
Hispanic Community Types and Assimilation in Mex-America*

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I argue that discrepancies among Hispanic assimilation models can be interpreted through three distinct types of Hispanic communities—continuous, discontinuous, and new. Continuous communities were founded by Hispanics and Hispanics have *always* been the majority population. As a result, Hispanics have not assimilated as predicted by traditional models. Discontinuous communities were originally settled by Hispanics, but eventually were filled by a minority population. Since WWII, many of these communities have experienced a Hispanic demographic resurgence making assimilation more problematic. Hispanics in new communities are recent immigrants to Anglo dominant communities and are more apt to follow the traditional assimilation model. **Key Words:** assimilation, Hispanic, community type, Mex-America.

Introduction

As a third generation Ukrainian-American I conform to the traditional model of assimilation. My immigrant grandparents spoke mostly Ukrainian on their North Dakota farm; my father learned English in a one-room schoolhouse on the prairie, but also speaks Ukrainian; and I was educated entirely in English and speak no Ukrainian. Furthermore, I do not belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, did not marry a Ukrainian, do not prepare Ukrainian foods, do not listen to Ukrainian music—nor do I have the faintest idea how to make colorful Ukrainian Easter eggs.

In the language of assimilation theory, my family is said to have both structurally and culturally assimilated. Not all immigrant families share my experience. Native Americans were not immigrants and were not readily accepted by the dominant Anglo society. African Americans did not voluntarily migrate to the U.S. and, like Native Americans, their different physical characteristics inhibited structural assimilation. Another group that has not followed the traditional assimilation model is Hispanics, especially in Mex-America (a term used by Garreau (1981) and his colleagues to describe that part of the U.S. where Mexican-Americans still greatly influence society).

This study divides Hispanic communities into three historical types and then investigates the contemporary differences in Hispanic assimilation rates in the three communities. Assimila-

tion is generally thought to be the process by which an immigrant minority group comes to resemble, in a variety of dimensions, some larger society of which it is a part (Massey and Mullan 1984). The most widely cited model of assimilation is from Gordon (1964) who assumed an unbalanced assimilation process in which a minority group, such as Hispanics, would eventually be completely absorbed into the “host” Anglo society. Gordon understood the complexity of the assimilation process and divided it into seven stages. The first stage is cultural assimilation whereby the minority group absorbs the language and cultural practices of the host society. The second stage is structural assimilation whereby the minority group enters large society, primary level interaction with the host society such as cliques, clubs, and institutions. Once structural assimilation occurs, all other stages of assimilation will follow—marital, identificational, behavioral/receptional, attitudinal/receptional, and civic (Williams and Ortega 1990).

The large number and historic concentration of Hispanics in Mex-America—Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas—means that most assimilation research on Hispanics is focused there. Most geographers and sociologists generally concentrate on urban level, *spatial assimilation* studies (Massey and Mullen 1984; Kears and Murguía 1985; Clark and Mueller 1988; de la Garza et al. 1991; Allen and Turner 1996). This body of research assumes that Hispanics are an immigrant minority population and employs Gordon’s model, but

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adds a spatial component. It is argued that minority relocation into Anglo neighborhoods and the subsequent increase in primary level contact is a necessary pre-condition to structural assimilation. The underlying assumption is that increasing levels of Hispanic education, income, and occupational mobility leads to the movement of Hispanics into Anglo neighborhoods, thereby increasing Anglo-Hispanic interaction and facilitating Hispanic assimilation.

Other studies (Almaguer 1971; Blauner 1972; Moore 1972; Murguía 1989) present an alternative model that recognizes the historical primacy of Hispanics in Mex-America. The *colonial model* argues that because Hispanic settlement in Mex-America predates the arrival of Anglos, they are not an immigrant population, but a conquered people who do not conform to the immigrant group hypothesis. This model posits that rather than absorbing Anglo culture, Hispanics maintain their cultural identity. After the U.S. annexed the northern half of Mexico, Anglo immigration increased, and by 1900 many Mex-American communities had become a majority Anglo. After 1900, Hispanic immigration began to rise, and by 1990 some communities again became majority Hispanic. The colonial model argues that increasing Hispanic proportions initiated a revival of Hispanic culture, language, and ethnic pride—heroes of the past were resurrected, old holidays reinvigorated, history reinterpreted, and landscapes given new meaning. This revival is projected to culminate with Hispanics re-establishing economic, social, and political control of society and space.

Neither the spatial assimilation nor the colonial model, however, explains the existence of Hispanic homelands. Mex-America has been subdivided into the (1) “Hispano Homeland” in northern New Mexico (Nostrand 1970; Carlson 1990), and; (2) the “Texas-Mexican” homeland in south Texas (Arreola 1993b). Several unique historical circumstances contributed to a lack of Hispanic assimilation in these homelands, even 140 years after their incorporation into the United States. For, although the U.S. annexed the homelands, Hispanic cultural and demographic dominance of society and space has been maintained and Hispanic assimilation is weak.

Research on ethnic assimilation at a regional level facilitates our understanding of the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. How, for example, does Hispanic assimilation in

Anglo dominant communities compare with those in the homelands? Arreola (1993a, 1993b) has shown that there is substantial ethnic variation among Hispanics in Mex-America and that research on a subregional level is necessary to understand Hispanic assimilation. Furthermore, the three types of communities presented here, and the different levels of Hispanic assimilation, can help scholars and policymakers understand why California is successful at implementing legislation that denies services to illegal aliens (Proposition 187) and restricts the use of Spanish (English only), whereas states with continuous communities like Texas and New Mexico have not seriously considered such legislation.

Three Hispanic Community Types?

I hope to inform the debate on Hispanic assimilation by arguing that there are three distinct types of Hispanic communities in the West—continuous, discontinuous, and new—that can be linked to the three models described above: continuous communities correspond to the homelands; discontinuous communities to the colonial model; and new communities to Gordon’s model. Figure 1 presents the geography of the communities. Table 1 presents the data used in this study and the key for identifying communities in Figure 1.

Continuous communities were originally settled by Hispanics, have experienced only limited Anglo in-migration, and have always been a majority Hispanic. As a result, Hispanics have controlled these communities politically since their inception—in 1990 there were 176 Hispanic elected officials in the 106 communities examined, 58% were from 18 continuous communities. Hispanics in continuous communities also maintain the use of Spanish—93% of Hispanics in these communities speak Spanish in the home (Table 1). Owing to their demographic and political dominance, Hispanic assimilation is weak in continuous communities. It is around clusters of continuous communities that Arreola (1993b) and Nostrand (1970) identified their homelands.

Hispanics also founded discontinuous communities, but their political and demographic control over society has been interrupted. Discontinuous communities are transitional—they may exhibit social characteristics of either new

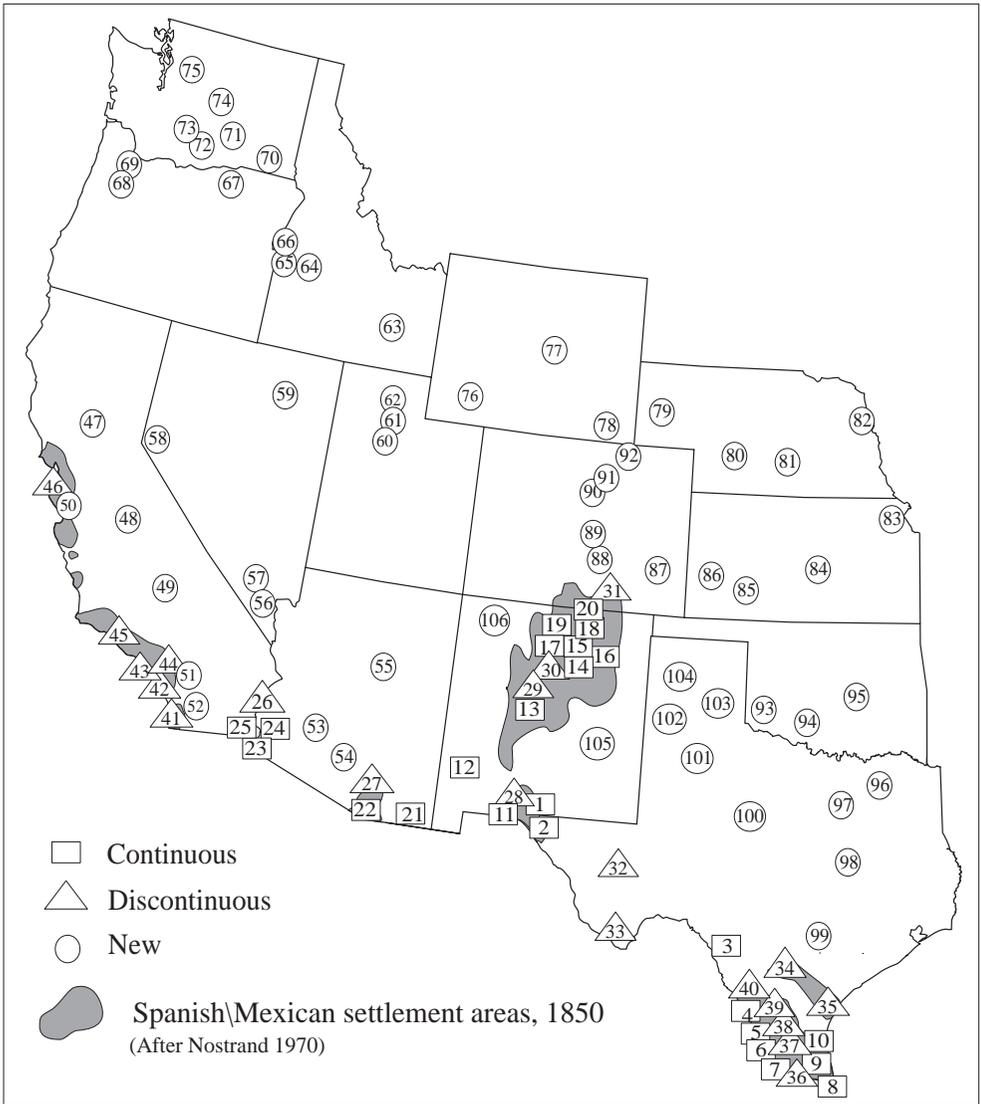


Figure 1: Hispanic settlement areas in the U.S. West by type of community. Source: Nostrand 1970 and 1990 Census. Key to city abbreviations can be found in Table 1.

or continuous communities. A few discontinuous communities have been almost completely overwhelmed by Anglos and the Hispanic population assimilated, while others have experienced large scale Hispanic immigration, which has reinvigorated them as suggested by the colonial model.

New communities were originally settled by Anglos and have only recently experienced Hispanic immigration. Only in new communities

do Hispanics meet the assumption of being a minority immigrant population in a dominant Anglo community. Hispanics in new communities do not control the political process—in 60 new communities surveyed there were only 19 Hispanic elected officials (11% of the total). Because Hispanics are an immigrant, minority population there is more pressure to assimilate and they do not maintain the use of Spanish—only 66% of Hispanics in new communities

Table 1 Community Data Sheet.

Continuous Communities	Hispanics as a Percentage of the Total Population	% of Hispanics Speaking Spanish in the Home	% of Professionals who are Hispanic	# of Hispanic Elected Officials
1) Anthony, TX	98	91	100	nd
2) Canutillo	83	93	51	nd
3) Eagle Pass	95	97	55	6
4) Falfurrias	89	90	90	2
5) Laredo	94	95	83	7
6) La Joya	99	91	100	3
7) Roma	98	94	89	3
8) Rio Grande City	97	96	84	nd
9) San Diego	97	97	90	6
10) Zapata	80	96	88	nd
11) Agua Fria, NM	66	62	39	nd
12) Bayard	85	72	75	6
13) Bernalillo	75	83	91	5
14) Chimayo	95	92	71	nd
15) Española	84	82	71	9
16) Las Vegas	82	83	71	9
17) Santa Cruz	75	82	28	nd
18) Sunland Park	99	99	77	8
19) Socorro	96	95	nd	6
20) Taos	61	82	32	6
21) Nogales, AZ	92	95	74	7
22) Douglas	83	95	40	4
23) San Luis	99	94	90	7
24) Somerton	95	97	67	3
25) Calexico, CA	95	97	37	5
	$\bar{x} = 91$	$\bar{x} = 93$	$\bar{x} = 70$	102 (58%)

Discontinuous Communities

26) Carrizo Spgs, TX	84	93	59	4
27) Corpus Christi	50	78	29	3
28) Cotulla	77	93	37	5
29) Crystal City	93	97	89	5
30) El Paso	60	90	nd	2
31) Hebbbronville	92	93	90	nd
32) Mercedes	91	95	78	4
33) Presidio	95	99	74	3
34) Pecos	72	96	39	2
35) San Antonio	55	80	30	4
36) Los Angeles, CA	39	92	12	2
37) San Bernadino	34	69	nd	1
38) San Diego	20	79	8	0
39) San Francisco	13	85	6	0
40) San Juan Capistrano	22	89	nd	0
41) Santa Barbara	31	78	9	0
42) Albuquerque, NM	34	58	19	4
43) Santa Fe	48	67	28	7
44) Trinidad, CO	55	47	30	3
45) Tucson, AZ	29	76	15	5
46) Yuma	35	78	16	1
	$\bar{x} = 39$	$\bar{x} = 86$	$\bar{x} = 15$	55 (31%)

New Communities

47) Casa Grande, AZ	34	67	17	1
48) Flagstaff	15	57	6	0
49) Phoenix	20	71	7	1
50) Brighton, CO	35	58	15	1

Table 1 continued.

New Communities		Hispanics as a Percentage of the Total Population	% of Hispanics Speaking Spanish in the Home	% of Professionals who are Hispanic	# of Hispanic Elected Officials
51)	Colorado Springs	9	42	4	0
52)	Denver	23	50	8	3
53)	Greeley	20	60	7	0
54)	La Junta	39	43	14	0
55)	Pueblo	39	39	20	0
56)	Chico, CA	9	57	nd	0
57)	Fresno	29	67	15	0
58)	Gilroy	47	66	nd	1
59)	Modesto	16	63	7	0
60)	Moreno Valley	22	61	9	0
61)	Poway	7	46	nd	0
62)	Boise, ID	3	38	2	0
63)	Caldwell	20	82	6	0
64)	Pocatello	5	30	2	0
65)	Nampa	13	67	6	0
66)	Dodge City, KS	19	73	6	0
67)	Garden City	25	69	10	1
68)	Hutchinson	5	53	1	0
69)	Kansas City	7	52	4	1
70)	Grand Island, NE	5	53	1	0
71)	North Platte	6	39	4	0
72)	Scotts Bluff	19	61	1	0
73)	Omaha	3	42	7	0
74)	Henderson, NV	8	49	4	0
75)	Las Vegas	12	74	5	0
76)	Reno	11	77	2	1
77)	Elko (EL)	15	67	3	0
78)	Carlsbad, NM	33	78	12	0
79)	Farmington	16	50	4	0
80)	Hermiston, OR	15	91	2	0
81)	McMinnville	8	74	1	0
82)	Portland	3	50	1	0
83)	Altus, OK	12	75	3	0
84)	Lawton	6	44	3	0
85)	Moore	3	23	1	0
86)	Abilene, TX	15	75	5	2
87)	Amarillo	14	75	5	0
88)	Austin	23	74	11	1
89)	Borger	12	82	4	0
90)	Denton	9	75	3	0
91)	Fort Worth	19	81	6	1
92)	Hereford	52	91	23	2
93)	Lubbock	22	82	8	1
94)	Waco	8	72	7	1
95)	Layton, UT	6	50	2	0
96)	Ogden	12	53	5	0
97)	Salt Lake City	10	51	3	0
98)	Moses Lake, WA	18	72	8	0
99)	Pasco	41	89	9	0
100)	Seattle	3	42	2	0
101)	Sunnyside	57	89	24	1
102)	Walla Walla	10	72	5	0
103)	Yakima	16	79	5	0
104)	Casper, WY	4	47	0	0
105)	Cheyenne	12	42	5	0
106)	Green River	11	44	2	0
		$\bar{x} = 15$	$\bar{x} = 66$	$\bar{x} = 6$	19 (11%)

nd = no data

Source: Compiled from U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990, Census Profile: Race and Hispanic Origin and the National Roster of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, 1990.

speak Spanish in the home. In new communities, Hispanics are more likely to conform to Gordon's assimilation model.

The three community types, like the regions themselves, are suggestive. And like regional boundaries, the distinction between community types is not inviolate; however, by incorporating historical geography with contemporary assimilation indices, I argue that differences in assimilation may be identified.

Historical Antecedents

Continuous Communities

Continuous communities were originally settled by Hispanics and Hispanics have always been the majority population, which has hindered assimilation. Continuous communities are able to maintain their numerical dominance because they have been isolated from the principal migration destinations of westward moving Anglos. Laredo, Texas was settled by Spanish/Mexicans in 1755, and exemplifies a continuous Hispanic community. Located on a high bluff overlooking the Rio Grande, Laredo was too far upstream to be reached regularly by riverboat and too far south to be a stopover for the westward moving Anglos on the way to California. San Antonio and the Texas Hill Country, 150 miles to the north of Laredo, were popular destinations for Anglo settlers after annexation, but few settled in Laredo. In short, Laredo was a less attractive destination than the Texas Hill Country or California, and as a result it maintained its *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness).

Montejano (1987, 36) argued that because Laredo Hispanics were able to maintain demographic dominance and control of their land during the Anglo period, they were better able to preserve political influence and to maintain, even institutionalize, aspects of their culture. In Laredo, there were "many influential Mexican citizens and they can't be treated like a *peleado* (peon)" (Montejano 1987, 248). A well educated, landowning class of Hispanics forced Anglos to respect the rights of Hispanics in Laredo and other Rio Grande Valley communities. This "peace structure," as Montejano (1987, 34-41) calls it, allowed South Texas Hispanics to maintain control of most aspects of society from 1848 to present. In 1990, for example, Laredo was 95% Hispanic and to this day its *Mexicanidad* is

pervasive. There are four daily newspapers available in Laredo; three are Spanish only, and the fourth is bilingual Spanish/English. The nightly TV news is broadcast in both Spanish and English, and Mexican food is simply food, not a spicy, exotic ethnic dish.

Other Rio Grande Valley communities such as Rio Grande City, Roma, Zapata, and La Joya have similar histories (Arreola 1993b). These communities are located along the Mexican border and were part of the disputed area between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers. Both Texas and Mexico claimed the land, but the population was primarily Mexican. Conflicting land claims between Texas and Mexico, and eventually between Mexico and the U.S., led to the Mexican American War of 1847-1848. U.S. victory compelled some Spanish speakers to relocate to Mexico and establish Nuevo Laredo. Many, however, remained in old Laredo on the U.S. side. Those who stayed continued to own land, speak Spanish, eat Mexican food, and celebrate Mexican holidays like their friends and relatives across the river. Anglo migration to Texas increased after the U.S. annexed land south of the Nueces, but Anglo migration to the arid plains around Laredo was never as great as it was to other parts of Texas, and some Hispanic communities have been able to maintain their *Mexicanidad* over time.

Chimayo, Española, Taos, and several small New Mexico communities located in isolated mountain valleys north of Santa Fe may also be categorized as continuous communities. These New Mexican villages are some of the oldest European settlements in the U.S., dating from 1598 (Carlson 1990, 3). Residents in these communities developed a complex social and economic attachment to the area that inhibited them from selling their land and moving to other parts of the West to take advantage of greater economic opportunity. The former Spanish and Mexican land grants claimed by north-central New Mexicans were eventually recognized by the U.S. government and New Mexicans were able to maintain many land and irrigation rights throughout the Spanish, Mexican, and American periods. Several million dry land acres that had not been settled by Spanish speakers were taken by the U.S. government and made available to Anglo settlers under the Homestead Act. The presence of a large number of Spanish-speaking landowners

nearby, however, led many would be Anglo settlers to avoid the area because they believed there was little land available. Furthermore, the railroad companies did not receive extensive land grants from the public domain as they had in many other parts of the West, because there was already a large number of Spanish-speaking residents in the irrigated valleys, which further isolated the Hispanic population (Carlson 1990, 13–62).

The large Spanish-speaking population of northern New Mexico inhibited early Anglo immigration and is one of the reasons why New Mexico, along with Arizona, was the last of the 48 contiguous states to achieve statehood. Non-Hispanic immigration to northern New Mexico did not occur until after World War I, and, ironically, was driven by the same factors that previously kept Anglo migrants away—the presence of a large Spanish-speaking population with a distinctive culture. In the 1920s, Hispanic architecture, food, music, and the Spanish language attracted Anglo artists and writers such as Georgia O’Keeffe, D.H. Lawrence, Ansel Adams, and Willa Cather, who adopted aspects of Hispanic and Native American culture to create Santa Fe style. These pioneering artists paved the way for widespread Anglo immigration after World War II and today the hills around Albuquerque and Santa Fe are increasingly populated by Hispanicized Anglos, but there are still several small, isolated New Mexican communities that are primarily Spanish speaking.

Other, more recently established, border towns have had a Hispanic majority since settlement. Sunland Park and Anthony, New Mexico are working class *colonias* (undeveloped rural communities) near El Paso; Nogales and Somerton, Arizona; and Calexico, California are important border crossings and all have Hispanic majorities. In fact, these communities are made up almost exclusively of Mexicans and Mexican Americans and their *Mexicanidad* is evident even to the casual observer.

Discontinuous Communities

Only a few of the communities founded by Hispanics were able to maintain their socioeconomic status and land ownership. After 1848, Anglo settlers appropriated much of the Hispanic-owned land and property in Mex-America and eventually dominated the politics and cul-

ture of the area. Many Anglos deemed Hispanic culture inferior and attempted to restrict the use of Spanish in order to facilitate assimilation. By 1900, only a handful of Hispanic communities maintained their pre-invasion political and economic status. In California and Arizona, Anglos eventually dominated numerically and controlled politically most original Hispanic communities (Pitt 1966; Sheridan 1986; Montejano 1987), while many Hispanic communities in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas met a similar fate (García 1981; Carlson 1990). Hispanics in these communities lost control of their land, became economically marginalized, and geographically segregated into barrios. Unable to retain land or political influence, Hispanics were forced into lower paying, less desirable occupations. This downward mobility and residential segregation actually helped maintain Hispanic identity because they were denied access to Anglo society.

Time graphs of Hispanic occupations illustrate the Hispanic marginalization and resurgence suggested in the colonial model (Fig. 2). In El Paso, San Antonio, Santa Barbara, and Los Angeles, Hispanics were the dominant professional and landholding class in 1850, but after the Anglo takeover Hispanics lost control of their land and moved into lower-wage occupations. After 1900, the need for Mexican laborers and the Mexican Revolution led to widespread immigration to the U.S., especially to Mex-American cities with established Hispanic communities. After years of decline, Hispanic percentages began to rise. Increasing Hispanic proportions led to occupational mobility and the emergence of a Hispanic middle class, especially after World War II when the GI bill helped finance Hispanic higher education. The larger, better educated, middle class Hispanic population of the Mex-America began to reestablish some of its lost political, social, and economic status.

The historical geography of discontinuous communities suggests that the modal U.S. immigrant experience of relocation in search of a higher standard of living is counterfactual for many Hispanics. In discontinuous communities, incorporation into the U.S. meant a diminution of economic and social status, which inhibited both structural and cultural assimilation (Pitt 1966; Montejano 1987; de la Teja 1995; Matovina 1995).

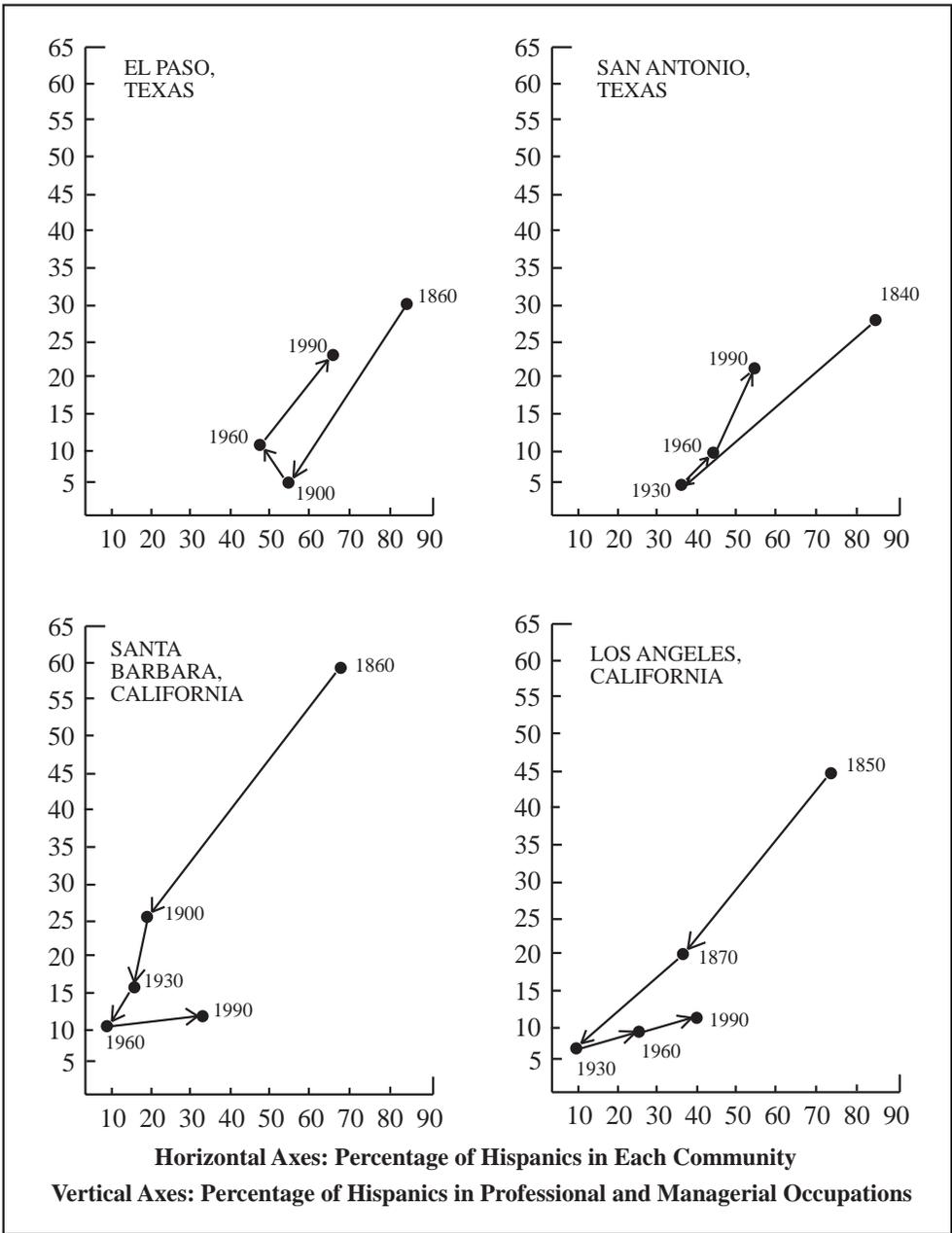


Figure 2: Time graphs of the percentage of Hispanics in professional and managerial occupations. Sources: El Paso data for 1860 from De Leon (1982) Table 16; for 1900 from Garcia (1981) for 1930 from U.S. Bureau of the Census Table 17. Table 5.1. San Antonio data for 1840 from Weber (1973) page 177; for 1930 from Garcia (1981) Tables 1 and 4. Santa Barbara data for 1860, 1900 and 1930 from Camarillo (1979) Tables 2 and 21. Los Angeles data for 1850 and 1870 from Griswold del Castillo (1979) Tables 3, 7, and 10; for 1930 from U.S. Bureau of the Census Table 17. All 1960 and 1990 data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census Tables 12 and 185 respectively.

New Communities

New Hispanic communities were founded by Anglos, and the Hispanic presence is the result of recruitment by agribusiness or industry in order to fill lower paying, seasonal, unskilled, or semi-skilled occupations. Yakima Valley communities are examples of new Hispanic communities common to many irrigated valleys of the arid West. Hispanic migration to the Yakima Valley dates from labor shortages created by World War II, which ended hop imports and doubled hop acreage in Washington. Other crops such as asparagus, sugar beets, and mint also expanded. More acreage under cultivation meant increased labor needs in all aspects of farm production, including planting, irrigation, thinning, weeding, and harvesting. Mobilization for the war meant that the traditional labor pool no longer existed. Yakima farmers saw Mexican *braceros* (farm workers), who had been used successfully to harvest California crops, as a solution to the area's labor needs. In October 1942, 500 braceros arrived in Yakima and from 1943 to 1947 Yakima Valley farmers employed 39,000 braceros (Gamboa 1981; Slatta and Atkinson 1984).

The Green Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s again expanded acreage and created labor shortages. The Bracero Program ended in 1964, but Yakima farmers continued to rely on Mexico for laborers, especially to the states of Michoacán and Jalisco. This new migrant stream was often illegal and facilitated by word of mouth (Tobias 1990). To this day Yakima Valley farmers rely on Mexican labor and the population of Hispanics in Yakima Valley communities has increased steadily since the 1940s. Pasco and Sunnyside are now 41% and 57% Hispanic respectively, yet because Hispanics are a recently arrived population employed primarily in agricultural occupations they do not have the same political and social influence as Hispanics in continuous communities. In addition, because many are not citizens, they cannot vote and their political power does not correspond to their numbers. Unlike continuous and discontinuous communities, Hispanics in new communities cannot argue that Spanish was spoken there first, and since they are a political minority, there is greater social pressure to assimilate.

I have distinguished between three types of Mex-American communities based on their specific historical geographies, but what is the cor-

respondence of these historical types with the contemporary assimilation of Hispanics?

Assimilation in the Three Communities

Gordon and many others (Massey and Mullen 1984; Neidert and Farley 1985; Williams and Ortega 1990; de la Garza et al. 1991; Gross and Massey 1991) assume that U.S. Hispanics constitute an "unbalanced" population group where Anglos are the host majority and Hispanics the immigrant minority. In the case of continuous and discontinuous communities, however, this assumption must be reevaluated. In continuous communities, Hispanics were the original settlers and have never been a minority population. In discontinuous communities many Hispanics still consider themselves the "host" society and Anglos the "guest" population. Only in new communities do Hispanics meet the assumption of an "unbalanced" immigrant population in a dominant Anglo society. New communities are, however, the modal type of Hispanic community and there are hundreds of them, whereas there are fewer continuous and discontinuous communities. To compare assimilation rates between the three communities I selected all the continuous and discontinuous communities for which I could find data and then randomly selected at least three new communities from each Western state. I looked at (a) the percentage of Hispanics speaking Spanish in the home; (b) the percentage of professionals who are Hispanic; (c) the number of Hispanic elected officials for 1990; and (d) the percentage of Hispanics as a proportion of the total population. I used Spanish language retention rates to evaluate levels of cultural assimilation and Hispanic elected officials and Hispanic occupations to identify structural assimilation.

Structural assimilation is a complex process consisting of five components, but because of space and data constraints I address only civic and behavioral receptional assimilation. *Civic assimilation* is the absence of minority political conflict towards the core and general acceptance of the dominant group's civic/political position. I examine the number of Hispanic elected officials and Hispanic political organizations to evaluate civic assimilation on the assumption that if Hispanics are content with the dominant (Anglo) civic/political position there will be no

need for separate Hispanic organizations (Williams and Ortega 1990). *Behavior receptional assimilation* addresses levels of economic and occupational assimilation, and it is generally assumed that the greater the percentage of Hispanic professionals, the higher the income, the less spatial segregation, and the more assimilated the group will become (Massey and Mullen 1984; Allen and Turner 1996).

Cultural Assimilation: Spanish Language Usage

Language retention rates are often used to evaluate cultural assimilation among minority groups. The working assumption in the U.S. is that by the third generation minorities will speak primarily English. This model works with many ethnic groups including Ukrainian, Russian, Korean, and Japanese immigrants (Jobu 1988).

Hispanic language assimilation, however, is much more complex. Hispanics in continuous communities have learned English but never abandoned Spanish. Figure 3 shows the relationship between Hispanic percentages in each community type and the percentage of Hispanics who speak Spanish in the home and establishes two important relationships: First, it illustrates a positive, curvilinear relationship between the percentage of Hispanics in a community and the percentage of Hispanics who speak Spanish in the home ($r^2 = .54$). This relationship is more significant than distance from the border ($r^2 = .17$) and even the percentage of the Hispanic population that is foreign born ($r^2 = .46$). Second, Figure 3 reveals that Spanish language usage in the home is affected by community type—93% of Hispanics in continuous communities speak Spanish in the home, 86% in discontinuous communities, and only 66% in new communities.

Kaplan (1994) argues that French retention among Quebecois greater than 80% is "high" and that French speakers in Canada are more likely to retain their language when they constitute a majority. When Quebecois constitute less than 5% of the population, French language maintenance is jeopardized because they lack the political, cultural, and economic clout to maintain a viable French language community. In the U.S., high Spanish language retention corresponds to the homelands, continuous communities along the border, and some discontinuous

communities (Fig. 4). New communities with high Spanish language retention rates are found in two regions: the Northwest and Texas. Approximately 40% of Northwest Hispanics were born in Mexico and many undoubtedly expect to return home (Massey et al. 1987), which helps explain why counties with barely 5% Hispanic populations still have high Spanish language retention rates. In the 26 counties on the Texas High Plains, however, only 11% of Hispanics were foreign born, yet they have high Spanish language retention rates. High Plains Hispanics migrated from the Texas-Mexican homeland in the 1930s and their percentages are approaching 50% in some counties, but nowhere do they constitute a majority. High Spanish language retention rates may be suggestive of an emerging "High Plains Hispanic Homeland." The area around Lubbock, for example, is known as the "little valley of the north," a reference to the Rio Grande Valley, the core of the Texas-Mexican homeland.

In summary, Hispanics in continuous communities have not followed Gordon's linguistic assimilation model. Discontinuous communities seem to conform to the colonial model, while Hispanics in most new communities are losing their Spanish language ability, with a few exceptions.

Structural Assimilation

Civic

Civic assimilation is thought to exist when the guest population does not challenge "... any issues involving values and power conflict with [host members]" (Gordon 1964, 168). Montejano's "peace structure" between the dominant Hispanic population and the recently arrived Anglo population suggests conflict has been minimized in continuous communities. Montejano goes on to argue that some degree of Mexicanization of the Anglo is necessary as the language is still Spanish, the holidays are Mexican, and political power is shared (Montejano 1987, 36). A similar peace structure developed in New Mexico (Nostrand 1992).

These peace structures mean that Hispanics in continuous communities have always been elected to various political, educational, and administrative positions. Table 1 reveals that

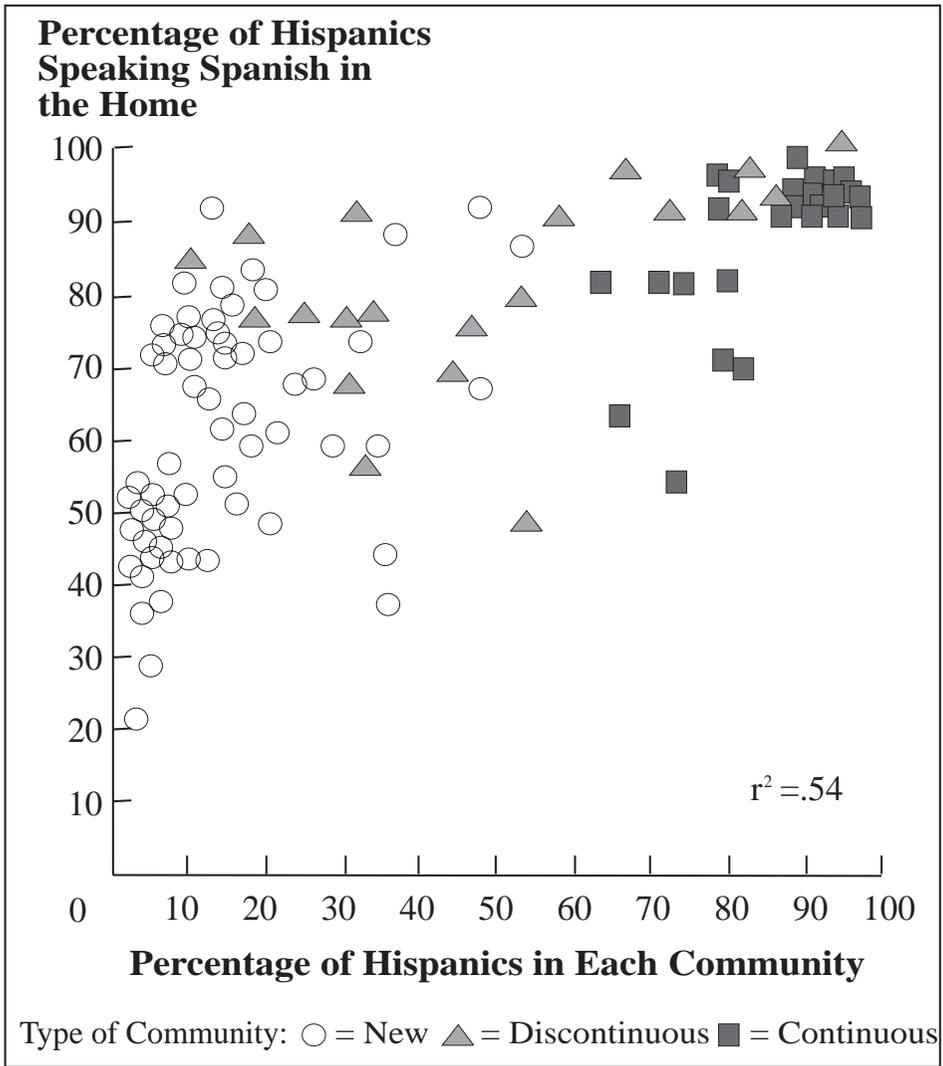


Figure 3: Scatterplot of the percentage of Hispanics in each community and the percentage of Hispanics speaking Spanish in the home.
 Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 3C. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993.

58% of all Hispanic Elected Officials (HEOs) surveyed were in 18 continuous communities; 31% were in 21 discontinuous communities; and only 11% from 60 new communities.

Discontinuous communities seem to conform to the colonial model, especially where Hispanics are a majority. In San Antonio, for example, the Hispanic population is 55% and the city has recently established a committee on equity that attempts to guarantee Hispanics representation

in the political process. One important San Antonio civic issue is deciding how to interpret the role of the Alamo in Texas history. To the Anglo population, and to the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) who oversee the Alamo, it is a shrine of Texas liberty—a place where brave Texas freedom fighters died defending Texas soil from corrupt Mexicans. But many Mexican Americans are ambivalent about the Alamo and some see it as another symbol of the Anglo

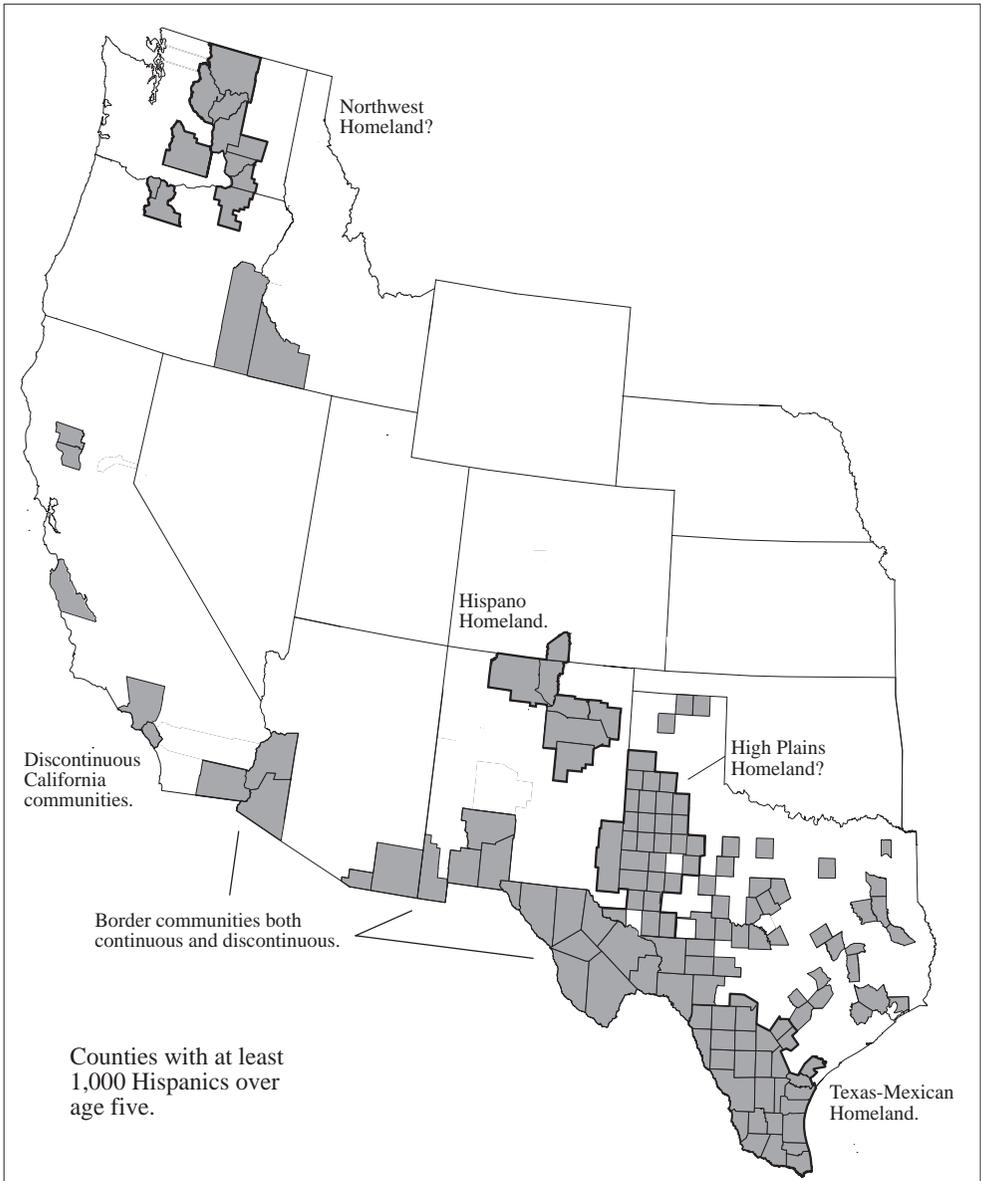


Figure 4: Counties where more than 80% of the Hispanic population speaks Spanish in the home. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 3C. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993.

conquest. How the Alamo should be interpreted is increasingly problematic in a discontinuous city where the Hispanic population is now a majority. The DRT library, for example, has always focused its research on “the 13 sacred days of battle” and the Anglo period that fol-

lowed. Recently, the library has been forced to allow more research on the pre-1836 Mission Period. According to Wayne Cox, DRT librarian “They’re trying to appease the Mexican-American side that was harassing them” (Brear 1995, 144).

Another civic battle is concerned with the interpretation of sacred space—the Alamo burial ground. Most Spanish missions provided a burial ground inside the mission walls, known as the *campo santo*, where Indian converts and mestizos were buried. For a long time the DRT denied the existence of a burial ground because it would mean closing the street in front of the Alamo and changing the parade route during the Fiesta celebration. Pressure by the San Antonio Hispanic and Native American community has forced the DRT to accept the existence of a burial ground and unilateral control of the space by the DRT has been compromised (27 October 1995, San Antonio Express-News). The fact that a mostly Anglo, conservative organization such as the DRT was compelled to alter its position on the Alamo burial grounds and its interpretation of Texas history is symbolic of the increasing influence of the Hispanic community in San Antonio. Rather than the civic assimilation postulated in Gordon's model, Hispanics actively challenge the Anglo view of history and its interpretation of the contemporary San Antonio landscape. Instead of civic assimilation, San Antonio's Mexican American population has reestablished itself to become what Arreola (1987) calls the "Mexican American cultural capital of the U.S."

San Antonio is not the only discontinuous community where Hispanics are contesting the Anglo view of history and its interpretation of space. In Los Angeles, organizations such as Plaza de la Raza and the National Chicano Moratorium Committee are working to "preserve and foster contributions and achievements of Mexicans and Chicanos in Aztlán/Mexico *ocupado* [occupied]." Similar organizations can be found in San Francisco, Tucson, El Paso, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque. In discontinuous communities Hispanics often appeal to the historical argument when discussing their lack of assimilation and increasing influence. Use of phrases such as "I didn't cross the line, the line crossed me" or "Pilgrims go home" are common to discontinuous communities and, of course, refer to the Anglo takeover after U.S. annexation. This appeal to history gives Hispanics in discontinuous communities a legitimacy that is not found in new communities and is one reason why assimilation is more problematic in discontinuous communities.

Organizations in new communities are much less concerned with political control and interpretation of sacred space. Instead they are occupied with more mundane issues such as migrant health care, education, and basic human rights.

Structural Assimilation

Behavioral

It is generally assumed that levels of education, income, and occupational status are linked to minority group assimilation (Gross and Massey 1991). High occupational status suggests assimilation and a lack of discrimination in the work place.

Hispanic upward economic mobility and political mobilization began in the early 1900s and accelerated after World War II. Figure 5 illustrates occupational differences by plotting the percentage of professional positions occupied by Hispanics against the percentage of Hispanics in each community. The census bureau provides occupation data only for communities with more than 10,000 Hispanics and, as a result, several smaller towns are not represented. In 1990, Hispanics in a few continuous communities (Anthony and La Joya) occupied all professional occupations and Hispanics in continuous communities had a larger percentage of all professional positions. New communities, even with high percentages of Hispanics, contributed a smaller percentage of professionals. Yet, contrary to Gordon's assimilation model, Hispanic assimilation is *lowest* in communities with the *highest* percentage of Hispanics professionals.

A summary of the variables used to compare community types appears in Table 2, which indicates a statistically significant difference in assimilation indices between the three communities. A more important question, however, is the direction that these differences are taking. Are Hispanics in Northwestern new communities linguistically assimilating as in other new communities? Unfortunately, due to the recency of their arrival, longitudinal data do not exist for Northwestern Hispanics. The 1980 census is the only census that can be compared with 1990. Before 1980, the census bureau collected community level data on Hispanics only in the five Mex-American states. Since 1980, the percentage of Hispanics speaking Spanish in the home increased by 7% in continuous communities and

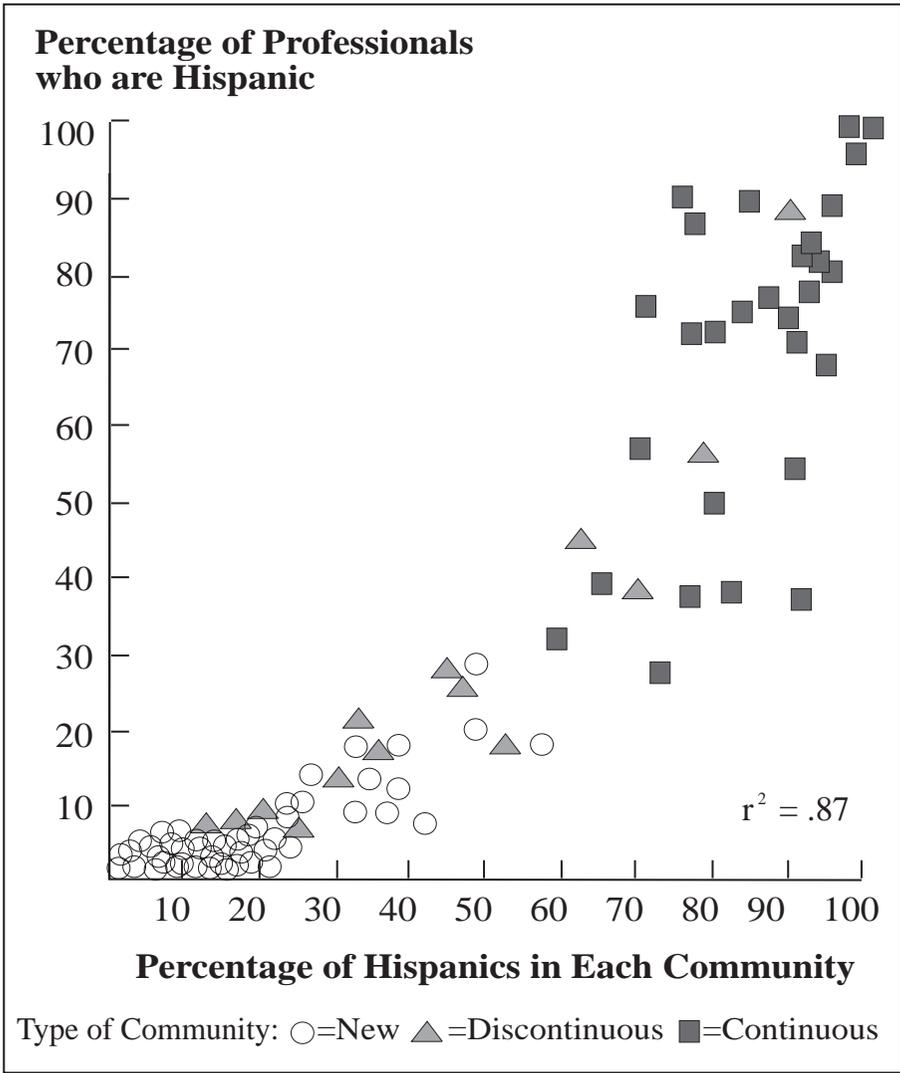


Figure 5: Scatterplot of the percentage of Hispanics in each community and the percentage of professionals who are Hispanic.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 3C. Washington, DC, 1993.

by 18% in discontinuous communities. In new communities the percentage was unchanged.

Discussion

I have identified three types of Hispanic communities based on different historic, geographic, demographic, linguistic, and economic factors and found that Hispanic assimilation varies according to community type. In continuous com-

munities Hispanics maintain demographic dominance, control their land, language, and political influence, and do not assimilate. It is around clusters of continuous communities that Arreola and Carlson identify Hispanic homelands. Other continuous clusters can be found along the border and in West Texas, but they are attenuated and do not have the geographic integrity and breadth to be labeled homelands. Even so, non-Hispanics moving into these areas

Table 2 ANOVA of Community Type by Selected Criteria. (Anova results are from absolute values for all communities given in Table 1.)

	(n)	Continuous Communities (25)	Discontinuous Communities (21)	New Communities (60)
Percentage Hispanic, 1990	\bar{x}	91	38	15
Percentage of Hispanics Speaking Spanish in the Home	\bar{x}	93	86	66
Percentage of Professionals Who are Hispanic	\bar{x}	70	15	06
Percentage of Hispanic Elected Officials	\bar{x}	58	31	11
Z score		2.21	-17	-2.04

$p = .049^*$ $H = 6.04$ $Df = 2$
 * Kruskal-Wallis 1-way ANOVA

soon feel pressure to assimilate, or at least accommodate, Hispanic culture. The traditional notion of Hispanics assimilation must be reevaluated in places where the Hispanic population is the majority and always has been.

Hispanics in some discontinuous communities are now the majority population and have reclaimed much of their political, economic, and cultural influence—these communities should perhaps be called resurgent. Resurgent communities now influence society and culture as suggested by the colonial model. Hispanics in other discontinuous communities, however, are still a minority and continually struggling to maintain their identity and increase their influence in society.

Hispanics in new communities have lower levels of Spanish language retention, fewer political organizations, fewer HEOs, and are more assimilated than Hispanics in other communities. This research also suggests that some new communities on the Texas High Plains and in the Pacific Northwest exhibit linguistic characteristics of continuous communities. Hispanics on the Texas High Plains are increasingly middle class and politically influential, yet they have not followed the traditional Anglo assimilation model. Instead, they retained the use of Spanish in the home and maintain a sense of *Mexicanidad* comparable to continuous communities. If a new community can attain levels of political and social influence equivalent to continuous communities, then many of the assumptions about minority assimilation in the U.S. must be reevaluated and the map of Mex-America re-

drawn. In fact, the unbalanced model of assimilation may be more appropriately applied to Anglos moving into continuous or resurgent communities where Hispanics are the host society and Anglos the guest population who have absorbed the characteristics of the dominant Hispanics population—a process called Hispanization.

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