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**The Investigation Paper: Sense of Community and the
Latino Community of Lawrence, MA**

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When looking over the guidelines for the paper, I immediately knew which community I wanted to choose. It might be kind of basic choosing the community you live in, and others are probably doing something more exciting, but when I think about “these are my people” I think of the latino community in Lawrence, and our sense of community is strong. I’ve been excited to write this paper since I read about it, and I hope the reader enjoys this overview through the McMillan-Chavis model.

Lawrence, MA is a small city located about twenty miles north of Boston. In the 1840s, Daniel Saunders bought some land along the Merrimack River because he wanted the resources of the river, and waterpower rights were valuable. The mill buildings that line the river today, although now they are serving as homes, were once bustling mills that produced textiles for the American and European markets. Lawrence is also known for its alias “Immigrant City.” In the late 1800s, the mills gave jobs and homes to waves of immigrants looking for work and a place to settle. It began with the Irish, Germans, and Englishmen. Then in the early 1900s, many Italians, Polish, and Syrians followed. In the late 20th century, the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans arrived. These are my people.

In the present day, Lawrence is home to about 90,000 people. It is a majority Latino and foreign-born community. It is full of creative and lively youth who are proud of their roots and who strive to make a name for themselves despite all the negatives we face as a community, including the unfavorable image that outsiders tend to have of our community. It feels like it is a really small city. Most people know one another in some

way, making it an even closer-knit community. I was born and raised in Lawrence, so you might find that I have a certain bias towards it.

Before going to college, I had never been outside of my city for an extended period of time. Imagine going from a low income, majority Hispanic community like Lawrence, to an upper middle class, White community like Fairfield, CT. It was definitely the shock that I needed to appreciate my community more! Nobody really knew where Lawrence was, so I found myself telling others that I was from Boston. I soon realized that there was no reason to do that. I repped my city loud and proud. There were a couple people who I had met who were from Andover and Lowell and gave me *the look* when I said where I was from, as if in disdain. That just made me appreciate it more because yes, I'm from Lawrence and look at me, thriving in the same place as you! As an insider, you see things from a different perspective than would an outsider. During times of crisis, we stick together and even on a daily basis, we show massive amounts of love towards one another. Hopefully after reading my paper, you will realize how much of a family we are. I just want you to keep in mind that when I talk about the Latino Community of Lawrence as my community I am talking mostly about people within my younger generation, as I relate more to them and I can relay their experiences.

McMillan-Chavis Model of Sense of Community

Membership

Boundaries. The boundaries of membership aren't too rigid. Maybe it's just a Lawrencian thing, but for the most part you can identify who fits and who doesn't. Like I mentioned before, we are a small community, and everyone knows everyone. Usually people end up moving away from Lawrence and nobody really comes into Lawrence, so we can tell who's new and who's not. Lawrence is divided into North and South. For example, I live in South

Lawrence which means I live in the half of Lawrence that is past the Merrimack River. This is more of a geographical boundary that the people within the community have for themselves. I honestly don't know how to put the boundaries into words. There are the geographical boundaries that define the City of Lawrence legally, but there are more nonphysical boundaries than anything else. I think it has a lot to do with the attitude that people present. Those who are not from Lawrence have a more negative attitudes towards our community, while those who are from here understand each other's struggle and have a more positive attitude. They define the boundaries.

Common Symbol System. The Lawrence Latino community shares many symbols. I am laughing just thinking about this one symbol. It is a restaurant, but not just any restaurant! It's the best restaurant to go to when you're out hanging with your friends in the middle of the night when you probably should be home. It's Big and Beefy! For some reason this is the favorite fast food place of everyone here. It's not a chain restaurant or anything of that sort, so I think people are pretty proud to have something be exclusively ours. Honestly, I think it is a little overrated because the food you get there is just as good as any other decent place, but I think it is the fact that it is the only place open until very late so people having "the munchies" at that time, have a gathering spot, therefore enhancing the flavor!

The other big symbol of membership I can think about is the Ayer Mill clock tower. I'm not sure why it is has become such a big community symbol, but it has always been an iconic Lawrence landmark. Many local photographers capture really great images of the tower. If you're from Lawrence, you know what that tower is. It is pretty much a staple in the community. The history of it is that in it was evident that more mills were needed in order to keep up with the textile production and demand. Construction for

the Ayer Mill began shortly after, and this clock was named after Frederick Ayer, a businessman who bought and merged many mills to form the American Woolen Company. Since then, the clock tower has honestly become an architectural focal point for the Merrimack Valley. Along with the clock tower, the mills are also a great symbol of Lawrence. There is so much history behind them and it's amazing to know that Lawrence served a great purpose in the manufacturing industry and wider economy. There are smaller symbols of membership too, like the guys who sell piraguas on the street pushing their carts (not since Covid, but hopefully again soon). They remind the elders of street vendors in Puerto Rico especially, and there are not other cities in Massachusetts where piraguas are sold regularly like in Lawrence.

Emotional Safety. I have iffy feelings on this element of membership. I like to think Lawrence is a place where people can feel emotional safety, however, sometimes people can be very mean! I don't think this is location specific so that makes me feel better. It's always just a few odd balls that enjoy hating on other's accomplishments for who knows what reason. For the most part, however, I think most people try to support others. In my generation, many use social media to promote their businesses or art and they get a lot of support from others. As far as creating a safe space to speak truthfully, this is something that without a doubt is done here. I don't think anybody here is afraid to say what is on their mind and when push comes to shove, we back up our community, so I believe the majority of people create and experience that emotional safety. Just come to one of our neighborhood council meetings and see how we have each other's backs.

Personal Investment. Perhaps it's due to the emotional safety within our community, or maybe it's all pride, but people here feel it is their duty to stick up for our city. And although I do not agree with gentrification, because it seems to eliminate affordable housing and benefit

wealthy investors every time, there have been multiple efforts to create housing for people. A family has recently bought out land on Essex street and are planning to build apartments. I just hope that they are affordable for struggling families. People are opening restaurants, which creates jobs and gives new life to the city. Lawrence is home to MANY artistic folks, and they are using their art to represent Lawrence in the best way they can. There is currently a basketball player from Lawrence who is an NBA prospect. We have kids going off to college, making a name for themselves, and coming back to work in Lawrence. Personal investment seems pretty standard from my viewpoint.

Sense of Belonging. I feel like the majority of people in Lawrence understand each other's struggles, and the sense of belonging and relatedness comes through those struggles, and connects back to personal investment. For example, if something happens to one member in the community then we all feel the effects, like dominos. That is just the way it works around here.

Latinos also pride themselves on hospitality. If someone were to visit, we go above and beyond to make sure our guest feels welcome and comfortable and treated well. This makes Lawrence a very comfortable place to be in personally. That is the one thing I missed when I went away to college—the sense of belonging. It was so crazy how I could automatically just feel like I belonged when I returned to Lawrence. I guess sense of belonging is why they call it home.

Influence

Sacrifice. We don't have much. We don't have the access to varied resources that more wealthy communities have, but we make do with what we have and honestly, I think the most every day kind of sacrifice that community members make is the commitment of service, and dedication of our futures. I know those of us who are the Gen

Z'ers are definitely the ones making sure we have a good future so that we will be able to give back to the people of Lawrence. You wouldn't have to sacrifice a whole lot of things in order to be a part of this community, but sacrifice for the greater good feels good, and it feels important. I know several people who have gone off to college and come back, to serve the community and help the people. It's grounded in love and that kind of sacrifice is a beautiful thing.

Power and Trust. The people who govern Lawrence try to do their best to make Lawrence a better place to live. Obviously, the people of Lawrence have a say and have the opportunity to voice their concerns, if any. I haven't had the opportunity to attend any other neighborhood council meetings except for my own, so I cannot go into too much detail about what goes on in each one, however, what I do know, is that the Lawrence City officials are people who once used to be regular residents, so I believe that seek elected positions of power in order to better the community from a resident's standpoint. The people of Lawrence definitely aren't afraid to speak their truth and stand up for what they believe in, so I think there is a good balance between the members and the group.

A couple of days ago, a group of artists got together and talked with the mayor, Dan Rivera, to see if they could paint "Black Lives Matter" on one of the roads in Lawrence like they first did in Washington DC. After having spoken with the organizer of the project and hearing his demands for our social justice and equality in representation, the mayor approved, and the artists set out to paint! It was honestly a great thing that this city took part in and I'm glad that the mayor was able to hear them out and approve such an amazing project. It was finished a couple days ago and looks great! That this was approved by those with elected and formal power, shows that the ordinary community members also have power, and a voice. This is why we trust our elected officials, and see them more as one of us than anything else.

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

Shared Values. Most of us want better for our community. Recently, in light of all the events pertaining to police brutality and now COVID, our community has tried to keep up with all the changes. I wrote about the BLM street mural which was one way in which we manifested this shared value of community solidarity. A GoFundMe page was opened for the project and hundreds of people were able to donate further demonstrating that solidarity. The community got together as a whole to organize peaceful protests back in the summertime to show our solidarity with the movement for Black lives as well.

Lawrence is also a city of people who are statistically close to poverty line, so we can empathize with others who are struggling. Although it was an ongoing struggle with the city officials at times, a group called The Movement Family (TMF) organized a weekly event for the homeless. They offered them food, clothing, detox services, transitional housing, and other counseling services. This depicts our shared Latino value of hospitality. They managed to help tons of people even though the city claimed the problem was too big to solve. This defines our people though. There are honestly many shared values that I could have chosen, but I feel like solidarity and hospitality are the best to describe the community, and personally these are my favorite.

There is one more shared value in the Latino Community of Lawrence that I cannot go on without mentioning though. We are big on family celebrations. Many residents have families that reside nearby and the get-togethers are anything but small. There is often commotion brewing, especially during the summer. You can definitely tell that kids and young adults are family-oriented and celebrating something, and I think that this is a good value to instill. Because

we are all from a similar cultural background, we all tend to reflect this value. Even if we do not know one other, we will bring food to the party and dance together.

Community Economy. That last shared value flows into community economy. Parties are commonplace in our community, and they really do require drawing upon our collective resources. Someone brings a certain dish. Someone else will take care of the music. Someone will provide the yard space. There is that level of community economy in that we pool our resources routinely to share celebrations of life year to year.

On the other hand, a lot of the things people trade in Lawrence are more nonphysical. There's a lot of connections being made among the community with talents and ideas. The creatives in this city like to meet up and collaborate with other creatives in order to offer the city something different. Baking, cooking, clothes, jewelry...you name it and someone can do it for you. There is definitely a lot of trading going on in that aspect, and training, in terms of skills and trades. People are frequently on social media motivating others to attain their goals and what not, so in the sense of ideas, it is a productive exchange.

I do not know that people will gain much status from being a part of our group. When I went away to school, nobody knew where Lawrence was, so I had to let them know where I was in relativity to Boston. Lawrence also gets a lot of bad rap, so for those who might have heard of it, you get kind of concerned reactions. Not every community is perfect, and I'm willing to admit the things that this community lacks. Ironically, I think most communities put on a false front whereas maybe Lawrence could use a little bit of a false front. I feel as if having the shiny outward appearance, wrapped up all nicely is what Lawrence lacks. On the outside it might appear a little banged up and dingy, but on the inside it's actually better than that.

Shared Emotional Connection

I feel like all throughout the paper I've described a lot of what I see as an insider of the group. The young people in my generation tend to have similar stories. Their parents or their grandparents immigrated here in search of better opportunities for their children and grandchildren. It's honestly the thing that I feel connects us the most: our community narrative. The people in this community can empathize with you on a level that someone who doesn't share that story of our people might not understand. Our ancestors and our parents did as much as they could to get us into the position that we are in today, and so we are left to continue to try and do our best to move ourselves higher and higher in the world, and to bring others with us as we go.

Because Lawrence is a majority Latino (Dominican and Puerto Rican) community, both the Dominican and Puerto Rican cultures are EXTREMELY family-oriented (although I can mostly attest to Dominican culture, I know Puerto Rican culture is very similar) loyalty to the family comes before anything else. Our shared emotional connection is deep because most of our extended families live so far away in the Caribbean, so we are more likely to value relationships with our Latino neighbors here in Lawrence more than usual, and to help when someone is in need. This is our family-oriented nature.

We do have some rituals that relate to shared experience. One of them is church. The Latino community is really big on church and I feel like this is something that brings the community even closer together. Church exposes them to different people within the community, so they are able to make friends, and exposes them to different opportunities to receive support and to be able to offer support to others, as they are able and as they are in need. Personally, I'm not big on church, but I did attend when I was younger and that part at church where you turn and hug your neighbor was the best part for me. It seemed like everyone looked forward to it and the pastor had to tell us that we had to move on from all the hugging!

There is definitely a lot of love to go around in the community. It is not all the time that you are surrounded by people who are pretty much the same as you regarding language, culture, appearance, etc., and so I feel like this is the comfort zone of many people here. I know that wherever Lawrencians go, they'll always have somewhere to come back to and call home.

Major Issues

“Lawrence, MA: City of the Damned.” That was the headline in Boston Magazine in 2012 for a couple of articles geared towards highlighting how horrible Lawrence is. “Crime is soaring, schools are failing, government has lost control, and Lawrence, the most godforsaken place in Massachusetts, has never been in worse shape.”¹ That was the opening to one of the articles. I'll honestly never forget the time that this was first published. Everyone rallied against the author on Twitter and that day consisted of huge waves of positivity and also negativity. I performed my own google search on Lawrence. The “people also ask” section contained: “Is Lawrence MA ghetto? Is Lawrence MA dangerous?” Living here all my life I honestly wondered what people on the outside could possibly be seeing. I know there is crime, but that is just the truth for every city. There's always some crime in a city. There is a drug problem. But there are also no services that are sufficient to get people on their feet and out of their situation. There is no doubt that Lawrence struggles in all of the maladies that the article presents, however, there are a lot of layers to these issues. And how dare this author refer to us as “damned!”

The article only tells a partial truth of half the story, and therefore only gives people access to half of the information. A lot of these things are societal problems that are, for whatever reason, being made to seem to only be a Lawrence issue. You don't see stories as often about the good that we do, about the homes that we build, the community outreach programs that we offer, the kids winning scholarships, the community gatherings and rallying together, the

supports we offer one another big and small, or anything like that. It gets me really upset because systemic racism is very real and we oftentimes experience the backhand of things because there are poor and uneducated people who don't know any better.

Another issue in Lawrence right now pertains to COVID. The cases are extremely high and there are hundreds of positive cases per week presently. I think a lot of this is caused by the fact that people do not like the idea of not being able to see their families because they are so family-oriented. So then you have many people going back and forth visiting family members without knowing if they are safe to do so. It also has a lot to do with the fact that there was not much COVID relief given. This forces these low-income families to risk their health and go out doing whatever they can to put food on the table. This goes along with how Black and Brown people are being disproportionately affected during COVID. I made a discussion post about this very topic. POC and lower income communities have unfortunately been receiving the short end of the stick this pandemic, which has only magnified the inequalities that were present before it began.

As far as what the future for Lawrence holds, I think everyone is taking things one step at a time, really, as Covid is the primary concern right now. The city is trying their best to implement social distancing and enforcing mask wearing in businesses and public spaces. I do feel that once the wintertime approaches a lot of businesses will be taking a hit, which is really disheartening. Regardless of pandemic or bad press or anything, I just know I'm going to represent my city and so will many of us!