Chapter 2
Biliteracy and Human Capital in Texas Border Colonias

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we explore the literacies of people living in Texas border colonias, economically marginalized communities along the U.S.-Mexico border that are among the fastest growing and most bilingual (Spanish/English) communities in the U.S. Deficit perspectives characterize public and educational discourses about the literacy abilities of colonia residents, despite a lack of empirical research on the topic. We present an ethnographic counter-portrait that takes into account the intersecting roles of geographic, socio-economic, demographic, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural factors in the literacies of border colonia residents. We draw on human capital theory to show how residents utilize their biliteracy to develop six forms of human capital and to mediate exchanges between them. The chapter concludes with implications for language and literacy research and educational practice in globalized and transnational settings.

INTRODUCTION

This study grew out of our interest in the literacies of people living in Texas border colonias, small, semi-urban, and economically marginalized communities along the U.S.-Mexico border. With half a million Texans living in colonias, they are among the fastest growing communities in the U.S. and among the most bilingual (Spanish/English) (Donelson & Esparza, 2010). Despite a lack of empirical research on the educational and literacy abilities of colonia residents (Smith & Valenzuela, 2012), deficit perspectives characterize most public and scholarly discourse on the topic. Thus, one objective of this chapter is to contribute to an empirically-based portrait of colonia literacies, one which takes into account the intersecting roles of geographical, socio-economic, demographic, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural factors in the literacies of these border communities.

A second objective is to add to research on the forms of literacy produced and consumed in colonia communities, as well as the practices through which residents enact them. Previous
work suggests that residents of border colonias use biliteracy to develop different forms of human capital and to mediate exchanges of capital or conversions between forms (Smith & Murillo, 2012; Smith & Murillo, 2013). We build on this work in this chapter by looking at these literacy forms and practices using human capital theory to consider the views of two key groups of educational stakeholders—parents and teachers—concerning the literacies of Texas border colonias. We focus on the views of these stakeholders because their support is required for the development of “high-level, literacy-related proficiencies in Spanish” (Valdés, 2011, p. 113).

The chapter is organized as follows. We begin by locating our study of colonias within broader discussions of border communities and education. We describe border colonias as transnational communities and globalized spaces before turning to theoretical motivations for exploring the connections between human capital theory and biliteracy. Next we describe data collection in two Texas border counties and present our findings. We conclude with implications for further research on border literacies in this and other contexts, as well as thoughts on how the literacies of border colonias might challenge our understanding of language and literacy development.

A PORTRAIT OF COLONIAS ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

The U.S. government defines a colonia as an “identifiable community in Arizona, California, New Mexico or Texas within 150 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border, lacking decent water and sewage systems and in existence as a colonia before November 28, 1989” (Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act, cited in Nuñez & Klammer, 2010). Texas is home to more colonias and more colonia residents than any other U.S. state. Approximately 500,000 Texans live in 2,300 colonia communities along the border from Cameron County on the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso County in the west (Texas State Energy Conservation Office, 2010).

Border colonias are transnational communities created by the demand for cheap labor on the U.S. side of the border, accelerated by the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and the need for affordable housing for the Mexican immigrants who provide that labor (Ward, 1999). Their greater numbers in Texas are explained by the absence of zoning codes in unincorporated areas, which allowed real estate developers to establish sub-divisions and sell housing lots without installing water, drainage, and other services. Residents were able to purchase lots directly from developers with low down payments and monthly payments in cash, an attractive option for families with low or no credit, or those lacking the legal documents necessary to apply for a bank loan. Under the “deed for contract” arrangements typical in colonias,

... the buyer does not receive title to the land until the full price, with interest, has been paid..... Traditionally these contracts were not recorded with the county clerk. If the buyer fell behind in making payments, the seller could repossess the land within 45 days without going through the normal foreclosure process, and could even claim any improvements made on the property. (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2003, p. 2)

Thus, while colonias have offered immigrant families an avenue to home ownership when few other options are available, purchasing a home or land (a more common option because families can economize by building a house a room or two at a time as their circumstances permit) in a colonia is not without significant financial risk.

Demographic research in colonia communities has consistently reported that colonia residents are, on average, younger, poorer, and have completed fewer years of formal schooling per capita than