-five minutes—but also kept it on a more professional rather than personal level. Though we did discuss her experiences living in Hamilton an equal portion of the interview was devoted to the experiences of clients she has worked with and what she has learned from her job about discrimination toward Latinos in Hamilton.

“Alicia”

Alicia is a naturalized citizen who came from Mexico her senior year of college to work at a local amusement park and visit the United States; she was one semester short of her Bachelor’s degree in English education and thought it would be wise to visit the country whose native language she would be teaching. While here on her temporary visa she fell in love and married a local man, then started a family a few years later. Her situation is similar to Julia’s, in that she is now a single mother with two school-aged girls. Alicia works at a major local institution with strong ties to the Hamilton community. Our interview lasted over an hour and a half and covered everything from her first harrowing experience in the United States to her daily worries about her daughters and her seemingly mundane encounters with discrimination.
“Maria”

Maria is in some respects the ‘best off” of the women with whom I spoke, in spite of the fact that she is the only one who is not a U.S. citizen. She moved to Hamilton five years ago from Mexico to be with her American husband; she passed her citizenship test earlier this year but has yet to actually receive her “green card,” (the permanent work permit), let alone be granted her U.S. citizenship. The most educated of the women I interviewed, Maria had a Bachelor’s degree from a university in Mexico when she moved to Hamilton, attended Miami University to earn her Master’s degree, and now attends the University of Kentucky where she is earning her Ph.D. Maria has three grown children, all of whom were able to accompany her to the United States; her youngest is only twenty-one and is still living at home while he finishes college. Maria has had so many problems with discrimination in Hamilton that she has vowed to teach anywhere but Ohio after she graduates next spring; she explained that she has run into fewer problems and less racism in Kentucky while attending classes than she has living in Hamilton, which she considered incredibly hypocritical considering the number of jokes that Ohioans tend to tell about the “hicks” from Kentucky.

Evidence of Discrimination

Even before completing all of the interviews I began to realize that discrimination by Anglos against these women affected nearly every aspect of their daily lives outside of the home. Once I had spoken with all four women, however, I was able to separate the common agents of discrimination into five categories: government agencies, police, employers, businesses or services providers and fellow citizens or neighbors. Though not
all the women described examples of discrimination from every category, each category is supported by at least four examples from not less than two women.

Discrimination From Government Agencies

Carmen’s experiences with discrimination first came up not after a question about discrimination but when I asked her about the challenges involved in starting her own business. The building her restaurant now occupies was used as another restaurant and then a dry cleaning business before it came into her hands. Because of the change back to a restaurant there were several building and fire codes that had to be met before she could safely open the restaurant; however, as she tried to obtain the paperwork and make the necessary changes to meet these codes, she says she ran into several problems with the fire department, including refusal to explain procedures to her, refusal to grant permits, and a general unwillingness to treat her with respect or consideration. She told me, “I feel discrimination because my business has the name… a Spanish name, and we’re Spanish. But I’m a citizen too. And, when, after I say that—they help me.” This pattern repeated itself several times throughout the interview: if she felt discriminated against and actually called attention to the person’s behavior, not only did the blatant discrimination end but she was also treated better and the person/s went out of their way to accommodate her.

Another experience with government agencies that Carmen related to me correlated her ethnicity with another factor working against her, namely her class. Because she is running her own small business, which is her family’s sole source of income, money is tight in Carmen’s household. She explained to me that sometimes she
is unable to pay the utility bill for the restaurant every month in its entirety; when this happens, she must call the City of Hamilton utilities department office to work out a payment plan. At least one woman who answers the phone at this office has been incredibly rude to Carmen on more than one occasion, refusing to speak with her and calling out—with Carmen still on the line—for someone else in the office that speaks Spanish. Though Carmen is not fluent she speaks English quite well and is, in my experience, not terribly difficult to understand, even over the phone. Regardless, the woman acted in a very unprofessional matter; even if she does have problems understanding Carmen and other Spanish-speaking customers over the phone, there is no reason for her to treat them with the level of hostility that she has shown to Carmen. Carmen pointed out that there is now a woman working in the utilities office who is Puerto Rican (though I found out later that the city will not hire her directly and that she is only temporary); all calls from Spanish-speaking customers are now transferred to her and, according to Carmen, she is very helpful and kind.

Alicia also relayed some trouble she had with a government agency; in this instance, it was a clerk at the vehicle impounds office in Hamilton. Alicia, who often uses her established roots in Hamilton and her legal citizenship to help newer Mexican immigrants navigate the bureaucracies of Hamilton, accompanied an undocumented immigrant to the impounds office to help him get his vehicle out of impound. The man had been pulled over by a Butler County Sheriff and was driving without a license (which he cannot obtain because he is undocumented). Regardless of any further illegal driving the man may have engaged in, he had to get the vehicle out of impound to avoid the
accruing daily fines. When Alicia asked the clerk if they could pay the total amount of fines and remove the car from impound, the officer demanded that the owner of the vehicle show a valid driver’s license. Alicia explained that the man had no license—the reason the car was confiscated in the first place—and asked, if a valid driver’s license was needed to acquire the car, if she could use her license. The clerk claimed that, if she used her license to collect the vehicle, she would be liable for any future unlicensed driving the man might commit in the car and she would be subject to prosecution. When she asked him to show her this policy in writing or simply write down what he was telling her, the clerk very belligerently refused; instead, Alicia proceeded to write everything down, including the clerk’s name, and used her license to remove the undocumented man’s car from impound.

After telling me about this incident, Alicia explained that another undocumented acquaintance of hers had the same problem but, instead of asking her for help, brought an Anglo male friend of his to the impound office to collect the car. Alicia did not know whether they dealt with the same clerk, but the Anglo-American was not asked to provide a driver’s license to collect the car nor told he would be liable for his friend’s illegal driving thereafter.

Maria had the most to say about discrimination she has received from government agencies, which is all the more astonishing when one considers her level of education—she is far from the stereotypical underprivileged Mexican woman who speaks no English. She has more education than many of the people who mistreat her (as the earlier statistics on educational attainment in Hamilton showed) and is a very confident and assertive
woman; she explained that these qualities of hers make it very difficult for her to passively put up with the treatment she oftentimes receives but notes, “You just have to take it” if that person has something you need. For example, when she received her first temporary work authorization after living in Hamilton for four months, Maria applied at a temporary agency that required her to undergo a background check. Accompanied by her Anglo-American husband, she went to the Sheriff’s office to apply. While standing in line she heard the clerk asking those ahead of her for their driver’s license so, when she reached the front of the line, she presented her driver’s license. She related how the clerk took one look at her brown skin, dark hair, and dark eyes:

“And she said, ‘Are you an American citizen?’ ‘No, I am from Mexico.’ ‘Oh, okay, well, you have to show me your green card, or your naturalization certificate for obtaining a background check.’ ‘Well I don’t have my green card but I have here my passport with this seal.’ ‘Oh, that means nothing.’”

Maria protested that the seal from Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) had to mean something, since it proved she was here legally; also, green cards are nothing more than permanent work authorization forms, and Maria had a temporary work authorization form that was renewable on a yearly basis. When Maria’s husband, an American citizen, tried to interject the woman very rudely cut him off, claiming it was none of his business.

Because Maria’s work authorization must be renewed annually until she receives her green card—which she is eligible for and simply has not received yet because of the backlogged immigration system—she must also renew her driver’s license at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) on a yearly basis because being awarded a driver’s license is contingent upon her legal work status. She described to me the dread she now experiences every June when she must go to the BMV and take whatever abuse the clerks
there decide to mete out to her. This past June Maria’s husband was unable to accompany her to the BMV, which he usually does in the hopes that clerks will not discriminate against his wife quite as badly if her American husband is standing right beside her. When Maria’s turn came the clerk asked for her green card. Again, Maria does not have a green card because of the up to five year lag in our immigration system; instead, she showed her I-751 form, an official INS form that documents an immigrant’s legal status and eligibility for a green card, which can be used in lieu of a green card until a formal green card is issued. This clerk, however, was unwilling to accept the I-751 form and instead insisted that Maria return with her marriage license and her husband’s birth certificate as proof that she is married to an American citizen. Maria does not live terribly close to the BMV and had to drive another forty-five minutes round-trip to bring the clerk these documents.

Webb (2000: 37) documented the same difficulties faced by Latina immigrants in rural Kentucky, where she notes:

When a County Clerk is faced with such a customer (A customer who cannot show a green card but is a legal resident), s/he apparently has several options. 1) She can simply ask for a social security card and an original birth certificate, as a clerk located in a large, more urban area insisted. […] 2) She can call the Department of Transportation’s Help Desk. Or, 3) the Clerk can, apparently, refuse the immigrant’s request for an i.d. or driver’s license in the absence of a green card.

Webb tested this second option by calling the Department of Transportation’s Help Desk. The woman she spoke with “seemed to make up the answer” (Webb, 2000: 38), which Webb later tested and found to be useless and irrelevant. She also placed a call to the INS, since one clerk, who had refused to grant ID cards or driver’s licenses to Webb’s
informants, had suggested that the Latina try this route; the INS clerk insisted that their only responsibility is to help the BMV assess fraudulent documents and that the INS provides no list of alternative documents that could be used in lieu of a green card to prove legal residence (Webb, 2000: 38). Webb coins her own term “to describe the way that overlapping regulations empower administrators to turn immigrants away from basic legal means” (Webb, 2000: 39). She reasons that “If a legal worker/official can move a person away from the law by using the regulations of other branches/offices of government, she effectively de-ministers, rather than ad(to move closer)-ministers” (Webb, 2000: 39; author’s emphasis). This power of “de-ministration” is impossible to circumvent or criticize directly, since the de-ministrator is most often the only one with the power to give the immigrant her driver’s license or ID card and antagonizing the clerk would be incredibly counterproductive. Webb argues that “this exercise of discretion/de-ministration serves to remind immigrants of their lesser/suspect legal status, affect their mobility in extreme ways and deprive them of rights…” (2000: 39).

In another case of de-ministration, Maria described the exchange that took place between her and a clerk at the INS office when Maria was petitioning for her daughter’s permanent visa. Her daughter was already in the United States, legally, on a temporary visa, but the clerk informed Maria that her daughter would have to return to Mexico to await the processing of her permanent visa documents. When Maria asked why her daughter, who was already here legally, could not just stay in Ohio while she waited, the clerk, as Maria recalled, responded, “go and tell your government to keep all those Mexicans sneaking across the border. That is why you cannot have your visa right now.”
Maria continued, heatedly: “she said it like it was our fault…” Even if it is protocol for immigrants to return to their home countries while waiting for their visa paperwork to be processed (although Maria insisted it was not), there was no reason for the clerk to respond with such unadulterated spite.

Discrimination From the Police

Julia, Alicia, and Maria all described altercations with Butler County Sheriff’s (BCS) officers in which they felt they or their family members were being singled out because of their discernible Latina/o appearances: Julia says she has been pulled over twice for speeding after each BCS officer followed her for several blocks, although she says she does not speed and never had any problems while living in Miami; Maria described how her son was pulled over on a “bogus charge,” but really because he looks Mexican, and the officer tried to impound the car because, though it was registered in Maria’s name, her son was driving with a valid Mexican (instead of Ohio) driver’s license. They went to court, where the judge decided her son had committed no offense but urged him to obtain an Ohio driver’s license to avoid future problems. Alicia, however, told by far the most poignant accounts of discrimination by Butler County Sheriff’s officers.

The first incident Alicia related occurred one evening on her way home from work. She had stopped at a traffic light and a BCS officer turned from the side street and proceeded to drive ahead of her. The light changed a few moments later and Alicia drove behind the BCS officer for a couple of blocks, until the officer looked in his rearview mirror and, Alicia assumes, noticed her ‘brown’ complexion and dark hair. He changed
lanes and slowed down so that she would pass in front of him, and from this position he could clearly see her two bumper stickers that show her support and respect for Mexico and Mexican culture. Alicia told me how this BCS officer continued to follow her for several miles, out of Hamilton city limits and into a neighboring town, until he finally pulled her over after she had executed a routine traffic maneuver—changing lanes so as to avoid slowing down needlessly when the car in front of her signaled an upcoming turn. The BCS officer claimed that Alicia had not had sufficient room to change lanes and had almost caused an accident, though Alicia does not remember any other cars on that particular stretch of road at the time and insists that she was not tailgating the other vehicle or committing any other unsafe driving practices. Alicia told me how the officer asked her for her “papers,” a practice I later corroborated with Maria, and how she showed him her driver’s license, registration, and proof of insurance. Her proof of insurance was not a typical insurance card because, she explained, “I had had some problems with the insurance company,” and the document she showed the BCS officer listed her employer, an institution with considerable clout in Hamilton. Alicia said that when the BCS officer came to this document he suddenly told her that she was free to go, handed back her papers and license, and returned to his car. One is inclined to wonder whether her affiliation with this prominent institution was enough to convince the BCS officer that she was too educated, connected, or aware of her rights to be easily taken advantage of.

The second experience Alicia described seemed to have a greater affect on her, namely because her two daughters were with her at the time. On this occasion Alicia had
pulled out from the street on which she lives onto the next street as a BCS officer was traveling the opposite way. As she headed toward the local gas station to fill her tank the BCS officer executed a U-turn in the middle of the road and began to follow her. Alicia stopped to get gas and the BCS officer pulled into the lot of an abandoned building next door, watching her the whole time. Alicia finished pumping her gas and entered the mini-mart to pay and to buy her daughter a drink. The BCS officer entered the store moments after she did and, while her daughter was busy getting a lid for her drink at the fountain station, Alicia said the BCS officer “doesn’t take his eyes off me, I mean he’s just watching me like a hawk, like he was looking for me.” Alicia explained that sometimes in these types of situations—when she feels she is being targeted because she is Mexican—she grows bold and refuses to allow herself to feel marginalized. So she returned the BCS officer’s stare: “I looked at him like, ‘I have nothing to hide, why are you looking at me?’ I mean, I didn’t say anything but I just looked at him.” At that moment, Alicia’s daughter returned to the front of the store and said “Mommy, Mommy, I got the lid.” Alicia said that when the officer heard her daughter speak to her in English he turned around and left the store immediately. Alicia can think of no other reason for the BCS officer to have suddenly left; when he heard her daughter, who looks more like her Anglo father than her Mexican mother, speak unaccented English to Alicia, he may have assumed that she could not be “illegal” because her daughter was obviously American.

I have focused here on altercations between my informants and Butler County Sheriff’s officers not only because the majority of the women’s experiences were with
BCS officers, as opposed to other police force officers, but also because I believe the actions of the BCS officers directly reflects the anti-immigrant (and, more specifically, anti-Mexican or Latino immigrant) stance taken by Sheriff Richard Jones. To be sure, the women I spoke with had no kind words for Sheriff Jones; one insisted that he “makes it worse every time he opens his mouth;” another expounded the argument that he was simply using his current position to try to edge his way into a legislative office, citing his recent interview with an editor from *The Hamilton Journal-News* as evidence, in which Jones said, “I’m having an awful lot of fun being the sheriff… In a legislative group, how well would I do?” (Gnau, 2006).

There was, however, one incident when City of Hamilton Police officers were the perpetrators of discriminatory behavior. Maria, who in the past was often plagued by problems with her racist neighbors (which will be documented in more detail in a forthcoming section), had called the Hamilton Police after her neighbor had committed an act of vandalism on her property. While the police were on the front porch taking Maria and her husband’s statements her neighbor, across the street on his own front porch, shouted, according to Maria and her husband, “I’m going to get my f---ing shotgun and kill all these Mexicans,” at which point the female police officer of the group looked at Maria and icily told her to go back inside and stop provoking the man. Maria had neither said nor done anything to provoke her neighbor; worse, the police witnessed this ethnic intimidation and chose to ignore it entirely, neglecting to even go across street and do something as simple as asking the man to stop shouting at his neighbors. Maria was incredibly frustrated by this event and was incredulous that the police could observe
this type of illegal, threatening behavior and have the audacity to insinuate that she was to blame for its initiation. She noted that of all the Hamilton City Police officers she has dealt with only one has treated her with any considerable amount of consideration; this officer is black and, one could assume, has probably been the recipient of racist behavior at some point in his own life. But it is shameful to think that the only police officers who are capable of upholding the law in such a case must themselves be members of a minority group.

**Discrimination From Employers**

Discrimination from potential or actual employers came up during each interview (save Carmen’s, since she is self-employed) as a particular sore spot. Julia pointed out that she is the only Latina who is permanently employed in her building; there is another Latina who works in another department but she has been employed through a temporary agency and, according to Julia, she will not be hired permanently, regardless of the immense contribution her bilingual skills bring to the department. Julia wondered aloud why it should be that in a city where Latinos are said to be a significant portion of the population that more are not hired in positions such as hers, where speaking Spanish is essential to the performance of one’s job.

Maria expressed extreme frustration when she related to me the story of her job hunt. For the first four months that she lived in Ohio, Maria was not in possession of a legal work authorization but she needed to work to support herself; therefore, she worked ‘under the table’ in fields like construction and factory work until she received her work authorization. As soon as she received this document she was eager to apply for more
skilled jobs that would allow her to utilize the Bachelor’s degree she had earned in Mexico. However, though she applied for several positions for which she was more than qualified, such as translator, human resources coordinator for Spanish-speaking populations, etc., she was continually passed over for these positions. In the mean time she had enrolled at a temporary staffing agency so that she had some source of legal income, but the dead-end factory jobs were always terminated just short of the three-month hire-in deadline, as is typical for businesses that employ temporary workers.

One morning, after she had been terminated from yet another temporary job, Maria saw a help wanted sign outside of a reasonably respectable motel which stated that a position was available for the front desk. Maria entered the motel and asked the woman at the front desk for an application for the job that was announced outside; the woman took several moments to finish typing whatever she was working on, looked up at Maria, and said that there were no openings available for housekeeping. “No, I’m not applying for housekeeping, I’m applying for the front desk,” Maria said. The woman responded, “But you are Mexican, right?” Maria affirmed that she was indeed Mexican and asked again for an application for the front desk position. The motel, she noted wryly, never called her back.

Appallingly, Maria’s example of blatant racist stereotypes being applied to her was far from the most egregious example of employer discrimination I encountered during my research. Alicia’s story of her first job in the United States—indeed, the reason she even came to the United States in the first place—left me speechless. A local amusement park had recruited college students from Mexico to come to Ohio to work for
the summer; this, in and of itself, is not unusual. Alicia came with forty-three other Mexican students who were mistreated from the moment they arrived at the amusement park. First, the students had been told that the park was located in Cincinnati—which it was not—but were never provided with an address; their parents had no idea where exactly their children were until they were allowed to send their first letters back home. The students had been promised that they would live comfortably with two people per room; instead, they were housed four to a room, and provided with cots measuring less than five feet to sleep on, one pillow, and one blanket. Though Alicia did not explicitly state whether the small building—which now, she says, serves as an administrative office—was air conditioned, she did mention that the students were “freezing” and that the one blanket was not enough. The dorm building had four bathrooms, two per gender; and one small kitchen with one refrigerator, which Alicia explained was not nearly large enough for all forty-four students to keep perishable food items. However, they were rarely given access to food other than that served to customers at the amusement park (far from any sort of balanced diet), since they had no form of transportation and, consequently, no reliable way of getting to a grocery store. The students worked six days per week and twelve hour shifts were not uncommon; they were provided no form of health insurance (or even allowed time off if they were sick, let alone access to medical care), had their paychecks docked for all of their living expenses (the students took very little money home; Alicia says they were paid $2.80 an hour), and were denied the summer bonus that Alicia remembers the Anglo-American workers receiving. As Alicia put it, “we had to fend for ourselves, we didn’t know where to go.”
As if the poor living conditions did not make the experience bad enough, the owners of the park increasingly abused the students as the summer wore on. First, when the students began writing of their dismal conditions to their parents back in Mexico, Alicia says the owners withheld the students’ mail that their parents sent in reply. Meanwhile, some of the Mexican students had managed to befriend not only their Anglo co-workers but also some of the members of church groups that routinely held picnics at the park. When members of one of the church groups learned what was going on they called on a local news team to investigate. According to Alicia, the owners of the park paid one of the Mexican students to give a false interview to the reporters, telling them things like, ‘we are one big family’ and ‘the owners treat us very well.’ Alicia recalled how she entered the dorm building in the middle of this interview, looked at the boy and told him, “Don’t lie like that,” at which point the reporter came to get Alicia’s version of their treatment instead. The next day, after the owners of the park found out what had happened, they entered the dorm building, searched the students’ baggage, and seized all of their passports and visas. Alicia explained:

“From that day, they didn’t allow the Americans to talk to the Mexicans… they didn’t allow anybody to go up to our rooms anymore, or talk to us. […] And they told us, if you keep saying things like that or doing things like that [telling the reporters what was going on] we’re going to deport you and said, you know, say that you are not doing your job right and you’re never going to be allowed to come back here even if you wanted to. So we were scared.”

After some length of time had passed (Alicia did not clarify how long), another news crew came to see if conditions had improved. The student they interviewed told the truth and Alicia assumes that the reporters succeeded in putting a considerable amount of pressure on the owners of the park, because the next day all of the students’ visas and
passports were returned to them. At this point most of the students quit and returned home to Mexico; Alicia was one of four students who stayed and, she explained, she did not leave because she had fallen in love with an American coworker and stayed to be with him.

When I asked if the owner of the park was ever punished for his abuse of the Mexican students, she told me that she and the other three who had stayed tried to sue him, but “they said we didn’t have enough evidence of anything, and he was—the owner was friends with somebody, somebody, I don’t know. And, so, they couldn’t do anything.” And, as if this lack of justice were not enough: “The manager told us that the next year they were gonna get French students, so they can do the same thing again! We were like, you got to be kidding!” This incident took place more than fifteen years ago, in the early 1990s, which could perhaps be used as justification for the students’ shockingly low wages: the minimum wage in 1990 was $3.80. It may be that Alicia and her Mexican co-workers were actually paid the minimum wage of $3.80, as opposed to the $2.80 that she recalled; then again, the park may have taken advantage of the students’ immigrant status in order to pay substandard wages. Nevertheless, the type of discriminatory behavior, including intimidation, isolation from Anglo-American peers, and negligence toward the students’ general well-being are unacceptable no matter the decade in which they occurred.

Discrimination From Businesses

Each of the four women I spoke with, when asked about their experiences with discrimination, readily came up with examples of businesses that failed to provide the
same services to them, or to women they knew, as they provided to Anglo-Americans.

Carmen told me of the time she entered a local bank to discuss her business’ finances
with a bank officer. She sat at the table provided for just this reason and waited. Not one
teller acknowledged her presence; no one asked her what she needed, or if they might
help her. After fifteen or twenty minutes an Anglo man entered the bank; he was
immediately greeted by at least one teller and served promptly. Carmen grew quite angry
at this blatant inequity and demanded to know why she had been ignored by the bank
staff when they obviously had time to greet the Anglo-American man. As soon as she
denounced their behavior as unethical and discriminatory the bank staff immediately tried
to calm Carmen and make excuses for their behavior.

Julia, Alicia, and Maria all related incidents that happened to someone they knew:
Julia told of the woman whose apartment manager gave her only three days notice to
leave the premises (and cited her noisy children as the reason for her eviction), when the
law requires at least thirty days notice; Alicia spoke of an acquaintance of hers who, after
signing a contract with the owner of a rental hall for her daughter’s quince party, had to
find another space for the party when the owner broke the contract and demanded more
money because she was a “dirty Mexican” who would damage the property; Maria
explained that when her daughter delivered her first baby at Fort Hamilton Hospital she
was forced to retain the services of the one Latino obstetrician at the hospital because “all
the Hispanic women have to go with him.”
Discrimination From Fellow Citizens

As long as there are differences between groups of people there will be discrimination based on these differences, whether based on race or ethnicity, class, language, or any of the other myriad characteristics people use to discriminate against others. Nevertheless, one might hope that with the increase of the ‘global community’ and cultural awareness that some of this hateful behavior might disappear, but the experiences of Alicia and Maria make clear that any rise in cultural acceptance has not quite reached Hamilton, Ohio.

Alicia first related a specific incident in a grocery store, where a perfect stranger told her: “I feel sorry for you.” When Alicia asked why, the woman replied, “Because I know how you guys cross, and how you come to this country.” The exchange continued:

And I said, “How do you cross, how do we cross, I don’t understand.” “Well by the river!” And I said, “Oh no ma’am, I didn’t cross through the river.” And she said “Well how did you come?” And I said “Well, by plane.” She’s like, “No, no, none of you come by plane.” And so I knew what the message was.

In addition to this particular episode Alicia described how, on any given day in a public place, white women will clutch their purses tightly when they see her, or will give her dirty looks. On one occasion, when her first daughter was a baby, an older woman approached her, again in the grocery store, and asked Alicia if she wanted to give her infant daughter to her, because she knew how “you Mexicans give your babies away.” Alicia had to threaten to call the police before the woman would leave her alone.
Maria has had incredible trouble with her neighbors since she moved to Hamilton; she actually has a file folder filled with police reports with titles like “Breaking and Entering,” “Criminal Damages,” and “Ethnic Intimidation.” In the aforementioned incident detailed in the section “Discrimination From Police,” where her neighbor shouted threatening remarks directed at Mexicans, the police had been called to the house because this same neighbor had climbed onto Maria’s porch roof so that he could tear down the Mexican flag she had raised in honor of the Mexican Independence Day. Though she had intentionally flown the flag below an American flag, so as to try not to offend this neighbor, he still felt threatened enough to vandalize her property. Neighbors broke Maria’s car windows the day she brought it home from the lot; it was common for her to hear comments like “there goes the neighborhood” and “go back where you came from” shouted by neighbors on any given day she set foot outside her house. The worst offending neighbor has, for the most part, ceased his racist behavior, but only because Maria was given an opportunity to confront him when he asked a favor of her—to not file criminal charges against his sixteen year-old son for assorted illegal acts against her and other neighbors. When Maria had the upper hand she was able to make her neighbor listen to her conditions: to stay away from her property, to stop shouting denigrating remarks at her, and to basically leave her in peace. Fortunately, her neighbor has thus far complied with these requests, even though she proceeded to press charges against his son.
Other Issues Faced by Latinas in Hamilton

Though discrimination quickly became the main focus of this research project, the women I spoke with also brought up other issues that they felt had a significant impact on their lives as Latinas in Hamilton. These additional concerns included the difficulties associated with taking pride in one’s national culture and language while living in the United States; the anxieties associated with motherhood and raising a child in a new culture; and the challenges that undocumented Latinas/os face in America’s increasingly xenophobic society.

With immigration from Mexico taking center stage in the national debate on immigration, many Anglo-Americans assume that every brown-skinned person who speaks Spanish is Mexican. Carmen is Dominican and tends to embrace her identity as “Spanish” and, while she did not have stories to share of Anglos assuming *she* was Mexican, she explained some of the problems her daughter faces at school when classmates tease her and say that she is a “fat-lipped Mexican.” Carmen took on the voice of her daughter in a frustrated litany that has become all too common in her household: “Mommy, they think I’m Mexican but I’m not Mexican, Mommy! I’m born *here*, and I have half Costa Rican half Dominican!” Embracing and defending her American citizenship is very important to Carmen, who often stressed that her “Spanish” heritage did not make her citizenship any less valid. Her daughter was born in the United States and Carmen seems to have imparted to her the value of defending one’s rights as a U.S. citizen while keeping hold of one’s identity as Spanish or Latina.
Unlike Carmen’s daughter, with both parents being Latino, Alicia’s two daughters have an Anglo-American father. She expressed her regret now at not having raised the girls to be bilingual; their father insisted that she not speak to them in Spanish because he could not understand what Alicia was telling them. Though her girls can understand most of Alicia’s spoken Spanish they cannot read or write Spanish, nor are either of them fluent. Alicia explained that her older daughter used to be somewhat fluent but, when she started school at age five, the other children made fun of her for speaking Spanish and so she stopped altogether. And though she has been in the United States for close to twenty years and speaks English fluently, Alicia still faces insecurities about her language capabilities. Because Spanish is her native language she speaks English with an accent that she claims is “horrible” but, in my opinion, is noticeable but in no way hinders her ability to communicate clearly. However, whenever she consciously tries to eliminate her accent (which she says she sometimes does if the person she is speaking with makes her feel self-conscious), she actually finds that her accent thickens and she stumbles over her words. She expressed her dismay at the ever-growing anti-Spanish language sentiments in this area, saying, “If you, by any reason, all of a sudden you have to be in a different country where you don’t know the language and... you don’t know anybody. I mean, wouldn’t you like people to treat you like a human being and try to help you?” Luckily for Alicia she never faced this problem of not knowing English, but she must still actively break down barriers that some people tend to erect the moment they hear her Mexican accent.
Maria, also fluent in English, has an intense pride in her country of origin and her native language, which she has endeavored to pass on to her children: “We don’t have to be ashamed of being from Mexico. I am very proud of being Mexican. And my kids, I have taught them not to hide that, why you have to hide—you don’t have to hide—you have the right even to speak your own language.” Yet language rights are often contested in the U.S. and the growth of movements like the English Only movement attest to this. In his book *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Politics of Language* Stephen May argues that “a greater accommodation of minority languages and cultures within the nation-state provides a more just representation of the (at times differing) interests of all its citizens” (2001: 17). The growing backlash against accommodation of Spanish-speaking persons supports May’s contention that “criticisms of minority languages almost always occur within a wider critique and/or dismissal of the particular ethnic affiliations of their speakers” (May, 2001: 19). Because ‘Mexicans’ (the nationality most often assigned to any brown-skinned Latino) are currently being used as political and social scapegoats for many of our nation’s problems the use of the Spanish language in public spaces is criticized. Yet even if they were not currently at the heart of a heated national debate on immigration, Latinos would most likely still be discriminated against simply because their culture is marked as different from mainstream U.S. culture:

> The nation-state, as it has come to be constructed, *creates* sociological minorities by establishing a civic language and culture that is largely limited to, and representative of, the dominant ethnie…. Minorities are, in turn, denied legitimate rights to their *existing* language and cultural traditions where these differ from those of the dominant ethnie (May, 2001: 92, author’s emphasis).
Another key point that all four women touched upon to a greater or lesser degree is the difficulties associated with motherhood and raising one’s child(ren) in a culture that is so different from the one in which she was raised. Carmen, because she owns her own business, focused primarily on the fact that she cannot spend as much time with her daughter as she would like. Her restaurant requires her to work ten hours a day, seven days a week, in addition to bookkeeping and other paperwork that she often takes home with her. She explained that her daughter sometimes tells her that she misses “the old days” in Boston, when her mother was home more often. Carmen elaborated, though, that their decision to move from Boston to Hamilton had a lot to do with her daughter: “we think it’s better for my daughter to grow up here; you know, in Boston we lived in an apartment, my daughter never had… like, we have a backyard, more space to play, it’s different, and it’s more quiet than the city.” But she sometimes worries about the racist attitudes her daughter must deal with here in Hamilton, whereas in Boston, Carmen said, people in general were more accepting of the established Latino community. Alicia is also acutely aware of the stigma placed upon her daughters because their mother is Mexican: “Sometimes I feel bad and I ask them… are you ashamed of your mommy? [They respond] ‘Oh no, we’re so proud of you,’ and that makes me feel so good. And then I said, well do you care they call you like this? ‘No, I don’t care,’ you know, and I hope she really is telling me the truth.” Though Alicia is proud of her Mexican heritage and culture and tries to pass her values on to her girls, she realizes the tension created by this multicultural approach to life in Hamilton. She went on to explain,

For me, being a mother here, it’s so hard because I didn’t know how to bring them up. Do I bring them with my values and with my Mexican knowledge,
or do I bring them as an American, with no knowledge of my culture. Because I don’t want them to be eaten up, I don’t want them to be made fun of, I don’t want them to… to take that as a weakness because a lot of people see that as a weakness.

Though Julia did not speak much of her personal life during her interview her concern for her daughters was quite evident when she described the anti-Latino sentiments that have been escalating in Hamilton, particularly since Sheriff Jones took office. If she were pulled over by a Butler County Sheriff’s officer and asked to prove her American citizenship, she may not have enough documentation on her person to convince the officer that she is indeed an American citizen. And if she were taken to jail, she posited, as this has become the Sheriff’s newest way of dealing with unwanted immigration, who would look after her daughters while the misunderstanding was cleared? Maria imagined a similar scenario should she get caught up in one of the Sheriff’s “Mexican round-ups,” as she called them: “At the end I’m going to get out, because I’m legal; but why I have to pass all these… ‘not happy moments’? Why?” Maria was indignant at the thought of being picked up by a member of the Sheriff’s office and being held—illegally—because of the color of her skin and the way she speaks. I assume that this has become a common fear among Latinas, because Alicia too expressed these same concerns, of being picked up and held based on her Latina appearance, and the worry of her daughters’ welfare.

The four women I spoke with are in a more secure position than many Latinas in Hamilton because, with the exception of Maria, they are all legal U.S. citizens; Maria is a legal resident, has actually passed her citizenship test, and is simply waiting for the INS to process her case. In comparison to the population of Latinos who are undocumented,
these women have everything, and each one of them had a kind word for undocumented immigrants and the sometimes brutal injustices they face in the United States. First of all, Julia, Alicia, and Maria all pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, undocumented immigrants do pay taxes—both sales tax and, if they are working with a false social security number, income tax. Also, Julia explained that undocumented immigrants do not receive tax refunds and Maria pointed out that those working with false social security numbers will never be able to collect the social security benefits they paid into; therefore, not only are the immigrants paying the same taxes as the rest of working-class America, they are not even receiving the benefits that the rest of us take for granted. Alicia pointed out that most undocumented immigrants are too fearful of deportation to access even the most basic social services that their taxes pay for, such as going to the hospital or even a free clinic in case of an emergency. (Ironically, Carmen pointed out that the only free clinic in Hamilton has essentially closed its doors and now only provides immunizations a couple of days a week.) Each of them wanted to know, where does all that money go? If the government is collecting these people’s money in the form of taxes and they are not receiving the benefits these taxes pay for, what happens to that money? Maria told me that, in her opinion, this is the real reason why many conservative legislators are against any kind of comprehensive immigration reform that would make it easier to obtain citizenship: the government makes too much money off of undocumented workers. Maria and Alicia, the two Mexicanas out of the four, brought up similar points in their respective interviews; in Maria’s words,

“You know what? Have you ever asked, how many United States citizens live in Mexico? Go check. Several million, too. But you know the
difference? People who come here come here to *produce*. They come here to *work*. People that are living there [in Mexico], most of them are people that, because they are old, or they are veterans from some war, they don’t produce anything. So let’s do something—let’s do our thing, you send the Mexican citizens—we send you your citizens, and let’s see what government has to pay more.”

Alicia was not quite this forceful in her critique of Americans’ view of Mexicans, but she did point out that many Americans benefit from moving to Mexico because the American dollar can buy them much more in Mexico than it can buy in the U.S. She also tried to make me understand, as a privileged Anglo-American citizen, the difficult situations in which undocumented immigrants often find themselves:

“Believe it or not, it’s not like the people want to be illegal; they want to be legal, but it’s so hard to get legal, it is so very hard and it costs way too much, more money, to become legal than come illegal. And that’s why, they, you know, even though it is so expensive and they can lose—they are risking to lose their lives, but they know that they have more possibilities to get over here being illegal than legal…. *It is because they want their families to have a life, to go to the doctor, to have food on the table, and that’s why they are coming over here*” (emphasis added).

**Possible Solutions**

Though documenting and bringing to light the discrimination faced by Latinas in Hamilton is a step in the right direction, it is not enough in and of itself to improve conditions for these four women and the many others like them. Therefore, I would like to present an assortment of proposals my informants had for ameliorating the adverse circumstances for Latinas in Hamilton. For my part, I would like to get their ideas to people that may have the power to turn them into realities, such as faculty at Miami University’s Hamilton campus.
Carmen was full of suggestions for making Hamilton a more accommodating place for Latinos, including the re-opening of the free clinic to aide the all of the working poor, including both documented and undocumented Latinos in Hamilton; extended after-school homework assistance programs that would be especially beneficial to the children of Latino immigrants with limited English proficiency; and the establishment of a Latino community center. Carmen spoke at length about how difficult it is for her to access health care now that the free clinic has closed because the only other place to go for medical attention is the Fort Hamilton Hospital, where even if you can afford to pay for services rendered you must often have a prescription or doctor’s recommendation for procedures like diagnostic tests—which the clinic used to provide. And Alicia noted that many undocumented immigrants refuse to go the hospital, even in an emergency situation, because they are afraid that someone will discover their undocumented status and they will be deported. Re-opening the free clinic might also serve as a community-building experience: if neighbors, regardless of their ethnicity, share the same resources in times of illness it may help them to look past their differences and focus on what they have in common, such their socioeconomic status and need for the free clinic.

Though lack of funding will probably keep her first idea from becoming a reality, Carmen’s next suggestion for an after-school program that focuses exclusively on homework help is far from unachievable. Carmen pointed out that, though there are a few after-school programs available for Hamilton students, they often are only a couple of hours long and do not provide adequate time for children
to always finish their homework in the time allotted—often no more than an hour, with play scheduled for the remainder of the time. If the parents of these children do not speak or read English the child cannot receive much help with assignments at home; also, many working-class parents must work later than when the after-school programs send their children home. She stressed the need for a program which focuses exclusively on homework and lasts at least two or three hours so that if a child has some sort of project other than daily homework assignments to complete he can get the assistance he needs from someone who has both the time and tools essential to help the child succeed. This type of program would be very inexpensive to implement, particularly if arranged through Miami University as a service-learning project, and would benefit all of the children who participated.

Carmen’s final suggestion, for the founding of a Latino community center, is based on the idea of the services she had access to when she lived in Boston. The building housed a number of vital resources for Latinos, including English classes, computer training, legal aid, drug prevention programs and after-school programs for students, and child care was provided free of charge for parents who could not afford to pay a babysitter while they attended a class. Carmen stressed the importance of the actual building, with the words Centro Latino prominently displayed across the front of the structure. I concluded that Carmen felt that this physical space, specifically designated for use by Latinos, might serve as a beacon for members of the community that feel they have nowhere to turn for help and would be a source of pride and confidence for Latinos. By increasing group solidarity the Latino
community might be able to better petition for equitable treatment and justice from all of the agencies I have focused on above. Again, funding issues would probably be the greatest obstacle to overcome when trying to achieve this goal, but it is still not an insurmountable barrier.

Maria suggested two simple means of improving the lives of undocumented Latinos: first, she said they should be allowed to become legal citizens, which she clearly differentiated from amnesty, saying “They are not criminals. Amnesty is when you ask for forgiveness for a crime; they are not criminals, they are workers without papers, undocumented workers.” If it were easier to become an American citizen, she assured me, most of the undocumented workers would gladly become ‘legal.’ Second, she stressed the importance of educational programs, such as the “Dream Act” available in a few states on the west coast, that allow undocumented high school students to become eligible to attend a public university and apply for loans so that they can afford tuition. “No grants, no scholarships, but loans,” she emphasized, money that would be paid back, not a hand out. If the student is capable of earning a college degree and is given the opportunity to do so, the loan could be considered an investment in society; a highly educated society is considered more valuable than an uneducated society, so why should we not give those capable of achieving a higher education ample opportunity to do so? The Hamilton branch of Miami University accepts all prospective students, regardless of their academic history, so long as they are U.S. citizens. But if Miami Hamilton was able to
participate in a “Dream Act,” how many Hamilton Latinos would be given the tools to make a better life for themselves that they otherwise could not have?

Discrimination against Latinas in Hamilton is real, and it is a growing problem. As our neighbors, these women deserve the same respect and rights as any other U.S. citizen, yet they are consistently denied equal treatment—both under the law and by their peers. The first step in combating this discrimination is to acknowledge its presence, which I have endeavored to do here; the experiences of Carmen and Maria demonstrate that calling attention to discrimination often goes a long way toward its cessation. The next step is to listen to the suggestions that these women and the Latino population in general have to offer and to work together to help strengthen both the Latino and the greater Hamilton communities. It was my intention, when I began this project, to make my findings available to social service administrators for Butler County and the city of Hamilton; however, this may not be the best way for me to advocate positive changes for Latinas in Hamilton—Miami University may be a more accessible institution for me to present my findings and recommendations. By working with the appropriate faculty at Miami Hamilton, such as Dr. Daniel Hall, Dean of the Hamilton Campus, or Dr. Sree Subedi, Social Science Coordinator, I hope be able to help put the ideas that my informants shared with me into action. As a member of the Hamilton community I believe that Miami University has a responsibility, and the ability, to help ameliorate the discrimination currently faced by Latinas in their community and that this goal should be undertaken with all due speed.
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