

PERCEPTIONS AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF NICARAGUAN IMMIGRANTS IN SAN RAMON AND SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA

Julia Irons, St. Olaf College
Advisor: Daniel Rojas, PhD

In recent decades, Nicaraguan immigrants have become an increasingly visible segment of the Costa Rican population. The purpose of this study was to better understand the changes that have occurred in attitudes towards and perceptions of this immigrant population in Costa Rica in the years before, during, and after the civil conflict in Nicaragua. This study has two components. First, I analyzed the coverage of Nicaraguan immigrants in the daily periodical *La Nación*, in which trends of tone and word choice in headlines were evaluated over the course of decades. The conclusions of the first component of the study were the following: that headlines in *La Nación* consistently emphasized the implicitly excessive number of Nicaraguan immigrants in the country; that a perspective which pits the legal forces of Costa Rica “against” the immigrants has emerged since the beginning of the Nicaraguan conflict; and that the descriptor of Nicaraguans as “refugees” has disappeared, to be replaced by the descriptor “ilegales.” In the second component of the study, 66 personal interviews were carried out in order to complement the periodical analysis. The themes of the interviews were: to better understand the relationship between what is printed in periodicals and how such media is actually perceived and absorbed; to speak to Costa Ricans regarding their attitudes toward and perceptions of Nicaraguan immigrants; and to speak to Nicaraguan immigrants regarding their experiences as immigrants and their beliefs regarding how Nicaraguans are perceived in Costa Rica. From this second component, I first concluded Nicaraguan immigrants consistently demonstrated a tendency to separate themselves in living space from Costa Ricans and even from other groups of Nicaraguans, although the extent to which such separation can be considered voluntary is unclear. As regards the Costa Ricans with whom I spoke: while seldom offering undiluted negativity or condemnation of the immigrants, nevertheless expressed concerns regarding their allegedly violent comportment and their large presence in the Costa Rican workforce. Nicaraguan immigrants were pessimistic regarding relations between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans, although they themselves did not generally express hostile feelings towards Costa Ricans in the way that Costa Ricans did toward Nicaraguans.

Finally, in synthesizing the periodical and interview analysis, I conclude that: both newspapers and interview subjects demonstrate a preoccupation with the size of the Nicaraguan participation in the Costa Rican workforce; newspapers and interview subjects also demonstrate a level of self-awareness regarding the mistreatment and exclusion of Nicaraguans in Costa Rican society. Additionally, within the populations with whom I spoke, *La Nación*, although highly regarded, is not necessarily widely read. This evidence of low readership detracts from the force of any impact of its changing discourse, which would not support the use of my findings from periodical analysis in understanding inter-group relations in Costa Rica. However, I also conclude that a majority of those who read *La Nación* do so superficially, skimming the headlines. This supports the importance of understanding changes in the tone of discourse of this periodical, as many casual readers may be disproportionately impacted by the content of the headline alone.