

# Re-Framing The U.S.-Mexico Border: A Non-Profit Educational Program On Border And Migration Issues

*Dr. Jessica Piekielek, Millsaps College*

**Abstract:** This article explores the work of a binational non-profit organization that offers travel seminars designed to educate U.S. citizens about the social, economic, and political realities of the U.S.-Mexico border through direct interactions in border communities. These educational trips offer a unique opportunity to explore individuals' perceptions of the U.S.-Mexico border and undocumented migration, as those perspectives are developed and revised through personal experience. This article examines the ways in which the organization and its participants describe the U.S.-Mexico border region- its physical, social, and political landscapes- as well as border residents and migrants. Contextualized within wider national debates on the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration, participants' narratives suggest the possibility of an alternate social imagination of the relationships between U.S. and Mexican states and residents.

**Keywords:** U.S.-Mexico border, social movements, collective action frames

## Introduction

Recently, the U.S.-Mexico border has (re)-emerged as an important touchstone in contentious national debates about immigration, sovereignty, and national security. News programs that ask if the southern border is secure, while showing video footage of young men sliding under barbed wire fences in the desert borderlands, have become a semi-regular feature on television. In its last year, the Bush administration invested considerable effort to "secure the border," by deploying National Guardsmen, promising to double the existing force of agents, and erecting hundreds of miles of walls along the border. As the U.S.-Mexico re-entered the immediate gaze of politicians and national syndicates, interesting questions are raised about the meanings and understandings of the U.S.-Mexico border and the ways in which these meanings are engaged by individual actors

at the border.

Many anthropologists and other social scientists have explored how border residents and migrants interpret the border (Martinez 1994, Pope 1995, Ruiz 1998, Tamar 2002, Vila 2000, among others). The question of how U.S. citizens in the 'interior' of the country understand the border is less well analyzed, beyond the broad strokes provided by national opinion poll data on the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration. Few ethnographic studies have explored the interpretations of 'interior' residents, especially when they are personally faced with the realities of the border.

In this paper, I explore the work of a bi-national non-profit organization, BorderLinks, which offers travel seminars on the U.S.-Mexico border. BorderLinks aspires to educate U.S. citizens on the social, economic, and political realities on the U.S.-Mexico border through direct interactions in border communities, including tours, site visits, workshops, and stays with host families. Churches, schools, youth groups, seminaries, and other organizations sponsor trip participants, who come with varying degrees of familiarity with the border region and Mexico. More than an educational or tourism organization, BorderLinks is part of a transnational social movement that is responding to a variety of "border issues," including U.S. militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, "illegal" immigration, free trade, and globalization. As such, BorderLinks is challenged to create convincing invitations for U.S. participants to question their assumptions about the U.S.-Mexico border and its relevance to their own lives and ethical obligations.

BorderLinks trips offer a unique opportunity to explore Americans' perceptions of border issues and communities as those perceptions are developed and revised through firsthand exposure to the border region. I examine the ways in which BorderLinks and its trip participants describe the Mexican border region- its physical, social, and political landscapes as well as border residents and migrants. Specifically, I focus on representations of difference and sameness that participants constructed between themselves and their own communities and the border communities and people they met during their visit in the border region. Participants' reflections on their experiences at the border and on the connections or divisions that they make between themselves and the people they met during their visit in part suggests the degree to which BorderLinks trips help maintain or build an alternate social vision of the relationships between the U.S. and Mexican states and their citizens.<sup>1</sup>

---

1 I conducted the fieldwork for this research in the summer and fall of 2002 in cooperation with Jodi Perin, another graduate student at the University of Arizona (UA). BorderLinks

## Social Movements and Framing Processes

Social movements have received significant attention from social science scholars,, especially with more recent attempts to (re-)theorize social movements in the context of globalization and the rise of transnational social movements. One of the questions addressed by social movement scholars is how social movements generate social meaning and construct narratives to mobilize current and potential participants. Bendford and Snow (2000) have developed the concept of collective action frames to discuss the ways in which social movements produce shared meanings among participants. Following the work of Goffman (1974), frames enable individuals to organize and interpret events in meaningful ways. Constructed and held jointly, collective action frames serve multiple purposes, allowing individuals to collectively identify problems, suggest solutions, and mobilize for action. In short, they are shared repertoires for organizing meanings and for acting.

The idea of collective action frames can be useful for examining how meanings are constructed, disseminated, and re-developed within social movements. Collective action frames are flexible and changing; they are constantly negotiated and re-created in interactions within social movements as well as in exchanges connecting social movements to their wider socio-political contexts. Frames are suggested and modified by multiple individuals and organizations. The concept of a 'frame' should not be understood as static, but should allow for the evolving nature of collective action frames. Social movements, and the sets of meanings, narratives, and symbols attached to them, can be complicated, contradictory, and subject to change.

Collective action frames also draw on or answer to cultural frames already in circulation in wider cultural arenas. Tarrow (1992) suggests that collective action frames need to juxtapose themselves against aspects of other existing cultural frames. Yet despite the recognition that collective action frames borrow or build on frames outside social movements, social movement scholars working with the idea of collective action frames have been criticized for not paying enough attention to wider social contexts within which they operate (Rubin 2004). What is sometimes missing from

---

and trip participants gave us permission and support for our research. As part of our research, Jodi and I were full participants in two BorderLinks trips each, for a total of four trips. We conducted follow-up phone interviews with all but two participants from the four trips. In addition, we conducted informal interviews with BorderLinks staff and presented our research at staff and board meetings for feedback. This research was approved by the UA Internal Review Board.

theorizations of collective action frames is an attention to power and to wider social and political contexts. How are collective action frames engaged with or juxtaposed against existing dominant frames? How do collective action frames circulate within and beyond social movements?

The concept of hegemony, as developed by Gramsci (1971), can provide a framework for understanding how collective action frames are created, maintained, and re-worked, especially in relation to dominant frames of meaning. Hegemony is a flexible, relational framework which dialectically links material structures with language and ideology. As such, hegemony is a lived process, constantly shifting in balance and form. Roseberry (1994) notes the fragility of hegemony in that it is neither monolithic nor immutable; it can be tested, manipulated, or in some cases ignored. But flexibility is the key to maintaining power. By enveloping alternative forms of cultural production, a core hegemonic order is sustained. While hegemony is shifting and flexible, it may appear to those individuals living within its framework to be fixed and "natural." Hence, Gavin Smith lists one way of understanding hegemony as "a cultural field of that which is taken for granted" (1999:229).

A Gramscian approach to social movements can help broaden and center the idea of collective action frames, specifically by linking the micro-processes of frame construction with macro political processes. Social movements are potentially counter hegemonic projects that call into question the hegemonic order and relations of power. In this sense, collective action frames become more than effective means for mobilizing members and resources; they are potential breaks with a dominant consensus about cultural meaning and political power. Social movements develop collective action frames to 'disorganize consent' and 'organize dissent,' to borrow the phrases used by Carroll and Ratner (1996).

Following, I discuss the various ways that the U.S.-Mexico border and undocumented migration are framed in dominant narratives, BorderLinks trips, and individual trip participants' discussions. While I focus on the discursive framing processes within BorderLinks programs, it is with an eye also to the possible ways in which these collective frames have meaning beyond the duration of participants' trips as well as the ways in which the alternative frames proposed by BorderLinks and its participants engage with dominant interpretations of the U.S.-Mexico border, as described below.

### **The U.S.-Mexico Border in National Debates**

Within the U.S., a hegemonic discourse describing the U.S.-Mexico border as both physically real and practically necessary is consistently constructed and reflected in the U.S. media, on the floors of Congress, in state policy-making, in public opinion polls, and in debates about immigration. Within this discourse, the idea that countries delineate and control their boundaries is accepted as common sense and natural. Despite differences between progressive and conservative stances on immigration reform and border enforcement, this assumption often underpins both stances (New and Petronicolos 1998). The U.S.-Mexico border, as described by Demo (2005) in her analysis of videos produced by the INS public affairs office, is both a symbol and an index of U.S. sovereignty.

In the case of the U.S.-Mexico border, sovereignty of the state to control its boundaries is particularly important because the U.S.-Mexico border is seen as a site of vulnerability, the place where the U.S. is a little too close to the poverty and crisis that is identified with Mexico (Chavez 2001). This assumption about the nature of the border is tightly tied to national debates in the U.S. on immigration and national security. At the border, immigration is an "uncontrolled movement" with immigrants crossing in "streams," "floods," and "torrents" that swallow U.S. jobs and drain social services (Chavez 2001, Coutin and Chock 1995, Demo 2005). The border becomes a site at which the problem of illegal immigration can be located, so that while the border region faces a host of concerns, immigration and, more recently, terrorism captures public attention and encompasses much of what the border means to the nation (Nevins 2002).

Complementing the vision of the border described above is a particular national imagination of Mexican and undocumented immigrants. In news accounts and debates about immigration reform, undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central American are often represented as dangerous, evil, and unknown, equal to criminals (Coutin and Chock 1995, Chavez 2001). More recently, but not wholly differently, undocumented migrants are presented as threats to national security, because they break the law and disregard the borderline. As national security threats, undocumented migrants become wrapped in the discourses of terror and terrorism. This image of undocumented immigrants is in recurring tension with the national myth of the U.S. as a nation of immigrants. At various historical moments, such as when undocumented immigrants have become eligible for amnesty and citizenship, eligible immigrants are re-

framed as hardworking, family-oriented, safe, and worthy (Coutin and Chock 1995; Reimers 1998).

Negative media representations of Mexican migrants and the U.S.-Mexico border parallel U.S. federal and state policies in the last decade that have further institutionalized and militarized the border. The number of Border Patrol agents on the U.S.-Mexico border increased from roughly 3,400 in 1993 to 9,700 in 2004 (Government Accounting Office 2004). Between 1986 and 2002, appropriations for Border Patrol increased more than 10 fold, from \$151 million to \$1.6 billion dollars. These increases were used to triple border enforcement staff; develop physical infrastructures, including roads, fences, and walls in selected locations; and implement new "force-multiplying technologies," such as cameras and infrared sensors. Importantly, increased border enforcement has not reduced the number of undocumented migrants crossing the border. Rather, the result is that many undocumented migrants are pushed to cross at more remote, and potentially deadly, locations (Cornelius 2001).

Nevins (2002) argues that the rhetoric identifying undocumented immigrants as "illegal" and the border as "out-of-control" is a relatively recent development in media venues and in politics. Nonetheless, this rhetoric captured national attention and acceptance quickly. National opinion polls from 1983-1996 showed that over half of Americans thought that illegal immigration was a problem, with the percent of concerned rising (Lee 1998). Undocumented immigrants comprise about thirty percent of total net immigration to the U.S. (Lee 1998) and about half of undocumented immigrants are Mexican (Passel 2005). However, in national discourses, "illegal" immigrants and Mexican immigrants are often conflated (Lee 1998, Nevins 2002). In this conflation, the U.S.-Mexico border becomes a key site of national vulnerability and a "sensible" place for responding to the "illegal immigration problem." Nevins further argues that the development of the rhetoric of "illegal" immigration serves to naturalize and normalize the U.S.-Mexico border.

That the discourse on the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration, as described above, predominates in national media, debates, and policies does not mean that everyone relies on the same framework to understand the border. Border residents, bi-national business operators, proponents of international economic liberalization policies, undocumented migrants, and human rights and bi-national activists may all have alternate conceptions of the border.<sup>2</sup>

---

2 For ethnographic descriptions of border residents' understanding of the border as porous, see, for example, Pope (1995) and Ruiz (1998).

Despite the existence of alternate viewpoints, the discourse that predominates in the U.S. is one in which the border is seen as a materially, politically, and socially “real” line, which checks, and is also vulnerable to, the “dangers” of Mexico: poverty, “illegal” aliens, drugs, and cultural difference. It is not my intention to further explore the whole of “the complex culture and politics of the ‘representational machine’” (Roseberry 1998:522) that produces this interpretation of the U.S.-Mexico border. However, it is important to outline because it is this interpretation to which any alternate viewpoints will need to answer. BorderLinks and its trip participants are reflecting on, responding to, and incorporating aspects of the discourse described above, within the context of their own lived experiences in the border region.

### **BorderLinks**

BorderLinks is a bi-national, non-profit organization that offers travel seminars designed primarily for American participants and centered on the U.S.-Mexico border. The organization has a bi-national staff and facilities in Tucson, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. The principal focus of the U.S. staff and center is raising U.S. citizens’ awareness of border issues and the globalizing economy, by exposing participants to life on the border and encouraging them to reflect on their own assumptions about the U.S.-Mexico border. Ultimately, BorderLinks staff hopes that participants will use the information and experiences garnered during the travel seminars to educate and advocate in their own communities about U.S.-Mexico border issues. BorderLinks hosts between 60 and 80 groups a year, in addition to a semester-long program for college students.

BorderLinks argues for the U.S.-Mexico border as an appropriate site for their work by framing the border as an area of complexity and contrast, as a site for meeting across national boundaries and as a microcosm of the processes of globalization. First, the border is simultaneously a study in contrasts and meeting ground across divisions. BorderLinks written materials (websites, orientation materials, newsletter, etc...) often highlight differing levels of income and development and differences in environmental and health problems on the two side of the border. Mexican border communities are ‘communities at risk,’ juxtaposed against U.S. wealth and prosperity. But the border is also a space for the meeting of two nations. At the border itself, the division of two nations can be crossed “in a single stride” (Gill 1999). On BorderLinks trips, Mexican and U.S. citizens come together in cross-cultural exchange. Photographs on the Border-

Links website and promotional materials show Americans and Mexicans conversing and sharing meals together. BorderLinks Mexican director writes, "We are tied together and our futures must reflect that connection" (Trujillo 2003). The concurrence of juncture and disjuncture is only one aspect of the complexity of the border region, as BorderLinks literature emphasizes. BorderLinks argues for a multi-focus approach to border issues that appreciates social, environmental, political, religious, and economic factors as equally important to understanding border "reality." In addition, BorderLinks represents the border as a site that is experiencing rapid change, which reinforces the complicated nature of the border.

The transnational, complex, and changing nature of the border makes it representative of global economic processes. At the border, the patterns of international economics and politics that impact all local communities are acutely realized. Former BorderLinks director Ufford-Chase writes that knowing the stories of people from both sides of the border "is like looking through a magnifying glass at the impact of the emerging global economy" (2002). BorderLinks literature suggests that trip participants can view the U.S.-Mexico border as a laboratory for processes of globalization and as a preview of the impact that a unifying global economy will have on communities around the world. As a microcosm of the new global reality, the border becomes a symbol, "a still-life painting of the new world order" (Ufford-Chase 2002). The U.S.-Mexico border as a metaphor becomes a critical learning tool for BorderLinks in educating trip participants about the impacts of globalization and social and economic cleavages.

A final important aspect of the border in BorderLinks literature is that it is a place to be experienced. Sensory exposure is key: seeing the high border wall separating the U.S. and Mexico in downtown Nogales; smelling "raw sewage flow[ing] through the streets during heavy rains" (Ufford-Chase 2002); hearing the stories of people from border communities; touching "homes made of packing crates, cardboard, scrap lumber and corrugated tin...so close together you can reach from one to another" (Ufford-Chase 2002). Key words in BorderLinks literature include firsthand, direct, and personal experience and immersion at the border.

BorderLinks' vision of the border has been profoundly shaped by its roots in the sanctuary movement for Central American refugees fleeing civil wars and political violence in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala during the 1980s. Churches and congregations often served as physical, spiritual, and intellectual centers for sanctuary. In 1987, sanctuary activists in Tucson started BorderLinks, primarily to educate church groups by

offering educational trips on the U.S.-Mexico border focused on Central American refugee concerns. BorderLinks' involvement in the sanctuary movement has provided the organization with connections to liberal and mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches. Former activists in the sanctuary movement (U.S. and Mexican) continue to serve as staff and board members for BorderLinks.

In her ethnography of the sanctuary movement in Tucson, Cunningham (1995) argues that the sanctuary movement was more than a political response to violence and U.S. complicity in Central America. Sanctuary challenged notions of national borders and states as bounded. Through its policing of the U.S.-Mexico border and its processing and removal of refugees from the U.S., the federal government asserted its rights to establish and to protect its national borders. In contrast, the sanctuary movement symbolically and literally challenged this conception of the border and of bounded nations. At a literal level, sanctuary activists rejected state constructed boundaries by assisting refugees across the border.<sup>3</sup> At a symbolic level, the sanctuary movement worked to create ties across national borders. Sanctuary literature sometimes called people to action through the creation of fictive kinship with refugees: Imagine that the persecuted is your brother, sister, mother, or father and then commit yourself to working for sanctuary as though this were true. By framing refugees as brethren, sanctuary literature sought to make violence outside U.S. national borders germane to U.S. citizens. Sanctuary activists' discussion of the church also serves to symbolically cross borders. Jim Corbett, a leader in sanctuary work in Tucson, wrote that the church can be a "community that transcends national boundaries" (Corbett 1986:14). Thus, the U.S. sanctuary movement was an attempt by U.S. citizens to construct an alternative discourse not only about war and violence in Central America, but also on the power of the state, on the role of faith and church in social justice, and on processes of globalization and transnational engagement.

Personal experience and witness were also important aspects of workers' participation in the sanctuary movement (Coutin 1993 and Lorentzen 1991). Analyzing personal narratives of border crossings, transformation, sanctuary work, and social justice, Coutin argues that sanctuary workers developed a "culture of protest:" practices, rituals, jokes, codes, and ethics internal to the movement that organized sanctuary work. Constructed

---

3 Sanctuary activists argued that their assistance was an act of "civil initiative" to uphold the 1980 Refugee Act and the U.S. commitment to the U.N. Refugee Convention. The U.S. government argued that sanctuary activists were operating outside the law and a federal judge convicted eight activists of conspiracy and transporting and harboring fugitives in 1985 (*United States v. Maria de Socorro Pardo del Aguilar*).

out of a social critique of American imperialism, these cultural behaviors became enactments of alternative relationships between Americans and Central Americans, a way of "practicing change" (Coutin 1993:174). Through personal experience and interpersonal relationships, sanctuary activists were able to assess the truth claims of the U.S. and Central American governments and construct a discourse on violence in Central America counter to that portrayed by their national government.

The sanctuary movement's development of a spiritual and moral framework for understanding U.S. policy in Latin America, the nature of national boundaries, and the role of church in political action has had an important influence on BorderLinks' philosophy. Like the sanctuary movement, BorderLinks questions the border as monolithic and "natural." In contrast, BorderLinks represents the border as a region of complexity, a space that divides two nations yet is also a site for meeting and exchange. Key to this challenge is a parallel emphasis on personal experience, direct witness, and the development of cross-border inter-personal contact.

While BorderLinks evolved out of the sanctuary movement, it has since allied itself with other U.S.-Mexico border activists groups. Cunningham (2000) notes that activists from the sanctuary movement shifted to become part of a global social movement. When Cunningham followed up with sanctuary workers in Tucson in the 1990s, she found them participating in many social activist projects, varying from the U.S. embargo against Cuba to NAFTA to welfare reform. They had adopted new vocabulary to describe their work, less based in religious terms and more dependent on concepts such as "global citizenship," "deterritorialization," "global human interconnectedness," and "a world without borders" (2000:596). These concepts mirrored the way that sanctuary workers had previously understood the U.S.-Mexico border, yet extended their concerns to a more global level, connecting them with a rise in transnational social movements. Cunningham's characterization of the change and development of these individuals' perspectives and activism mirrors the evolution of BorderLinks' work. BorderLinks still depends on church groups for financial support and embraces a theological analysis of the border. However, it also relies on a new vocabulary that emphasizes a secular interconnectedness as a result of changing social and economic relationships. The organization has shifted from its original focus on Central America to more immediate issues in the U.S.-Mexico border. BorderLinks now has institutional and personal alliances with a variety of organizations in Tucson, including the *Coalición de Derechos Humanos*, the No More Deaths in the Desert campaign, and the Samaritan Patrol, that focus public attention on

U.S. border and migration policy and that offer direct humanitarian assistance to undocumented migrants. The evolution of the types of collective action frames upon which BorderLinks has drawn over the last twenty years exemplifies the flexibility and changing nature of social movement frames.

### **BorderLinks Trips on the U.S.-Mexico Border**

BorderLinks offers trips to a variety of groups, with typical trips lasting five days and including visits to Nogales and other nearby border communities. Each BorderLinks trip was led by one Mexican and one American trip leader, who tried to provide simultaneous translation during all organized activities. Primary to all trips was an intimate exposure to poverty on the border for trip participants. This involved participants in home-stays, sharing meals, visiting, and spending time with poor and working class families in their homes. Trip activities included a mix of site visits, discussions, driving tours, and presentations. Visits to a maquiladora<sup>4</sup>, social service programs, the U.S. Border Patrol station, and the supermarket (to estimate subsistence costs) are standard. Most groups spent time at the physical border itself: the high, corrugated metal wall in downtown Nogales or a flimsy barbed wire fence in the remote Sonoran desert. They also had at least one opportunity to meet with undocumented migrants preparing to enter the U.S. Trips were intense for participants at multiple levels. Activities pushed people past their comfort zone at a physical level. Mid-summer in northern Sonora is hot, dry, and dusty. Taken for granted comforts such as showers, beds, and air conditioning were not available on a daily basis. Participants spent considerable time riding in fifteen passenger vans and their days were filled with many activities and little unprogrammed time. They were also challenged at an emotional level by what they saw and experienced.

At face value, BorderLinks trips may appear as an informative buffet of activities that highlight economic, social, or political issues specific to the U.S.-Mexico border. But, as anthropologist Cunningham points out in her description of her own experiences with BorderLinks, trips are a “narrative based on a specific set of questions, organized around the trope of crossing borders, and rooted in a particular kind of politics” (2001:376).

4 Maquiladoras are foreign-owned, export assembly plants, first established along the U.S.-Mexico border as part of Mexico’s Border Industrialization Program, begun in 1964. They are a major source of formal employment in Nogales, Sonora, although an economic downturn in the U.S. and the prospects for re-locating to other countries for cheaper labor have contributed to the recent closing of plants in Nogales (General Accounting Office 2003).

Aspects of BorderLinks' discursive representations of the border are evident in the structure of trips. The complexity and contrasts of the border are captured in the arrangement of activities which aim to show multiple sides and perspectives. Participants meet with a variety of people: Border Patrol officers, migrants, maquiladora managers and workers, long time residents, recent arrivals, activists, and clergy. Some of the people met offered contrasting opinions about the border region and others complicated participants' perspective by arguing for more nuanced views. Participants saw the border at various points and visited poor colonias and richer neighborhoods. Activities like a visit to the supermarket demonstrated the contrasts in cost of living and wages between the U.S. and Mexico. Likewise, BorderLinks trips make the border a meeting ground and place for dialogue for trip participants. Meals and overnight stays with hosts, simultaneous translations, workshops, and group discussions opened opportunities for participants and border residents to share in conversation. Lastly, by focusing trips on the processes of migration across national boundaries and on the maquiladora industry as an example of free trade, BorderLinks highlights the border as microcosm of globalization. An alliance with the poor, a focus on personal interactions and relationships as source of knowledge and authority (rather than, for example, statistics or legal perspectives), and participants' personal discomfort can all encourage an attention to present conditions on the border and a re-examination of assumptions about living standards and security, in the broadest sense. Thus, even those participants who may not familiarize themselves with BorderLinks' perspective, through its written materials and history, will nonetheless have their experiences shaped by the way that BorderLinks frames the border.

While the structure of BorderLinks trips suggests alternative views of the border, it would be a mistake to assume that the trips present a unified vision. Several factors contribute to a level of multi-vocality and the potential for multiple perspectives to be conveyed. First, the BorderLinks staff itself is not united by a common interpretation of the border. A bi-national staff means that staff members have different life experiences, histories, concerns, and allegiances that shape their individual views of the border. Second, most U.S. trip leaders are younger staff from diverse regions of the U.S. A relatively high turn-over rate among U.S. staff means that trip leaders may be learning alongside participants, rather than espousing a particular, well-developed viewpoint. Third, BorderLinks staff often expects each group to shape the dialogue at visits and during reflections. The result is that BorderLinks trips tend to foster what Philips

(2004) terms “ideological multiplicity.” Following Philips’ metaphor of “an ecology of ideas,” BorderLinks trips create a particular environment that may allow for the emergence and exploration of multiple perspectives. However, certain sets of ideas and frames will be more likely to flourish, while other ideas and frames will need to compete for a niche in the environment.

### **Trip Participants’ Reflections**

Each of the four groups that Jodi and I joined was unique in terms of geographic origin, age range, motivations, and interests. Two groups were organized through educational institutions; one was a group of high school teachers and the other a group of public health and medical students. The other two groups were sponsored by churches that had previously sent members to participate in BorderLinks trips. Over half of the participants were white and ten percent were Mexican-American. The majority of participants were U.S. citizens. Groups ranged in size from 10 to 13 individuals. Most of the participants that we asked said they were initially interested in the trips as an opportunity to get to know and experience the U.S.-Mexico border region or Mexico more generally, among other reasons.

Jodi’s and my fieldwork with BorderLinks provided us with several distinct opportunities to listen to participants reflect on their trips experiences. In follow-up interviews, during trip conversations, and in group reflections, participants were involved in discursive constructions of border communities; participants created verbal “snapshots” of the border region to illustrate and explain their own experiences. Most participants captured some aspect of difference between themselves and their communities and the border region. But participants also employed images that created ties between themselves and the Mexican residents and migrants who they met. Further reflection led some participants to begin to question the border as a “natural” delineation between the U.S. and Mexico. Finally, while most participants felt it was important to share the knowledge they gained on the BorderLinks trip with other people, a few participants struggled to effectively communicate what they had experienced.

Though interview questions did not ask participants to draw comparisons or contrasts between their own communities and the border region, participants used the interview process to point out and react to the differences they saw during their trips along the border, generally and in comparison to the U.S. One participant, Amy elaborated, “It wasn’t bad

in a sense that people that were living there thought it was bad.<sup>5</sup> It was just, like, compared to what we're used to it was practically desolate." Speaking of the migrants whom he met on the trip, Vincent said, "I know that, you know, people are living desperate lives...this is what they are resorting to, to risk their own lives goin' through the desert just to get here." Often differentiation was based on assessments of the material living conditions of poor families. Participants discussed the low wages, relative high costs of basic goods, and housing conditions. Andrew remembered vividly a home where he had lunch in a neighborhood that did not have electrical services,

"Just looking at the situation with the wiring there was pretty, uh, pretty frightening....It's a disaster waiting to happen. Little pieced together wire running through the walls, two-by-fours and cardboard and chip board and stuff like that...I asked Alicia [his host for lunch], you know, 'How many people get killed?' 'No one. No one gets killed, but there are a lot of fires.'"

The housing conditions of poorer host families, whose homes are sometimes constructed of cardboard, have dirt floors, and lack running water, especially captured the attention of participants. The physical landscape of Nogales' colonias was also a site for difference, with participants highlighting unpaved streets, untended garbage, and the semi-arid climate. In these descriptions, the border region constituted a site of desolation and desperation.

Of initial concern for some participants were language and cultural differences. Homestays, ultimately consistently listed by participants as among the best trip activities, raised initial concerns for participants because they worried about communicating with families. At a basic level, participants wondered how they would talk to hosts without knowing Spanish. In addition, some participants worried that they did not know Mexican cultural etiquette and would offend their hosts. Cultural and linguistic differences were initially conceived as barriers between participants and their hosts.

While most participants described the differences they witnessed, some participants also minimized that difference to emphasize a shared humanity between themselves and the people with whom they interacted on their trips. These constructions were based on themes of family, work, and face-to-face interaction. Trip participant Ruth explained that Border-

5 All participants' names are pseudonyms.

Links trips were an opportunity to witness a shared humanity between Mexicans and Americans. While Ruth thought that many of the trip participants in her group approached the trip with open minds, she considered the importance of BorderLinks' work more generally,

"One might have a lot of misconceptions about what kind of people live in conditions like that...it's good to recognize that the people that live there are just like us. You know, they aren't low-lives. You know, they're hard working people. They're families; they're mothers; they're, you know, extended families that are really trying to do the best they can to survive. And to keep their families together."

Ruth explicitly noted the tendency to stereotype border residents and migrants and sought to contradict misperceptions of poor Mexicans. She drew on the concepts of family and work to recast Mexicans as similar to Americans. For participants, situating poor Mexicans within interpersonal relationships helped identify their personhood and admirable capacity to face difficult times. As well, participants emphasized the parallel familial roles they shared with their hosts, especially as parents or grandparents with similar aspirations for their children's happiness.

Participants also contextualized migrants within families in order to construct the personhood of migrants. Migrants were presented as hard-working family members seeking to create successful lives. Cristina, who grew up in Mexico but now lives in the U.S., described her visit with migrants in the plaza in the town of Altar, an important stopping point for many migrants on their way to cross the border,

"At first, I was hesitant to speak with all those guys who were there. You think they're all mean people or who knows who they are. But you start talking with them, and they have a family, they have dreams, they have- it was nice talking to them...I wanted to hear their stories, their reasons, their struggles, and everything like that."

Migrants were understood as industrious individuals forced by economic necessity to come to the U.S. without documentation, in order to support their families and improve their lives.

For other participants, shared humanity was constructed through interpersonal contact. Maria explained how she thought the BorderLinks trip impacted her, "Just putting a face to all the things you read about in the paper as far as people, you know, crossing the border on foot and, um, it

really put a face to it and story behind it, a personal one, which was just invaluable, that you would never gotten if you didn't actually go and experience it." Several participants noted that meeting with migrants waiting to cross the border deepened their emotional response to the questions of undocumented migration. Carol described her reaction to news of migrants' deaths on the border after returning to her home town, "Yeah, we picked up the newspaper...and it said that fifteen had died from Thursday night to Monday or something. And I, God, I was just overcome by sadness... because, what if it was the people that we had just met?...I could just see their faces and thought, oh my God, what if they didn't make it?" The image of "face" and face-to-face interaction were key aspects in constructing a shared humanity and a capacity for participants to empathize with migrants' stories.

As a result of their experiences, some of the participants began to question legal constructions of citizenship and national boundaries. For some participants, this re-alignment or questioning was subtle. This was the case, for example, for participants who switched their terminology from "illegal alien" to "undocumented migrant." The term "illegal aliens," as Conover aptly puts it, sounds "like outlaws from another planet" (1987:xiv). Migrant right groups, with such slogans as "No person is illegal," have opposed the use of terms like "illegal aliens" and "illegals," arguing that the terms criminalize and dehumanize (Van Ham 2006). Another participant, Sue, explained,

"I guess I believed [before attending the BorderLinks trip] that we needed to somehow have some immigration laws, but getting to know my high school students [primarily first generation Mexican-Americans] personally it was just kind of a link, just like getting to know the people on the BorderLinks [trip],... *They're people, that they should be able to come here,* and yet I guess, I don't know for sure what would happen if we just had no immigration laws or let anyone in." [Emphasis added.]

For Sue, the fact of migrants' personhood was enough to justify their freedom of movement and their right to enter the U.S. At the same time, she continued to struggle to understand what the ramifications of reforming U.S. immigration laws would be.

Other participants began to call into question their own political and ethical positions. When I asked Nancy to reflect on a dinner we had shared at a migrant soup kitchen, she responded, "It has come back to my mind several times since...I guess as we came home, too, somebody had just

been captured out in the desert, or something, right at the end of July there...and then we had to re-kind of- think all that information we'd taken. Who's side do we take in this?" Several participants similarly hinted at a sense that they needed to re-align themselves in relation to their national government's policies and to undocumented migrants.

For other participants, the questioning of legal constructs in light of their understandings of migrant personhood was more profound. Carol described a conversation she had with a group of women who crossed the border undocumented with their children. Her story more explicitly calls into question the restrictions on border crossings and the process of dehumanization which results,

"And I was so impressed with the women with those kids...Yeah, they cross during the day because at night they rob you, and there were red ants that got all over the kids and they had to keep crawling, and you know, hiding and crawling, and, how horrible...and I asked if they had to cross back [to Mexico] the same way, and one said, 'No, we just walk across the border like decent people.' That breaks your heart."

Participants witnessed the risks and consequences of what De Genova (2002) terms the "'illegality' and deportability of everyday life:" the desert heat, lack of water, the windowless U.S. Border Patrol holding cells, and the demeaning nature of a mother's recourse in which she must ask her children to crawl through the desert.

For a few participants, the contradictions in U.S. border policy could not be justified. One participant noted that it was "ironic to have such an ugly barrier between two countries supposedly helping each other and trading freely." Another participant, after experiencing how easily he could cross into Mexico, felt it was hypocritical that the U.S. did not allow Mexicans to cross with equal ease.

The reality of the border itself was also questioned, as participants began to evaluate what actually constituted the border. Kim, a trip participant, and Jodi, my research partner, had a short conversation about the inconsistency they saw between the physical fragility and the political power of the border.

Kim: "And I think seeing the border there and realizing that the physical border isn't much of anything, but, all of the other elements that make that a border are so dramatic and so, um, just such an amazing, an enormous impact."

Jodi: "Yeah, that's very well-put, about the...flimsiness of the physical bor-

der at Sasabe [a remote, rural site along the Arizona-Sonora border].”

Kim: “Yeah, I mean, it’s nothing, but it’s like it’s this huge, it’s still this huge barrier.”

While the barbed wire border fence at Sasabe, Sonora to which Jodi and Kim referred, seemed surprisingly fragile, Kim recognized the less visible aspects of the border which increased its strength in limiting human mobility: whether that be the long stretches of desert on either side; Border Patrol officers, their surveillance equipment, roads, and vehicles; or many migrants’ scant financial resources in the face of the high costs of assisted crossings.<sup>6</sup>

One group was invited to physically “transgress” the border at Sasabe by a local (Mexican) police officer accompanying the group. In her field-notes, Jodi wrote that the officer “opened the make-shift gate...and playfully suggested that we cross ‘illegally’ into the U.S...Almost everyone... took the opportunity to take a few steps to the American side.” However, the officer also reminded the group that the U.S. Border Patrol was watching them, which he had ascertained from the glint of sunlight reflecting off binoculars in the distance. Similar to Kim and Jodi’s conversation, this group’s experience highlighted the border as “fragile” in appearance but also heavily surveilled and fortified.

Not all participants questioned the existence or necessity of a national boundary. For instance, Amy stated, “I don’t think our government could really just like open the borders or anything because we’d have such a flood of people.” Jack equated a “fortified” border to a padlocked door which protects private property. His analogy to a locked door gave a fortified border a kind of everyday commonsense, as well as suggests the potential danger of thieves. However, he also submitted that each wall built was a compromise of greater social principles.

Interestingly, a few (mostly young) participants struggled with verbalizing what they learned, which was based in emotional and visceral experience. When I asked what she had learned on the trip, Rachel initially responded, “Um. I dunno. It’s kinda hard to like put it into words. It’s more like an overall feeling, kind of. I dunno.” Jodi had a similar exchange with Amanda, who said, “Well, I discovered more, but it’s, I can’t really explain what they were. They were kind of like personal issues.” Beth, another young woman on one of the trips, tried to articulate why she

6 Mexican migrants without documentation can pay roughly \$1,200 US dollars to human smugglers to direct their attempts to enter the U.S. (Massey 2005).

was having trouble explaining what she had learned,

“I think because you can tell someone...it takes them [Nogales maquiladora shop floor employees] four hours of working in the maquila to buy a gallon of milk.....And they say, ‘Wow, that’s ridiculous.’...And they immediately get what you’re trying to tell them. But [other things are] harder for them to understand...Because, you know, you didn’t understand it ‘til you went down there...You can’t expect them to understand it on the level that you understand it...and so they don’t react in a way that you’d like them to. So then you get frustrated... It’s one of those things that I can’t really articulate what I, I felt, so everyone I talk to about the trip I’m like, ‘You need to go on one of these trips.’”

First-hand experience and what Beth termed “all those things that you really learn more with you heart than with your head” became difficult to communicate to others through words.

I initially attributed this difficulty in articulating the experience of BorderLinks trips to the age of the participants. During the trips, I witnessed most of the young people remain quiet while adults dominated conversations during activities and group reflections. However, anthropologist Susan Coutin describes a similar reaction to her own experience on a BorderLinks trip, which she attended while doing dissertation fieldwork on the sanctuary movement. She reflected, “There’s an experiential depth to it [the trip] that becomes difficult to articulate. As one man said, ‘How will we relate this experience to others when we go back?’ There’s a feeling that they can never understand simply by hearing our words, because it goes beyond words” (Coutin 1990:154). Coutin and her fellow trip participant expressed the same sense of the primacy of experience in producing knowledge, which could not be translated into words to be shared with others.

### **Trip Participants’ Discussions in Context**

Earlier, I described a national discourse on the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration that tends to dominate in the mainstream media, state and national policy developments. Within this discourse, the U.S.-Mexico border is a natural and unquestioned division between two distinct spaces and nations. Yet the boundary, while “real” and “natural”, is under constant threat, a dangerous site where the U.S. is most vulnerable. The border is the break which holds back “invasion” by “illegal” immigrants

and the threats of Mexican poverty. BorderLinks, especially influenced by its roots in the sanctuary movement, has developed a particular view of the U.S.-Mexico border as a region of complexity and contrasts. The border is simultaneously a division of two nations and a meeting ground where Mexican and American citizens can gather. The border provides a space for dialogue, but it is also the theme for discussion, as an allegory for the processes of economic globalization. Finally, the border is a place to be experienced, where U.S. citizens come to know personally U.S. and international policies as they play out in the daily lives of Mexican border residents and migrants. This conception of the border is evident in BorderLinks literature and is also carried out in the development of BorderLinks trips.

BorderLinks' representation of the border is an alternative narrative to the hegemonic discourse on the border and immigration. By emphasizing the complicated nature of the border, BorderLinks opens a space to talk about multiple perspectives and issues, rather than focus on the border as a site where the "problem" of "illegal" immigration needs to be addressed. Within that space, the border becomes a place for gathering and dialogue, instead of danger and invasion. BorderLinks' construction of the border as a "study in contrasts" and the emphasis in trips on meeting with the poor parallel the dominant images of the border and Mexico as impoverished and different (from the U.S.). However, the mission of the organization is arguably to encourage participants to conclude that difference and poverty does not necessarily equal the kind of erupting or invasive danger conjured by other narratives of the U.S.-Mexico border.

BorderLinks trips complicated participants' understanding of the U.S.-Mexico border. Then, through the trips, participants began to develop a shared repertoire, especially as they learned the concepts key to BorderLinks' perspective on the U.S.-Mexico border. But in constructing their representations of the border trip participants were not working only from their direct experiences or from BorderLinks' ideas. They were also drawing on and answering to national dialogues about the U.S.-Mexico border, immigration, national security, and poverty. Participants focused on the border as a site of difference, either explicitly or implicitly in comparison to the U.S. Yet their efforts to draw similarities and connections between themselves and border residents and migrants despite these differences underscored an alternate framing of the meaning of national boundaries.

In some respects, participants' representation of the border in their interviews paralleled aspects of the regnant narratives on the U.S.-Mexico border. Trip participants highlighted a series of differences based on

language and culture which they anticipated encountering. The material conditions of poverty also captured participants' attention, leading to assessments of the border region as desperate and in crisis. Amy's assertion that the border was important to stop a "flood" of people is one example of participants drawing on the same set of images used in the media accounts discussed earlier. In some ways, participants' personal experiences and observations seemed to confirm the idea of a Mexico so dangerous and different as to justify holding it at bay through control of the border.

More commonly, though, participants did not explicitly articulate dominant images of the border and migrants as dangerous, but indirectly engaged and challenged this ideology in their descriptions of the border. Hegemonic frames of the border, Mexico, and Mexican migrants, sometimes unspoken but ubiquitous, wove through participants' conversation. Ruth's analysis of why BorderLinks trips are generally important is one example. She conjured an (imagined) person who holds a series of misconceptions about border residents as "low-lives," lazy, and rootless. She then responded to this person, arguing that Mexicans living on the border are hard-working and family-oriented. Similarly, another participant, Cristina described her initial hesitation to speak with migrants because of the perceived potential danger they posed as evil or unknown. Then, based on her own experience, she contradicted this perception, instead wrapping migrants in images of family, aspiration, rationality, and admirable struggle. In these and other cases, participants invoked dominant frames of Mexican migrants and residents, often held by unnamed or anonymous others who were nonetheless important to answer. Participants then rejected, reframed, or reconsidered the dominant views which they had introduced.

Participants' emphasis on family and work are similar to the rhetorical strategies used in debates about immigration in which proponents of liberal immigration policies emphasize the contributions which immigrants make to the national economy and evoke the sanctity of the family as a protective measure in countering restrictionist arguments. But in participants' discourse, the images of family and work did more than commend migrants as potential U.S. laborers or citizens. Participants developed these discourses to establish relationships between themselves and the Mexican hosts and migrants whom they met. Although not identical, participants' use of "family" parallels the sanctuary movement's technique of imagining kinship across national boundaries to inspire and justify their human rights work. Participants' construction of shared humanity, either universalist or family-centered, is also very similar to the constructions of

shared humanity that Van Ham (2006) describes among long-term activists in several Tucson immigrant advocacy groups.

Like BorderLinks, participants also described the border as a space for meeting and dialogue. The focus on face-to-face contact and the conversations participants had with hosts are examples of their own personal experiences of the border as a meeting ground. One group hoped to make the border a more permanent place of exchange for their church by maintaining a relationship with a church at the border and the church continues to sponsor members to attend BorderLinks trips. Again, participants made connections between themselves and the people they met, not only rhetorically but also concretely.

Some participants' reflections suggested they were moving through a process of re-evaluation as they worked to understand notions of migrant "illegality" with participants' personal experiences and observations on the personhood of Mexican migrants. Rather than "illegal," migrants were workers, family members, and dreamers in these participants' stories. In these narratives, migrants themselves called into question the legitimacy of U.S. border and immigration policy. Rob described this questioning literally in a story in which migrants confronted group members about why they are not welcome to work in the U.S. Likewise, one migrant mother's border crossing story, as re-told by Carol, similarly serves to shift attention from the "illegality" of undocumented migration to the indignity and hazards of a situation in which migrants cannot cross "like decent people."

For some participants, the "naturalness" and legitimacy of the border was problematized through recognition of a series of contradictions. Kim and Jodi contrasted the apparent physical fragility of the border with the less visible, but powerful, aspects of the border that make it "real." One participant noted the irony of a wall between cooperating nations, while other participants contrasted their capacity to easily cross the border with the obstacles facing Mexican residents, whether potential immigrants or temporary visitors to the U.S. Additionally, the contradictions between the personhood of migrants, as understood by participants, and their "illegality" made more apparent the socially constructed nature of the border. These participants' choices to question the legitimacy and "naturalness" of the border suggests their potential willingness to shift their loyalties from the state to a commitment to people crossing borders, a willingness that social movement scholars argue is critical to developing a transnational movement (Smith, Pagnucco, and Chatfield 1997).

Not all participants were able to articulate an alternative discourse (or chose to do so). In some cases, participants identified a moral imperative

to “see” the border differently, but ultimately felt like they did not have the political or economic acumen to assert an alternative. These participants expressed personal and “heart-led” reactions to what they witnessed on their trips. But they did not always have the language to articulate these reactions within a larger ethical, moral, or political framework. When hegemony is strong, “things,” like the border or poverty, seem natural and normal. Social actors have trouble developing a language (words, images and concepts) which would describe an alternate reality, vision, or possibility. Despite the “physical” and direct experiences which BorderLinks and group leaders uphold as powerful, participants were not always able to translate these experiences into meaningful narratives that they could share with other people.

Ultimately, participants varied in their responses, due in part to variations in participants’ personal histories, objectives and desires. Generally, participants who had more personal experience with poverty in the Third World spent less time talking about the material conditions of households and neighborhoods. For participants with less exposure, material conditions were a frequently used vehicle for conveying difference. Another explanation for variation across participants may have been that some participants were continuing to develop lines of thinking from previous conversations or debates with family, friends, or fellow group members. Last, some participants were more open than others to different perspectives and ideas. It’s important to view these interviews as a small “slice of life,” which cannot capture the totality of participants’ ideas, views, or theories for understanding the U.S.-Mexico border. Further, a comprehensive, singular framework for understanding may not exist for participants, even if could be “captured” in an interview.

Finally, even the alternative versions of the U.S.-Mexico border that participants developed are not without potential pitfalls. First, the importance of “face” in situating Mexican hosts and migrants and trip participants in relation to one and other depended on the personal experiences of participants. While people outside of the trips may understand why meeting “face-to-face” with migrants and border residents was meaningful, participants will only be able to convey these meetings indirectly through stories and photos. The power of “face” in creating a shared humanity across the border, as trip participants experienced it, depends on a personal encounter in which few Americans have the privilege of partaking.

The tropes of work and family are effective in constructing sameness and relationship, however, they may have unintended consequences. Fo-

ocusing on family and work can pigeon-hole migrants and border residents into particular social relationships and roles. Within this framework, there is little room to maneuver for a single young man pursuing individual fortune or a woman escaping an abusive family to the anonymity of a new place. Even sympathetic constructions of Mexican immigrants and residents can be problematized to reveal a more restrictive character than arguably intended by the speaker. Additionally, emphasizing shared experiences through family and work has the potential to erase the different structural realities that poor Mexican and middle class U.S. individuals face. Hosts and participants may place similar value on raising families, for example, but encounter very different challenges in terms of financial resources, access to safe and healthy housing, or educational opportunities for their children.

Participants' construction of difference should not be understood as an automatic acceptance of hegemonic representations of the border, border residents, or migrants. Focusing on language and cultural differences or poverty in the Mexican-U.S. frontier can feed into fears about Mexican immigration to the U.S. But recognizing the very different material and social differences between border communities and participants' hometowns does not necessarily lead to conclusions that would justify strict divisions between the U.S. and Mexico. I would argue that many of the stories which participants told about "difference" are important stories to tell: that "desperate" migrants are willing to risk their lives crossing the desert to find work in the U.S. or that families live in homes extremely vulnerable to fire and harsh weather conditions. The key is that these stories elicit compassion and a drive for justice, rather than fear and division.

BorderLinks organizes trip programs that it hopes capture for participants the intricacies of the realities of the U.S.-Mexico border. Participants' personal experiences are the medium through which BorderLinks hopes to develop new and deeper understandings of the border within a broader American public. Trips include a variety of activities which expose participants to things they've never seen, stories they've never heard, and people they've never before met. BorderLinks trips are far from full immersion; trips are short and participants remain in groups guided by trip leaders. Yet the trips are emotionally charged because many of the activities are physically, emotionally, and intellectually challenging for participants. In interviews, participants directly or subtly suggested that they were encouraged to begin to re-think their perceptions based on their trip experiences.

I have attempted to outline coherent trains of thought among par-

ticipants' reflections, but often people's views were chaotic and seemingly contradictory, both between participants and even within individual interviews. Participants' ideas were sometimes still in the process of formation, as they continued to question, complicate, and condense what they had learned. Contradictions arose in and across participants' interviews partly because they were tapping into multiple perspectives and narratives about the U.S.-Mexico border. Participants were sometimes talking against a national hegemonic discourses on migration, border, and poverty, but they were also invoking this discourse, using it to explain or to juxtapose their experiences and what they knew of the border. Interpretive repertoires are not formed in a vacuum and interpretive communities are not isolated. Following Gramsci (1971), hegemony is constantly negotiated, processed, questioned, and re-made. Thus, not surprisingly, participants were re-working their visions of the border, probing at the weaknesses of the hegemonic interpretation, noting the places where their personal experiences could not be reconciled with the dominant narrative, while relying on the same frame to interpret their own experiences.

### Conclusion

In the face of another round of 'immigration reform' and nativist 'resurgence,' how successfully will immigrant rights and border activists be in developing a collective action frame that bucks the prevalent framing of borders and citizenship as natural? New and Petronicolos argue that both left and right wing positions on immigration and the U.S.-Mexico border are grounded by shared assumptions about "immutable national boundaries, marking off the citizen from the alien, which "naturally" delimit spheres of jurisdiction, spheres of moral responsibility, and spheres of knowledge" (1998:84). As such, they are concerned that the politic left is not strong enough to effectively counter conservative, anti-immigrant discourses.<sup>7</sup> How effective then is BorderLinks, as a social movement 'educator,' in transmitting this frame to participants?

The ways in which trip participants choose to represent the border region has implications for BorderLinks' work. Questions of social repre-

---

<sup>7</sup> Cunningham (2001) suggests that one of the reasons that BorderLinks trips do not provide a cohesive political agenda is that in the context of shifting and transnationalizing states, it has become more difficult for trip leaders and participants to clearly identify agents of the state. During the early days of the sanctuary movement, the state was understood as morally wrong and directly responsible for refusing asylum for Central American refugees. In contrast, attempts to assign culpability among a new cast of characters, organizations, and semi-state affiliates are complicated by a shifting, transnationalized political terrain.

sentation are important within the context of BorderLinks' mission to expose participants to "the complexity of life on the border" and to encourage participants to "reexamine their own assumptions and beliefs." How participants describe their experiences and the knowledge they acquire on trips can reflect on the operation and effectiveness of BorderLinks' experiential education programs. To the extent that participants left with more a complex image of the border, BorderLinks was successful with the four groups that Jodi and I joined. In addition, interviews suggested that some participants re-examined the assumptions about borders and migration that often dominate mainstream media and public policy debates.

The border is a principal concept evoked in public dialogues on national security and immigration, but it is also a place peripheral to and unseen by most of nation. Thus, Americans in the interior of the country "know" the border primarily through what they are told, what they read, and the images they see in magazines or on television. Two-thirds of the participants had never been to the U.S.-Mexico border prior to their trip. What they knew previously they had culled from representations made by others- news media, friends, family, and fellow church members- or they inferred (whether correctly or not) from what they knew of other Third World countries. When we asked participants if the BorderLinks trip had inspired them in some way, most participants said they were sharing their experiences with friends and family. Several participants had plans to make presentations at their churches or schools. In a follow-up interview, one participant said that he and his colleagues had shared stories at a church service on returning from their trip and suggested developing an exchange with a church in Sonora. But he explained that members of his church who had not previously attended BorderLinks trips had trouble understanding the experiences of returning members. He compared the experience of a BorderLinks trip to a faith conversion. What narratives participants are (or are not) able to communicate, based on their BorderLinks trip, and their commitment to talking with others has significance in light of most Americans' experience with the border.

Based on participants' reflections, I would argue that BorderLinks trips create fissures in the dominant framing of the U.S.-Mexico border, at least for some participants. These participants adopted or developed alternative frames for themselves, which told a different story of the border region. Since hegemony is constantly in process, it's difficult to say if participants' discussions, reflections, and revisions are temporary blips, in an otherwise seamless dominant narrative, or permanent alterations. According to Gramsci, it is "normal" for hegemony to be questioned and

revised, so long as the power and position of a dominant class is maintained. Change occurs through “organic crises” or prolonged struggle over cultural and ideological meanings. Although Gramsci was speaking at a national level, BorderLinks trips might be viewed as a kind of generator of “organic crises” at a personal level, in which participants’ experiences serve to disrupt the dominant narrative. Following Gramsci’s theory, then, these crises only offer the potential, not a guarantee, for change. BorderLinks trips then might be viewed as one fragment of a larger and more prolonged struggle over the cultural and ideological meanings of the U.S.-Mexico border.

As a counter hegemonic project, BorderLinks trips successfully ‘disorganize consent,’ but do not effectively ‘organizing dissent.’ Part of BorderLinks’ leadership holds strong political opinions about the U.S.-Mexico border, developed in part through years of protest during the sanctuary movement. Yet BorderLinks trips do not present a coherent alternative political agenda. Indeed, most participants did not have plans for further action, aside from sharing their experiences with friends, family, congregations, and classmates. Rather, the aim of BorderLinks is primarily to gather people in ways that seed or ferment alternative views of the border. The majority of BorderLinks trip participants are not deeply committed to activism on the U.S.-Mexico border. But they are arguably more amicable to the arguments, visions, and frames of organizations and movements that call into question the social and political nature of the U.S.-Mexico border and Mexican immigration to the U.S. Following Eric Wolf’s suggestion that meaning and power can shift if confronted with destabilizing alternative meanings, BorderLinks trips then become potentially political acts.

Future research might explore the impacts of BorderLinks trips on participants more long term, to assess the extent to which participants maintain an alternate framing of the U.S.-Mexico border and migration. Secondly, it seems reasonable to ask whether and how an alternative frame motivates participants to mobilize or act. Even as participants seem to adopt aspects of an alternate framing of the border, it’s not clear that they are moved to “action,” as the idea of a ‘collective action frame’ would suggest.

Nonetheless, scholars working with the idea of collective action frames assume that ‘the politics of signification’ (Hall 1982) are important to understand. I would argue that the discourses that U.S. citizens use to reflect on the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration can have real and concrete political consequences. The passage of Proposition 187 in California in

1994, and similarly Proposition 200 in Arizona in 2004, demonstrated the potential power of voters (working from a particular framing of immigration and the border) to shape the state's projects on boundaries and surveillance of immigrants. Both propositions required state agencies to verify citizenship before providing public benefits, like education and health care. What happens in the interplay between the state and social movements with regard to the border and immigration can have profound consequences for border residents and migrants.

Despite its limitations, I hope this discussion provides an example of the process by which individuals shape, process, and re-evaluate social movement frames through personal experience and exposure to dominant and alternative narratives. Through its trips, BorderLinks strives to orchestrate specific personal experiences that will allow participants to question, critique, and re-think hegemonic assertions of the U.S.-Mexico border and migration. Ultimately, BorderLinks hopes that, in dialogue with residents, migrants, BorderLinks staff, and other people they meet at the border, participants may begin to develop alternate framings of national boundaries and citizenship. By exposing participants to new ways of viewing the U.S.-Mexico border, BorderLinks seeks to encourage participants to begin to question predominant assumptions and perspectives about political and social boundaries. They are working on an alternative hegemonic project: a new way of seeing and knowing the U.S.-Mexico border, and on a larger scale, new ways of understanding national boundaries and civic engagement across nations.

### **Aknowledgements**

I am grateful to BorderLinks trip participants, staff, and host families who kindly welcomed Jodi and me and willingly offered their reflections and stories on which this research is based. The Department of Anthropology and the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Arizona provided funding for this research. BorderLinks also provided financial support by partially subsidizing our participation in their programmed activities. Diane Austin, Namino Glantz, Linda Green, Norma Mendoza-Denton, Nathan Piekielek, and Krisna Ruelle all provided insightful comments on earlier drafts of this piece. Finally, I thank Jodi Perin for her enthusiasm, thoughtfulness, and commitment to this project.

### References Cited

- Carroll, William K. and Robert S. Ratner  
 1996 Master Framing and Cross-Movement Networking in Contemporary Social Movements. *The Sociological Quarterly*. 37:601-25.
- Chavez, Leo R.  
 2001 *Covering Immigration*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Conover, Ted  
 1987 *Coyotes*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Corbett, Jim  
 1986 *The Sanctuary Church*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications.
- Cornelius, Wayne  
 2001 Efficacy at the Border. *Population and Development Review*. 27(4): 661-685.
- Coutin, Susan Bibler  
 1993 *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- 1990 *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Stanford University.
- Coutin, Susan Bibler and Phyllis Pease Chock  
 1995 "Your Friend, the Illegal:" Definition and Paradox in Newspaper Accounts of U.S. Immigration Reform. *Identities*. 2(1-2):123-148.
- Cunningham, Hilary  
 2001 Transnational politics at the edges of sovereignty: social movements, crossings and the state at the U.S.-Mexico border. *Global Networks*. 1(4): 369-387.
- 2000 The Ethnography of Transnational Social Activism: understanding the global as local practice. *American Ethnologist*. 26(3):583-604.
- 1995 *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- DeGenova, Nicholas P  
 2002 Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 31:419-47.
- Demo, Anne  
 2005 Sovereignty Discourse and Contemporary Immigration Politics. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 91(3):291-311.

## General Accounting Office

2004 Border Security. GAO Report 04-590. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office.

2003 Mexico's Maquiladora Decline Affects U.S.-Mexico Border Communities and Trade. GAO Report 03-891. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office.

Gill, Jerry H.

1999 BorderLinks: the Road Is Made by Walking. Tucson: BorderLinks. Gramsci, Antonio

1971 Selections from the Prison Notebooks. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, trans. New York: International Publishers.

Kopinak, Kathryn

1996 Desert Capitalism. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Lee, Kenneth K

1998 Huddled Masses, Muddled Laws. London: Praeger.

Lorentzen, Robin

1991 Women in the Sanctuary Movement. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Martinez, Oscar

1994 Border People. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Massey, Douglas

2005 Beyond the Border Build Up: towards a new approach to Mexico-U.S. migration. *Immigration Policy in Focus*. 4(7): 1-11.

Nevins, Joseph

2002 Operation Gatekeeper. New York: Routledge.

Passel, Jeffery

2005 Estimates of the size and characteristics of the undocumented population. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center

Pope, Cynthia

1995 Babies and Borderlands. In *Geographies of Women's Health*, S.A. Matthews, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Redfield, Kari

2003 On the Other Side. Tucson Weekly. September 11.

Reimers, David M

1998 Unwelcome Strangers. New York: Columbia University.

Rouse, Roger

1996 Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism. In *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, edited by David Gutiérrez. Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc.

Rubin, Jeffery

2004 Meanings and Mobilizations: a Cultural Politics Approach to Social Movements and States. *Latin American Research Review*. 39(3):106-142.

Ruiz, Olivia

1998 Visiting the Mother Country: border-crossing as a cultural practice. In *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities*, David Spener and Kathleen Standt, eds. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Smith, Gavin

1999 *Confronting the Present*. Oxford: Berg.

Smith, Jackie, Ron Pagnucco, and Charles Chatfield

1997 *Social Movements and World Politics: a Theoretical Framework.* In *Transnational Movements and Global Politics*, edited by Jackie Smith, Ron Pagnucco, and Charles Chatfield. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Ufford-Chase, Rick

2003 *BorderLinks Challenges Christians*. Electronic document, <http://www.borderlinks.org/bl/faith/challenge.htm>, accessed March 5, 2003. 2002 710 E. Speedway. *Loaves and Fishes*. 21(6):5-8.

Van Ham, Lane

2006 *Civil Religion in Tucson Immigrant Advocacy Groups*. PhD dissertation, University of Arizona.

Vila, Pablo

2000 *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Wilson, Thomas M. and Hastings Donnan

1998 *Nation, State and Identity at International Borders*. In *Border Identities*, Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolf, Eric

1990 Distinguished Lecture: Facing Power- Old Insights, New Questions. *American Anthropologist*. 92(3):586-596.