

Bolivians in London

– CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF A LONDON COMMUNITY



A RUNNYMEDE COMMUNITY STUDY
BY KJARTAN PÁLL SVEINSSON

RUNNYMEDE



About Runnymede Community Studies

In reflecting on the changing nature of ethnic diversity in Britain, it becomes increasingly clear that we have to move beyond binary notions of white and non-white to explain the ways in which racisms operate, identities are formed and people live out their lives. The societies in which we live are becoming more diverse and will continue to diversify as migration patterns change, and the impacts of globalisation are reflected in labour markets as well as in transnational movement of capital.

This series of community studies aims to promote understanding of the diversity within and between different ethnic groups. Our intention is to build up a collection of studies which focus on communities; their demography, links to civil society, and key political and social issues. We hope that over time this will provide a rich resource for understanding how diversity is lived and experienced away from the necessarily crude ethnic monitoring form, in a vital and dynamic multi-ethnic society.

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Bolivians in London – Challenges and Achievements of a London Community

KJARTAN PÁLL SVEINSSON

Bolivians in London at a Glance

Population and Geography

- According to the 2001 census, there were 525 Bolivian-born people living in London.
- The Bolivian embassy estimates that around 10,000 Bolivians live in London.
- According to calculations based on remittances sent to Bolivia from London, there are 15-20,000 Bolivians living in London, the majority of whom have arrived in the last 5 years.
- The majority of Bolivians in the UK live in London. Long-term residents tend to be geographically dispersed across the city, even living in neighbouring areas, such as Surrey and Kent. Recent arrivals are somewhat geographically dispersed, but have congregated around Elephant and Castle and Seven Sisters.

Immigration

- Bolivians have been arriving to and settling in Britain at least since the 1960s.
- Bolivia has long been a country of net emigration. Traditionally, most Bolivians have emigrated to Argentina and the United States. However, with the unstable economic situation in Argentina and ever tighter border controls and visa regulations of the United States, Bolivians are now coming to Europe in greater numbers.
- Within Europe, Spain receives more Bolivian immigrants than any other country.
- The last few years have seen a sharp increase in Bolivian migration to London.
- A large proportion of Bolivian migrants in London have irregular immigration status.

Education

- Little is known about the educational level of Bolivians in London. However, according to the interviewees of this study, a large number of Bolivian migrants are university educated.

Employment

- Recently arrived Bolivians often find work in the cleaning industry, but also private nannying or serving in restaurants.
- Although exact figures are unavailable, a large part of recent arrivals are undocumented, thus working with limited permits in the UK.
- Deskilling is common, with university educated Bolivians often finding work only in the cleaning industry.
- English is a barrier to employment, and often keeps non-English speakers in a vicious circle: not speaking English, the only work available are jobs where no English is required, which gives no opportunity to learn or practice English.

Relevant Organisations and Websites

Bolivia Solidarity Campaign

Web: www.boliviasc.org.uk/

Friends of Bolivia

Web: www.friendsofbolivia.org.uk

Anglo-Bolivian Society

Web: www.angloboliviansociety.org.uk

Carnaval del Pueblo/Noticias

Web: www.noticias.co.uk

Knowledge is Power Project

Email: carolina.a.herrera@gmail.com
Web: <http://www.the-kip-project.co.uk>

Latin Front

Email: latinfront@yahoo.co.uk

Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)

Tindlemanor
52-54 Featherstone Street
EC1Y 8RT
Tel: 0207 3360888
Email: lawrs@lawrs.fsnet.co.uk
Web: www.lawrs.org.uk

Campaign Against Repression in Latin America (CARILA)

6 – 9 Manor Gardens
N7 6LA
Tel: 02075611931
Email: carila@carila.org.uk
Web: www.carila.org.uk

Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO)

493 Cambridge Heath Road
E2 9BU
Tel: 0207 7298833
Email: mail@irmo.org.uk
Web: www.irmo.org.uk

Latin American Association

Priory House
Kingsgate Place
London
NW6 4TA
Tel: 02073728653/ 02076246409
Email: admin@casalatina.org.uk
Web: www.casa-latina.org.uk

Latin American Disabled People's Project (LADPP)

PO Box 43412
SE17 3WZ
Tel: 0207 7938399
Email: ladpp@ladpp.org.uk

Latin American Elderly Project

Ring Cross Community Centre,
Lough Road
N7 8RH
Tel: 020 7609 6661
Email: laeplatin@onetel.com
www.laeplatin.com

Latin American Golden Years Day Centre

1-29 Cancell Road
SW9 6HN
Tel: 0207 7930469
Email: latinamgyc@btconnect.com

Latin American Social Fund 2000 Plus

Suite Q
Second Floor
135-143 Stockwell Road
SW9 9TN
Tel: 020 7207 1500

Praxis

Pott Street
E2 0EF
Tel: 0207 7297985
Email: admin@praxis.org.uk
www.praxis.org.uk

Latin American Women's Aid

The Print House
18 Ashwin Street
E8 3DL
Tel: 020 7275 0321
Email: info@lawadv.org.uk

Latin America Co-op Development Project

Suite 2-12
11 Marshalsea Rd
SE1 1EP
Tel: 020 7357 9091

oneLondon

53 Brixton Station Road
SW9 8PQ
Tel: 020 7737 6170
Web: www.one-london.com

Introduction

As a number of commentators have recently pointed out, the nature of Britain's ethnic diversity is changing.¹ Amongst those who have in recent years found their way to London in ever greater numbers are various Latin American groups. The presence of these groups can clearly be seen and felt on the streets of London. Cafes, bars, clubs and restaurants run by Latin Americans are steadily on the increase; money transfer agencies catering to Colombians, Ecuadorians, Bolivians etc. can be spotted on various high streets throughout the city; the annual Carnival del Pueblo in Burgess Park – which this year attracted tens of thousands of Londoners – has been dubbed “Europe's largest celebration of Latin American culture.”²

In spite of this evident impact Latin Americans have on the cultural life of Londoners, their presence has to date gone fairly unnoticed – albeit with notable exceptions – by both local authorities and national government; nor has it generated much academic interest. As a result, little is actually empirically known about Latin Americans, and their interests are often overlooked by the authorities as a result of being consigned to a category of ‘Other.’ Thus, while the numerous Latin groups are highly visible as participants of and contributors to the every day life of London, they remain both hidden and unrecognised in political, economic and social discourse.

This report presents a rudimentary depiction of one of the Latin American groups: Bolivians. The information deficit on Bolivians is particularly acute; virtually no studies have been conducted on Bolivians in the UK, and even information as basic as the total number of Bolivians living in London is missing, although some estimates are available.³ This study does not by any means

purport to present a comprehensive ethnographic account of the Bolivian community in London. Based as it is on data collected through 15 in-depth interviews with Bolivians, this would be impossible. Rather, it is intended to identify and map the main issues facing Bolivians. For example, the report identifies a gap between long-term residents on the one hand, and recent arrivals on the other hand, where one has little contact with the other. However, how this split is lived and understood is beyond the scope of the sample size. Similarly, class distinctions prevalent in Bolivia were said to have continued relevance amongst Bolivians in London. While it is likely that these issues are of importance to most Bolivians living and working in London, this report cannot make any accurate or conclusive statements about the structure or dynamics of these distinctions. In other words, where the purpose of this study is to map out main issues identified by Bolivians, it will be up to later studies to fill in the ethnographical details for a comprehensive understanding of the Bolivian community.

What is presented below is a ‘snapshot’ of Bolivians in London. Following a brief outline of the methodology used to carry out the study and some background information about Bolivia and Bolivian migration generally, we turn our attention to the main findings of the report. The *Migration* chapter outlines the interviewees’ reasons for leaving Bolivia as well as their accounts of the migration process. This is followed by a chapter on *Documentation*, where we discuss the connection between nationality and irregular⁴ immigration status, and the impact of immigration policy on the life chances of recently arrived Bolivians. *Identities* examines the multiplicity of Bolivian identity, and the interplay between Bolivian-ness and London-ness, and is followed by a discussion on unity and fragmentation in the *Cohesion* chapter. Finally, in the *Integration* chapter we look at how Bolivians perceive their place in London, and how they want to be perceived by other Londoners.

While many of the issues discussed here have a specific relevance to Bolivians living in

1 See Ashley (2005); Berkeley (2005); Grillo (2006); Vertovec (2006); Zetter et al. (2006)

2 Mayor of London.

3 The Bolivian embassy estimates that around 10,000 Bolivians currently live in London. However, according to calculations based on remittances sent to Bolivia from London, Freddy Ortiz of Universal Business UK has estimated that the figures are closer to 15,000–20,000. In any case, it is clear that the 2001 census figure of 525 is wildly inaccurate.

4 The terminology used for irregular migrants and migration can often be confusing, with different parties choosing terms and concepts that best fit their own interests. Throughout this report, we will follow IPPR in using the term irregular migrants, which they define as “people who are liable to be deported for issues related to immigration status” (Farrant et al., 2006: 5). Other common terms – such as undocumented, unauthorised or illegal – either do not capture the complexity of irregular migration, or have unfounded criminal connotations.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore interviewees' experiences of living in London, and what they perceived to be the main issues facing Bolivians in London generally. For this reason, the methodology used was primarily qualitative, which is particularly apt in providing insight into the complex, subtle, and often contradictory views, experiences, motivations and attitudes of individuals. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 15 individuals. This means that the results should not be read as statistically representative of *all* Bolivians in London. However, a purposive sampling technique – where interviewees are selected specifically a) for their specific experiences or knowledge, and b) to capture the diversity and breadth of views within the sample group – was adopted in order to get as broad a perspective as possible. In this way, every effort was made to have a broad sampling range in terms of age, class, origin (within Bolivia), length of time in the UK, etc. to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible. Still, the small sample size means that covering all issues of importance to Bolivians in London would be impossible, leaving unavoidable ethnographical gaps. This should be kept in mind when reading this report. Access to interviewees was facilitated by community organisations as well as snowballing. Interviews were conducted in homes, offices, pubs, cafes and restaurants. The names of interviewees used throughout this report are not actual. They have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the participants of this study. Additionally, a number of organisations working with the Latin American community were informally interviewed.

Interviewees came from a range of different backgrounds, but could, for the sake of clarity, be divided into two categories: those recently immigrating to the UK (within the last 5 years), and those who have been here for longer (ranging between 20 and 42 years). While this may not tell us much about the backgrounds of the interviewees, it does evince similarities and contrasts of experiences of living and working in the UK, and the effect of government immigration policy on these experiences.

London, they are by no means unique to them. The interviewees' experiences of the migratory process, as expressed both by long-term residents and recent arrivals, are likely to strike a chord among other migrant groups from the 'South' in the North-South divide that characterises the global economic landscape. Many migrant communities experience discrimination on account of being from the Global South,⁵ a situation that is threatening to reproduce, within the UK, the global economic structure.⁶ As will become clear, however, irregular status not only affects the irregular migrants themselves; amongst Bolivians, it has repercussions throughout the wider community. A major problem identified by interviewees was the cleft between long-term residents and recent arrivals. Where an 'ethnic rights' discourse may be inadequate – due to the wide range of different experiences and structural positions within the Bolivian community – to deal with disadvantage and discrimination, Bolivians with irregular immigration status, and thus most vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination, could benefit greatly by tapping into existing migrants' rights networks.

Background

Bolivia is a land-locked South American country, renowned for its natural beauty and rich cultural life. Geographically, it is divided by two Andean *cordilleras*, or mountain ranges, which demarcate the country into three ecozones: the Andean high plateau (Altiplano); the semitropical Yungas and temperate valleys of Cordillera Oriental; and the tropical eastern lowlands. Bolivia is populated by just under 9 million people, of whom roughly 60% are indigenous, 20-25% are *mestizo* (mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage), and 10-15% are of Spanish descent. While ethnic identification is instrumental to social organisation, other social markers exist as well, such as class and regional affiliation, reflected in the highly stratified structure of social and economic life. In spite of the country's rich natural resources, nearly two

⁵ Evans et al. (2005: 6)

⁶ JCWI (2006)

thirds of Bolivians live below the poverty line.⁷

The history of Bolivia is marred by political and economic instability, not least from the mid-twentieth century onwards. A number of military coups and economic crises have resulted in bouts of migration to urban areas within Bolivia and emigration to other countries. Three periods in particular saw great waves of migration: the National Revolution of 1952; the several military coups and juntas from 1964 to the late 70s; and the economic crisis and hyper-inflation of the mid 80s. Most Bolivians migrated to other South American countries (in particular Argentina) or the United States.⁸ However, in recent years Europe has become an increasingly popular destination, primarily due to the unstable economic situation in Argentina and ever tighter border controls and visa regulations of the United States. Within Europe, Spain has received more Bolivian immigrants than any other country.

The number of Bolivians finding their way to London is unknown. Bolivians have been arriving in London since the late 1960's, although initially not in great numbers. According to key informants, there has been a considerable increase in Bolivian immigration to London in the past five years. However, virtually no literature exists on Bolivian immigration to the UK, which reflects a larger research gap on Latin American migrants more generally. The Latin American group that has been researched in greatest depth are Colombians, although even here studies, albeit important, are few and far between.⁹ While Bolivian experiences partly resonate with those of Colombians, there are important differences as well. We will come back to these throughout this report, but three important differences, which relate directly to particularities of their home countries as well as their diplomatic relations with Britain, should be made clear here.

⁷ World Bank (2006)

⁸ Kayser (2005: 54)

⁹ This seems to be changing however. As the Latin American community in the UK grows, so does academic interest in these groups. At the time of writing, a number of studies had been conducted on Latin Americans – most notably McIlwaine's (2005) study on Colombian migrants – and several further studies were under way.

¹⁰ cf. McIlwaine (2005: 20)

¹¹ UKvisas

¹² This can be subject to questioning by immigration officers, often rather intensively. One interviewee stated that she was questioned for 7 hours before finally satisfying the officers.

¹³ James (2006)

¹⁴ McIlwaine (2005: 43–44)

Firstly, and similarly to Colombians,¹⁰ many recently arrived Bolivians seem to arrive to the UK via Spain. However, this may be less prevalent due to differing visa regulations. Colombians need to apply for a British visa before setting off to the UK. Bolivians, on the other hand, can apply for a visa upon arrival.¹¹ For this reason, many Bolivians intending to work in the UK take their chances to enter directly on a tourist visa.¹² Secondly, while the extent to which social markers in Latin America translate to London has not been researched in great depth, James has indicated that, amongst Ecuadorians, ethnic, class and regional differences are partly neutralised in London. McIlwaine, on the other hand, reports that certain aspects of the civil war in Colombia have entered life in London,¹³ contributing to distrust and disunity amongst Colombian migrants, but does not mention other differences as having continuing importance.¹⁴ In the case of Bolivians, however, a whole host of social markers in Bolivia – such as class, level of education, or regional affiliation – appear to translate over to London, a point made by a number of interviewees. Thirdly, the political situations in Colombia and Bolivia are different. While both have experienced a high degree of political turmoil, Colombians have lived with a long-standing armed conflict, an important factor in Colombian migration. Bolivia, on the other hand, has not experienced a civil war; rather, emigration from Bolivia stems from political instability and a dire economic situation. As Emilio, a Bolivian who has lived in Britain since the 80s, explains:

Bolivians never had a civil war, like the Colombians do. At the moment there are potentially some problems with the new president [of Bolivia], who's very socialist and wants to nationalise everything, retake the land of the big land owners, and redistribute it. And potentially that could lead to some problems. There has been some problems, I have a friend who used to be a politician, he's a teacher at the university as well, a professor. And he got tortured once by one ex-president, many years ago. But I think, back in the

70s when the military were very active, supported by the CIA. But since the 70s there hasn't been much problems in those areas. The problem in Bolivia is social. There's a lot of inequality.

Thus, where Colombian migration to the UK is described by McIlwaine as a 'reactive necessity' rather than a 'proactive strategy of choice',¹⁵ Bolivian migration is more likely to be a complex combination of the two.

Migration

When asked why they decided to leave Bolivia, most interviewees stated that the economic situation was so dismal that leaving the country was the only way in which they could improve their life chances. In other words, London was seen as a place harbouring opportunities not available in Bolivia. Some women added that oppressive gender relations, particularly within the family or in marriage, made life simply unbearable, thus compelling them to leave. Ultimately, the search for a better life was, in one way or another, central to the interviewees' reasons for leaving Bolivia.¹⁶ Still, this journey was not entirely painful and formidable; in some ways, it was also treated as an adventure. In this sense, there was a certain continuity in the narratives of those who had been here longer and the more recent arrivals.

Many of the long-term residents came in the early 70s, when General Hugo Banzer Suárez led a military coup d'état, only to become one of the most feared presidents of 20th century Bolivia:

I think at that time, if I remember, colonel Banzer went to power. And the situation in Bolivia was quite bad. It was really, really bad. And somehow I managed to get information about this opportunity, to come to London. And for me, there was no other solution at that time. (Victor)

Thus, economic and political pressures made emigration an inviting option. Most Bolivians at the time emigrated either to Argentina or the United States, and many interviewees spoke of either having had the opportunity to migrate to either place, or actually working there before coming to the UK. These interviewees ultimately came to Britain under a work permit system which required them to work in a specific job or field for a certain period of time, with little opportunity to move out of that field of work. In spite of these tight restrictions, some interviewees stated that arriving in England was an exciting adventure. Andres, for example, came in the company of friends and described a strong sense of camaraderie, which helped him overcome a great many social and practical hurdles. Still, the fact that all information about life in Britain was acquired through word of mouth meant that the reality was often shockingly different from what they expected:

It was an opportunity that a friend told us about. Somebody knew a friend, his brother went to study, and he got married with an English lady, and he said there's a lot of opportunity. Obviously, they never tell you the truth, the whole truth. They paint this beautiful scene, and they say you can do this, you can do that, you can work, you can study, you can do a lot of things. Which was not really true, the reality was quite different. (Gloria)

In spite of elements of agency and proactive strategising, the push factors of the economic and political pressures in Bolivia should not be understated. Indeed, for the long-term residents, these pressures were very real. The social crises resulting from the several military juntas in the 60s and 70s – particularly the Banzer regime – are well documented,¹⁷ and several long-term residents described the situation they found themselves in at the time. Andres, for example, recounted the aftermath of the Banzer coup:

I don't know if you remember the story from the 70s. It was a politically very unstable situation there. Lots of governments, power kept changing

¹⁵ McIlwaine (2005: 16)

¹⁶ This was not the case with all interviewees, as some moved to London by pure chance or coincidence. This, however, applied to the minority of cases.

¹⁷ Remmer (1986); Nash (1979)

hands. And I went to university for the first year there. And they changed the government, and just shut down the university, so what do you do? This would have been the Banzer government. Soon after Torres,¹⁸ Banzer came and shut down the university. That was it! So we were just hanging around for a few months, not knowing what to do, when somebody said, 'Ah, you can come and work and study in the UK.' So I thought, 'Well, why not?'

Thus, whilst recognising the interviewees as agents who devise proactive strategies of choice, it is clear that their motives for migrating must also be seen as a reactive necessity.

The recently arrived had a similar story to tell. Most left Bolivia in a search for a better life, one that was perceived as unattainable in the home country. The days of coups and counter-coups may have passed, but the political situation continues to be of great concern to Bolivians, and the Bolivian economy continues to be one of the most unstable and precarious in Latin America. As Remmer has demonstrated, the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank led to "[w]idespread unemployment, plummeting living standards, acute shortages of foreign exchange, declining investment, and severe inflation,"¹⁹ the legacy of which can still be felt in Bolivia.²⁰ Indeed, withdrawal of foreign investment, closure of businesses, blockades and violent protests leading to transportation and import problems etc. are very much part of contemporary every-day reality for most Bolivians.²¹

Some had already spent time working in Argentina, but slumps in the Argentinian economy forced them to migrate again. As

mentioned above, Spain was a popular initial destination. However, while many stated that Spain was in many ways an easier option – primarily because of the common language and less stringent immigration policy – working in London was still considered preferable. The preference for Britain was largely due to the strength of the economy,²² and the perception of London as an open and tolerant city, whereas some felt that life in Spain is rife with racism.

Again, all information on migrating to London was acquired by word of mouth, both before embarking on the journey and upon arrival. Interviewees relied on family, friends, and friends-of-friends for advice relating to jobs, housing, documentation, and navigating the British system. Interviewees did not, generally speaking, seek information via formal channels.²³ Often, contacts would be established with people the interviewees knew – or at least knew of – in London, and would then be followed up on arrival. However, the information obtained while still in Bolivia would often be fragmented and selective, and many interviewees said that the reality of arriving in London was at great odds with expectations, where cost of living and culture shock were cited as the main sources of disorientation:

I tell you something: one thing is to say 'Inglaterra' in Spanish, but when we came here, it was absolutely, it was another world. Completely another world. So it was very, very hard for me to get used to my new life. It probably took me two, three years before I started to settle down emotionally. (Jaime)

Thus, there are certain similarities in the motivations and experiences of long-term residents and recent arrivals. There are two major differences, however, that need to be clarified. Firstly, while none of the long-term residents sent remittances back to Bolivia, the majority of the recent arrivals did. This appears to be a major component of life of new Bolivians in London, much like that of Colombian migrants.²⁴ While the data collected for this study does not warrant any conclusive statements about remittances, it should be noted that recent arrivals were acutely aware of the importance of

18 Juan José Torres González led a leftist military regime from 1970 to 1971, when he was overthrown in a violent coup d'état by then Colonel Hugo Banzer.

19 Remmer (1986: 1)

20 Kohl (2006)

21 I am indebted to Frances Carlisle for pointing this out.

22 This resonates with the experiences of Colombian migrants, some of whom treat Spain as a transit country on their way to the UK (McIlwaine, 2005: 20).

23 This was seen by many as an unfortunate situation, and there was a general consensus that clearer and more accessible formal information packs should be made available. The implications of this informal 'word of mouth' information economy is discussed in greater depth below.

24 McIlwaine (2005: 30-33)

remittances for the Bolivian economy. Secondly, the work permit system under which Bolivians first entered the country is not available to more recent migrants, forcing them to find new and innovative ways to enter and work in the UK, an issue to which we shall now turn.

Documentation

Documentation was a topic of great importance to the interviewees, in practical as well as ideological terms. It was generally felt that documents and immigration status illustrates with great clarity the social and economic topography of Bolivians in London. However, there was a distinct disparity in the experiences of long-term residents and the recent arrivals. The long-term residents interviewed for this study all came to the UK via official channels, through a work permit system, as students, as spouses of European citizens etc. While those who came here under a work permit system had to follow quite restrictive terms and conditions, none of the long-term residents had any experience of living and working irregularly in Britain. Still, British and European bureaucratic practices and policies were highly unfavourable to Bolivian documents, particularly passports when travelling. Indeed, discussions about experiences of racism tended to revolve around nationality and status. Many interviewees told stories of travel within Europe where passing through immigration was, stated simply, an ordeal. The obvious connection here is between Bolivia and cocaine, or so the interviewees described immigration officers' attitudes towards them. This criminalising process made them both angry and sad:

It's a stigma. Colombia, Bolivia, you're definitely carrying drugs. For sure. You get victimised for being Bolivian.
(Gabriel)

In that time we travelled a lot. And every time it was getting harder and harder for me. My wife had no problem going through customs wherever we went. I always was behind. And unfortunately,

whenever we travel, as soon as I produce my passport, I was a criminal. Immediately. That's the attitude. Black and white. If I was to go tomorrow to wherever, if I give them my passport, 'Ah, criminal!' Because my passport is from Bolivia. That's how it is. (Andres)

However, this situation was not considered to be entirely unique to Bolivians and Colombians, but revealed a wider spectre of institutional racism against the alien and the poor:

Not only Bolivians, but other people, they have to face this as well. People with humble origins. Just because they don't have money, they are criminals. With humble origin, trying to better their lives, whatever, we don't know the reasons, but we're all treated like criminals. (Andres)

For this reason, many long-term residents decided to take up British nationality and passport, often long after having the opportunity to do so. This created a conflict within some interviewees, an issue that will be discussed further in the *Identities* chapter. The important point to make here is that certain civil rights were attached to British nationality; that is to say, rights of being treated like valued citizens as opposed to alien criminals. These rights were often denied to the interviewees on account of being Bolivian.

The experiences of the recently arrived are qualitatively different. Interviewees said that irregular immigration status is common amongst recent arrivals, irrespective of their original motives for migrating or social status back home. However, 'irregular' or 'undocumented' immigration status is far from being a static condition, and interviewees described how they fluctuated from one category to the other. As McKay and Winkelmann-Gleed point out, "[t]he line between lawful and undocumented or unauthorised migrant status is in many cases a fine one,"²⁵ although this line could perhaps more accurately be described as fuzzy and in constant flux. The interviewees were quite aware of this. Describing his own situation, Hernando said, "I am legal in one way, but I am illegal in another way."

²⁵ McKay and Winkelmann-Gleed (2005: 30)

In terms of getting into the UK in the first place, Bolivian migrants find ways that can only be described as enterprising. Interviewees listed a vast array of administrative loop-holes allowing them to enter Britain. Clandestine methods were never mentioned (although some Bolivians may enter this way). Rather, migrants either enter on a tourist visa and simply disappear, or on a student visa, which allows them to work 20 hours. However, the grounds of visa regulations and immigration policy are constantly shifting, which can drastically change a migrant's immigration status. Migrants therefore need to adopt a flexible and easily adjustable approach to the immigration system.

Once in London, the next task is to find a job. This was described as relatively easy to do: those on a student visa reported working far more than the allowed 20 hours per week – in some cases up to 50 or 60. The reasons for this are clear. Between remittances and the cost of living in London – which came as a huge shock to most interviewees – the 20 hours of work permitted were by no means enough to make ends meet. Indeed, many interviewees were sending money back to Bolivia, rather than receiving money to support their studies. This creates a financial uncertainty exacerbated by the fact that the only work available to them was low-paying jobs, often below the national minimum wage, and certainly well below the recommended living wage for London.²⁶

All interviewees had at some point worked in the cleaning industry, although other jobs were mentioned as well, such as private nannying or serving in restaurants. Again, there are many ways of getting work in spite of irregular status, and again, information about this is circulated by word of mouth. Some found jobs in the informal economy, working for cash in hand. However, many would find work in the formal sphere.

False documents were described as fairly easy to buy, albeit expensive, and came in a range of forms: political asylum papers, national insurance numbers, Spanish and Portuguese passports etc. Some interviewees said that many employers in the cleaning industry were aware that people used false documents when applying for a job, but

employed them anyway. However, as McIlwaine points out, this is becoming increasingly rare, largely due to the accession of several Eastern European countries to the EU and the government's tough stated policy on companies employing irregular workers.²⁷ The interviewees were painfully aware of this, as it had forced them to find new, semi-legal ways to get employed. As one might come to expect, irregular status brought with it great uncertainties. The anxiety of the prospect of deportation becomes an every day reality: "It was really tough, to know that they will just come and take you out in the street and say, 'Go back home.' It's quite hard" (Eliana).

More serious, perhaps, is the exploitation to which irregular migrants are vulnerable. In spite of all interviewees paying national insurance and income tax on at least part of their salaries, their irregular status is a *de facto* negation of their civil rights, and thus human rights by default. The possibility of not getting paid for their work was a very real one, and when this happened there was nothing they could do about it. For women, there is the added precariousness of sexual harassment. One interviewee described finding herself in a dangerous situation with her employer and co-workers, where she was not only denied her wages – which were well below the minimum wage in the first place – but felt lucky to escape unharmed:

I found a job washing dishes, and I got £3.20 an hour. And I had very bad experience, he didn't want to pay me, he wanted to go to bed with me, he said 'Ah, that's the only way I can pay you,' very aggressive, you know, he had me in a corner in the kitchen. So I had to leave the job, and he didn't pay me. If that happened now, I would probably go to the police, but then, you can't do anything. And I'm like "God, how many people go through this?" I managed just to leave the house, to escape, cause that's the only thing I could think of, £60 is nothing compared to my life. But I think that happens to many people, they get exploited. And in a situation where you're working [like this], where do you go? What do you do? You just have to take it. (Eliana)

²⁶ See www.livingwage.org.uk

²⁷ McIlwaine (2005: 34)

Deskilling was also mentioned as yet another source of frustration and feeling of debasement. Many of the interviewees were highly educated but found it impossible to find a job suitable to their skills. While immigration status was certainly a strong factor, it was by no means the only one. Some speculated that even if they had full administrative permission to work in Britain, inconsistent Home Office immigration policies could change their situation at any time, thus making them unemployable in employment sectors requiring skills and dedication: “I have the commitment. But the Home Office doesn’t have the commitment with my company. If tomorrow, the Home Office say ‘I don’t want to give you visa. So what?’ It’s not good for the company. So the company doesn’t want us” (Marcela). In this respect, interviewees felt that being Bolivian *per se* is the source of the predicament of deskilling, and irregular immigration status is an unfortunate side effect.

It is important to note that status and documentation of the recent arrivals had certain repercussions throughout the wider Bolivian community. Using their links with long-term residents to get established is a widespread strategy amongst newcomers, and many of the long-term residents interviewed commented on this. Some said that telephone calls from Bolivia, where prospective migrants were appealing for advice or assistance, was a common occurrence. However, the immigration status of the newcomers can influence what kind of help they will receive from their friends, acquaintances or family members in London. Long-term residents generally sympathised with the situation of irregular Bolivians, making a clear distinction between irregular immigration status on the one hand, and criminality on the other. Some said that immigration status did not matter to them, they would help their fellow Bolivians in any way they could regardless. Confident that Bolivians generally are hard working people who want not only to better their lives, but also contribute positively to their host country, Victor said that he helps recently arrived Bolivians in any way he can, irrespective of their status. Similarly, Emilio was not prepared to accept on face value the Home Office definition of irregular migrants as criminals. Quite the contrary, he felt that helping irregular migrants

would minimise the risk of irregular Bolivians succumbing to criminality:

I always help my friends if they need it. I always think that it’s better to help somebody who wants to help themselves, and if they’re doing something legal ... well, illegally, but legal, you see what I mean? If they come here illegally to steal and to rob, that’s bad. For me, if they’re only coming here to work, and the work is there, I’ll help them.

However, a number of interviewees said that they would hesitate before helping someone with dubious immigration status. This had less to do with any perceived criminality of irregular migrants, but instead the uncertainty of what, exactly, the consequences of helping them would be. Many felt that this was a major factor undermining cohesion amongst Bolivians in London. Juan, a university educated recent arrival, described how a long-term resident relative had been quite uneasy about helping out directly. In spite of housing him on arrival, the relative had asked him to find accommodation of his own, exactly because “he’s scared of immigration and all these things.” Again, the inconsistency of Home Office immigration policies was cited as the source of this insecurity. Stella, a long-term resident who receives a large number of phone calls from Bolivians pleading for help, explains:

You never know exactly what the Home Office will do ... You see, every time they say, ‘You should not help [irregular migrants]. You will get into trouble.’ And then they relax the law, and they say ‘Yes, help them, yes, we need them.’ So where do you stand? Do we need them? Do we give them jobs? Or are they here illegally? What do you do? Every day we get new laws here.

Indeed, Stella went on to point out that the behaviour of government officials did little to clarify the exact government policy on immigration, and revealed a hypocritical stance of the government towards irregular migrants.

With immigration judges – working for the Department for Constitutional Affairs itself – employing an irregular Brazilian migrant worker, and the former Home Secretary’s fast-tracking of his lover’s nanny through the immigration process, where do ordinary people actually stand?

It could be argued that the dilemmas arising from issues of documentation and immigration status are a self-made predicament, as Bolivians know what the rules of entry are and willingly choose to break them. However, in this instance, we would do well to remember Castles’ vital point on immigration policies as opportunity structures:

People lucky enough to enjoy a middle-class position in developed countries tend to have fairly positive views of the state and the law. This does not necessarily apply to the majority of the world’s population, who live in inefficient, corrupt and violent states. Most people have to learn to cope despite the state, not because of it. From this perspective, migration rules become just another barrier to overcome in order to survive. Potential migrants do not cancel migration just because the receiving state says they are not welcome – especially if the labor market tells a different story.²⁸

As is clear from the discussion of this paper, labour markets do indeed send out different signals from the stated government policy. Indeed, a Home Office analysis paper states that irregular migration is largely driven by an “unmet demand in the labour market (particularly, but not only) at the lower end.”²⁹ In spite of a tough outward stance on the part of the government, work is readily available, and according to several interviewees, employers are not terribly fussy about the immigration status of those they employ. While some interviewees related how

governmental pressures on employers meant that false documents had been made more or less redundant, this state of affairs was easily circumvented. Significantly, none of the interviewees spoke of governmental crackdowns in their workplace, let alone sanctions on their employers for knowingly employing irregular immigrants.

These factors indicate certain contradictions in the current immigration policy landscape. In public terms, the government has adopted an increasingly tough stance on immigration policy. The message sent out by the Home Office is that irregular migration is a social and economic problem, and that migrants without full permission to live and work in the UK should not come here. At the same time, however, the backdoor is open, and the labour market provides fertile grounds for irregular migration. As Castles points out, a powerful yardstick in deconstructing official goals and identifying hidden policy agendas is the failure to exercise obvious, available and effective measures to achieve their stated objectives.³⁰ Where irregular migration is concerned, sanctions on employers are one of those tools. One reason for this discrepancy between rhetoric and practice are concerns over economic impacts. A clear picture of the economic contribution of irregular migrants – and thus the possible consequences of their deportation – to Britain is not available. However, recognising that the consequences could be detrimental to the London economy, the Mayor of London has urged both national and EU authorities to proceed “cautiously in framing policies towards a section of our population about which they are largely ignorant.”³¹ Indeed, according to a report from the House of Lords’ Select Committee on the European Union, the Home Office itself concedes that “[i]t is probably the case that GDP is increased by illegal immigration.”³² The report continues to state that all EU Member States, including the UK, “tolerate demand for low-paid workers being met by illegal immigrants.”³³

To further contextualise Bolivians’ irregular status, it is worth restating that the nature and pay of the work available to Bolivian migrants, particularly under irregular circumstances, means that 20 working hours are unrealistic in meeting simple subsistence needs in London.

28 Castles (2004: 860)

29 Glover et al. (2001: 51)

30 Castles (2004: 854)

31 Mayor of London (2002: 2)

32 Select Committee on the European Union (2002: 13)

33 Select Committee on the European Union (2002: 13)

Furthermore, a number of interviewees were of the opinion that the 20 hour limit, along with a volatile visa situation, made them virtually unemployable in any line of work that required dedication, thereby ruling out any work suitable to their skills or level of education. Thus, when Hernando states that “if you are Bolivian, it doesn’t matter if you are a genius. You are a Bolivian. And that’s it. It’s a legal matter. No more. I cannot work,” he is acutely aware of the intricate relationship between his nationality and his immigration status. Hernando’s words are a powerful echo of Castles’ formulation of how immigration policies reflect and reinforce the global North-South divide that drives migration in the first place. Castles argues that immigration policies, in spite of claiming to exclude irregular workers, often conceal practices that allow migrants to enter in covert ways, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation: “This is one aspect of differential policies towards migrants with different levels of human capital, which seem to be generating a new transnational labor force, stratified not only by skill and ethnicity but also by immigration status. Such hierarchies are a key element of global economic stratification.”³⁴ In this global economic landscape, Bolivia is clearly south of the border, and Bolivians part of this new transnational labour force.

Identities

As is the case with any discussion on ethnic identities, it is unwise and unhelpful to speak of ‘Bolivian-ness’ in the singular. Fredrik Barth famously observed that ethnic identity is necessarily contextual, and is therefore liable to change over time. Therefore, rather than investigating the ‘cultural stuff’ within ethnic group boundaries, we should focus our attention on the contexts in which ethnic boundary maintenance is played out.³⁵ Bearing this in mind, it is hardly surprising that being Bolivian had different meanings to different interviewees. Nonetheless, certain themes could be drawn out from the interviews, and in spite of differences in background, interviewees still described a strong

sense of pan-Bolivian sentiment. The understanding of this pan-Bolivian-ness, however, varied, with the length of stay in the UK an important factor in how being Bolivian is experienced and lived out in every day life.

For the long-term residents, being Bolivian remains an important part of their lives and sense of self. All maintained links with family and friends in Bolivia (albeit to a varying degree) and followed political developments in Bolivia closely. However, some felt that this was not enough to hold on to their sense of Bolivian-ness, prompting them to develop strategies to do so. These strategies were, unsurprisingly, influenced by the fact that they had made their lives in London. This was not an entirely straightforward enterprise, as having lived in Britain for the better part of their lives needed to be reconciled with the fact that, ultimately, they would always be Bolivian. Emilio, for example, was aware that “despite the fact that I’ve lived here for 25 years and feel more British than Bolivian, I have a name that is not British, or English, I speak Spanish, I have relatives that are not English. So whatever happens I will be Bolivian by default.”

The amalgamation of Bolivian-ness with Britishness/London-ness was a recurring theme in interviews. There was general consensus that the multi-ethnic outlook of London allows for multiple identities, and that there is no inherent contradiction in being both Bolivian *and* a Londoner. In this way, some interviewees said that they feel able to pick and choose from what they consider to be the best of both worlds. In this respect, to be hard working was seen by some as an essentially Bolivian trait, but in a sense also made Bolivians more English than the English themselves; through their hard work, they contributed more to Britain than many British-born citizens. This point was made by Victor when discussing the ways in which he felt British:

This is my adopted country, and it’s the country in which I managed to make my life. But I want to show my Britishness, if that’s the word, in my behaviour, in my work, in my standard of living. I’ve never been unemployed, I always pay my taxes, I educate my daughters to the

³⁴ Castles (2004: 871)

³⁵ Barth (1969)

highest education they can possibly have. And that's the way I think I'm British. I contribute. Perhaps more than any other Englishman. I'm not relying on the welfare state, or anything like that.

This passage reveals an important distinction made by several interviewees: that between conduct and mentality. In other words, some long-term residents felt that the way Bolivians act in the UK is responsive to the social context, but in a way that retains a strong sense of Bolivian identity:

[Bolivians are] the best immigrants that this country has. In my opinion. We don't bring our religion. We don't have customs that affect the local society. We don't wear clothes to say, 'I'm Bolivian, I'm wearing this, I'm wearing that.' Or 'I believe in this.' We don't, we're very relaxed. So we absorb this society very easily. (Victor)

Still, there was an acute understanding that, as far as the host society is concerned, Bolivians will always be foreigners. As Victor expressed, this is exactly why long-term residents hold on to their Bolivian-ness, "because it keeps us going. You know? We got to believe in something. We lost our customs here. So it keeps our character stronger, is the sense that we are Bolivians." Still, having lived for so long in Britain means that they are no longer fully Bolivian either. Indeed, Andres spoke specifically about belonging to a 'third group' which is the Bolivian Diaspora. Never quite accepted as British because of language and appearance, and not quite Bolivian for having lived abroad for so long, he described being simultaneously 'here and there' and 'betwixt and between.' There was certainly a feeling that being part of a Diaspora can be a positive thing: "A bit of this, a bit of that. So it's beneficial because you can take the positive things from both sides" (Andres).

However, this loss of Bolivian-ness caused some conflict amongst interviewees, a conflict which is embodied primarily in two things. Firstly, some

long-term residents felt that one of the sacrifices of living and succeeding in Britain is that their children will be more British than they are Bolivian. Some aspects of Bolivian culture may be taught and talked about, but this would not amount to a full transmission of Bolivian-ness. Thus, there was a sense in which Bolivian-ness would end with them, and fade into memory with their children and grandchildren:

Because there's a price you have to pay for everything. And that's the price I paid. Because I never managed to pass on what I believe, what I feel about my country to my daughters. Because the influence of school and education. They have very little of Bolivian. They like it, they went to Bolivia. But they don't have the mentality. They don't have the culture in their hearts. (Victor)

The second point of conflict was taking up British or European passports, which all of the long-term residents had done. This was done for primarily practical reasons, as travelling on a Bolivian passport presents a host of problems and delays. Still, some felt that giving up their Bolivian passport represented a loss of identity, "because my Bolivian passport was the last thing that linked me with my country" (Andres). Indeed, since a Bolivian passport was associated with the cocaine industry in the minds of immigration officials, giving it up spelled out a certain surrender to unjust immigration practices: "It was a principle I had. But in the end, you're always at the losing end. You don't gain anything. It's fighting a losing battle. But what can one do?" (Andres).

Thus, for the long-term residents, the civil rights that came with a British passport outweighed the potential attenuation of Bolivian identity. Identity, then, is primarily a personal journey that is shared with fellow Bolivians and mediated through symbols of food, music, and parties.

For the recent arrivals, however, identity has become more of a collective battleground. Those who are not British/EU citizens and lack any means of regularising their immigration status have no access to civil rights. Instead, many of the recently arrived interviewees adopted a 'community rights' discourse,³⁶ in which Bolivian

36 This draws on Baumann's (1999) distinction between civil rights movements, ethnic rights movements, and religious rights movements. The problem with this in practice, however, is that "Civil rights movements exclude foreigners, ethnic rights movements exclude so-called non-half-ethnics, and religious rights movements exclude nonbelievers" (ibid.: 4).

identity is central. Promoting Bolivian culture was often mentioned as a useful tool for generating understanding of Bolivians, and thereby becoming a recognised ethnic group in Britain. While many recent arrivals said that, for a small community like Bolivians, drawing on a pan-Latin American identity can in many ways be beneficial, they also felt that there is still a strong tendency among the British to conflate Latin Americans into one ethnic group, dominated by images of Colombian culture. This was seen as problematic, because Bolivians are not Colombians:

Because as a Bolivian people, we have a very peculiar identity. Salsa is not our music. Chachacha is not our music. Samba is not our music. But here, we are losing that, that's why Terremoto³⁷ is very successful. Because it's the only club for Bolivian people in all of London. And we are thousands. So we thought the best way is to do with the culture. Because we like to dance, we like to show our dances. (Marcela)

In this sense, there is an urgent need to uncouple Bolivian identity from Colombian identity in the public imagination. This, however, raises an important question: When we speak of Bolivian culture and identity, which Bolivian culture and identity are we actually talking about?

Cohesion

The unity and internal cohesion of the Bolivian community in London was a topic of great importance to the majority of interviewees. Most said that they were, in one way or another, striving to benefit Bolivians as a community. However, while the Bolivian community is close knit in some ways, it is divided in others. In spite of the pan-Bolivian sentiments described in the previous chapter, there is still a tendency to

distinguish between groups *within* the Bolivian community, and there was a general consensus that divisions and fragmentation made cohesion a highly complicated goal. As previously mentioned, the interviewees come from a variety of geographical and social backgrounds in Bolivia. Bolivia, of course, is a relatively heterogeneous country, with a vast array of different social markers. The social marker most often cited by interviewees to have continued relevance in London was class.³⁸ Additionally, there was generally little contact between long-term residents and the recently arrived.

Most interviewees were of the opinion that what characterises Bolivian unity are parties. This was considered a trait brought to London from Bolivia. However, it is exactly here that the division between long-term residents and the recently arrived are reflected. Parties arranged by the two long-term resident Bolivian community organisations – Friends of Bolivia, and the Anglo-Bolivian Society – were considered of great importance by a number of long-term residents. In these parties, they were able to go back to their roots and express their Bolivian-ness. The connections and bonds between the long-term residents were described by all interviewees in this category to be strong and unified. But none of the recent arrivals interviewed knew of these parties, or indeed of the community organisations themselves. This was acknowledged as a problem by some of the long-term residents: “My view about the Bolivians in London is that we are growing up, and I don't see new blood coming to these two main organisations. I think we have to make an effort to get these new people into these two organisations” (Victor). Nonetheless, recruiting newcomers was thought to be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, most of the recent arrivals are irregular, and would therefore be unlikely to associate themselves with official organisations. Secondly, the recent arrivals are primarily economic migrants who come here specifically to work and send money back to Bolivia. The price paid for the ticket to the parties, some speculated, could be put to better use back home. Judging from the comments made by recently arrived Bolivians, however, most newcomers simply do not know that these parties are being held.

Juxtaposed to these parties is Carnaval del

³⁷ Terremoto is a Latin American club in Peckham, South London, which caters to a Bolivian clientele.

³⁸ Some interviewees also mentioned the distinction between Kollas – people from the Bolivian highlands – and Cambas – who come from the tropical lowlands. However, although some felt that the animosity that can be found between Kollas and Cambas in Bolivia has continued relevance, this was not discussed in depth in interviews. Therefore, lack of data on this issue means that a discussion on the relevance of the Kolla/Camba relationship in London would be largely speculative.

Pueblo, a Latin American carnival which takes place in south London every August. In this carnival, Latin culture is celebrated by sharing – in the words of its director – “the happiness, colours and tastes of the 19 Latin American countries in just one day.”³⁹ The recently arrived interviewees all attended the carnival this year, and two were directly involved in representing Bolivia. However, Stella pointed out that, just as few of the recently arrived attend the parties organised by the long-term residents, “I don’t know if you’d have found the Bolivian ladies married to the Europeans to go [to Carnaval del Pueblo]. I think the separation is very obvious there.” Thus, while parties are a tool for cohesion and unity in one sense, in another they also become emblems of the divisions within the Bolivian community. Other long-term residents made similar points, and Emilio added that the spatial distribution of wealth in London underlines these divisions; the parties hosted by Friends of Bolivia or the Anglo-Bolivian Society tend to be hosted in more affluent parts of London, “while the Carnaval del Pueblo was held in Peckham, in Burgess Park, which is more access to the popular people.”

While length of stay in Britain was one factor dividing the community, recent arrivals also spoke about conflict and disunity amongst themselves. It was here that class distinctions came to the fore in interviews. It was generally felt that the class structure in Bolivia translates, to a certain degree, over to London. This, however, creates a mutual sense of exclusion: working-class interviewees felt that middle- or upper-class Bolivians have no interest in associating themselves with people of the working-classes; middle-class Bolivians, on the other hand, felt that working-class Bolivians snubbed them in return: “And if you are not following their lifestyle, ‘What does she think she is? She thinks she’s British.’ And they make fun of you. So we have no contact with the community” (Marcela). Again, this is reflected in the geography of London. Those who are from a working-class background, it was said, tend to converge in poorer areas in south London, most notably around Elephant and Castle, with several individuals often sharing a small living space.

Those of a more affluent background, however, are dispersed across London, but are less likely to live in poor areas, and more likely to live on their own.

It is important to mention that class dynamics do change, even though the rough structure may stay relatively intact. As Emilio pointed out, the upper-classes are not as upper as they were in Bolivia. Differences in real and relative wealth are, to a certain degree, levelled in Britain, and the economic gap between working-class and middle-class Bolivians is less pronounced than it is in Bolivia: “In Bolivia you will see that the rich people are very very rich. Because there’s so much wealth here you cannot spot where the wealthy Bolivians are. Even the people who come here to clean, if they save £10,000, they can buy a house in Bolivia, and live comfortably” (Emilio). Indeed, part of this levelling process is the fact that many middle- to upper-class Bolivians – due to the widespread deskilling amongst Bolivian professionals – work in the cleaning industry. Marcela, who came from an affluent family in Bolivia, related a story from her job as a cleaner, about how she communicated with a colleague in a senior position to her. When asking her to take out the rubbish, her colleague addressed in the Spanish formal mode of speaking:

He was working there for five years, he could tell me by my name. But no, he said señora. He made clear that he is the boss in there. But he made clear at the same time that he respects my social class. And it’s ‘usted.’ But when they are talking between them, it’s ‘tu.’ So I was excluded from them. Automatically.

It must be noted, however, that divisions were by no means absolute, and it would be unhelpful and false to exaggerate them. As is discussed above, many long-term residents were ready and willing to help recent arrivals, but feared the potentially negative consequences. Also, while recent arrivals did speak at length about class differences, many also stressed the help they had received from fellow Bolivians, often cutting across class barriers. Indeed, the ‘word of mouth’ information economy is in itself testament to a great degree of social cohesion. Similarly to

³⁹ BBC News

Colombian migrants,⁴⁰ a shared experience of migration becomes a locus for unity.

But nor should the perceived disunity be understated, as it bears direct relevance to Bolivian migrants' relationship with the British state. Many of the recently arrived interviewees said that communication and information was the main problem facing Bolivian migrants in London, and that the best things the government could provide them were: a) accessible information, in Spanish, about practical issues relating to living in Britain, as well as courses or workshops on how to navigate the British system – only through clear knowledge of their rights can migrants combat exploitation; and b) channels of communication within the Bolivian community to consolidate different factions. But many hastened to add that for information and communication to bear any relevance for the Bolivian community, the community needs to become more internally coherent and unified. In this respect, Hernando compared Bolivians to other Latin American communities in London. He felt that Colombians, Venezuelans and Ecuadorians could correctly be called 'communities' because there is a great deal of solidarity amongst them, but that this is not the case with Bolivians, making service provision a difficult task: "I tell you what the government can help us. Give us channels of communication. How you can give communication to people who are not organised? So the first step is to organise the community" (Hernando). This point was accentuated by Angelita:

At the moment, the government cannot do anything for the community. We need to change our minds. The community, not the government. The government can give many things, but the community has to accept that. But it's difficult. First, we have to have a community meeting. And make a research, a questionnaire, 'What do you need?'

This brings us back to the issue of identity, as some interviewees felt that the best way to create community cohesion is to promote Bolivian

culture – through the means of festivals – to English people. Creating an interest in Bolivian people amongst the local population, it was argued, would provide Bolivians with a platform for unification through collective pride in their culture:

If you make activities, not for the Bolivian community, for the English community. Because the English community don't know nothing about Bolivia. And that's reality. And if we can make activities to show the English community what is really Bolivia, people will start to feel Bolivian, because it's a feeling thing, it's not a political thing. You have to *feel* Bolivian. (Hernando)

Again, interviewees felt that this celebration of Bolivian-ness needs to be disconnected from standard images in the popular imagination of the English. The problem with events such as Carnaval del Pueblo, some argued, is that it is dominated by Colombian cultural tradition, while Bolivians are fairly marginal to the enterprise. Still, the celebration and promotion of Bolivian culture is not just for Bolivians, but was felt to be instrumental in paving the way for integration to British society as well.

Integration

If a complex and essentially elusive term as 'integration' could in some way be quantified, it could only be said that Bolivians integrate well to life in London. Thus, the somewhat bleak picture described above needs to be balanced against a more positive one. Most interviewees – both long-term residents and recent arrivals – said that they were happy living in London. While a large amount of deskilling certainly goes hand in hand with the migration process, most interviewees said that Britain does allow people to grow and develop their skills. This view was prevalent amongst the long-term residents, many of whom came to the UK with nothing, and have been able to build a good life. Many of the long-term residents experienced similar deskilling as the recent arrivals, but had managed to work their way to what they considered a comfortable

⁴⁰ McIlwaine (2005: 44)

place in life. Amongst the recent arrivals, many said that it was exactly the prospect and possibility of doing so that compelled them to stay.

In this respect, the multicultural aspect of London was cited as a facilitator of integration. While long-term interviewees all said that they would always be foreigners in this country, this did not amount to a feeling of outright rejection. The racism described in previous chapters was primarily experienced at an institutional level. While many interviewees said they had experienced racism from the public, this was not considered to be a prominent part of life in London. Rather, the multicultural character of London allows for being both a Bolivian and a Londoner, fostering a sense of belonging:

And I got used to London as well, London was an exciting city, a lot of opportunities. I think if you have the qualities and qualifications, you can get a job, especially in London. I think London is so multinational ... You meet so many new and exciting people, cultures, so many different things, events, that's happening around different cultures. It's a learning experience, you don't ever reach that plateau where you know everything. That's why I stayed so long in London, and that's why I don't feel any urgency to go back. (Emilio)

Indeed, the recent arrivals said that – with their Bolivian qualifications not recognised in Britain – they are/were certainly forced to start at the bottom and work their way up. But this is exactly what they said they intend to do. In other words, the deskilling process is not static, and all recent arrivals believed that in spite of initial setbacks, London is a place where people from all over the world are given a chance to grow. The secret ingredient to success in London – hard work – was considered to be an essentially Bolivian trait:

The minimum of what the Bolivian can do here, is to work hard, for themselves. And that will reflect on the English society. And I think we've managed to do that. Because wherever you go, you're never going to see a Bolivian who's lost the opportunities in this

country, or they managed to do something wrong. Most of them are very very hard workers. They manage to get into the opportunities that this country offer them. And they use them. And they're succeeding. And they're still succeeding now. (Victor)

Still, integration and acceptance into British society does not happen on its own accord, but was described as something that needs to be proactively worked towards. Many spoke of involving themselves in activities outside work, such as sports, charity work or English classes. These kinds of activities were considered important for a number of inter-related reasons. Firstly, they allowed the interviewees to learn more about British life, both social and bureaucratic, and at the same time teach Britons about Bolivia, thereby contributing to enhanced understanding in both directions. Secondly, they proved to be a great asset when dealing with the authorities. For example, Emilio described how his involvement with a charity had assisted him when applying for naturalisation. This work, he said, demonstrated to the government that "I wasn't a timewaster or economic grabber." Similarly, when Eliana was caught by immigration officials for working beyond the 20 hours allowed by her student visa, she was able to avoid deportation by evincing her dedication to her English studies. Knowing that her entry conditions did not allow her to work as much as she did, she also realised that she needed to be able to show that she is actively trying to integrate and contribute to Britain:

So that's why I study, and I had 95% attendance, I never failed an exam, and I have my diplomas. So when the time came to apply for a visa, I could show that. So I'm not just fooling around, getting a job, and not going to study or paying for someone to sign for me. That's the effort I made. So I worked 12 hours and on top of that went to college, but that's why they let me stay.

This leads us to the third reason, which is the immense importance placed on learning the English language. While all interviewees spoke

English at the time of research, many did not do so when they first arrived. Speaking adequate English was considered by all to be absolutely essential to successfully living and working in Britain. For this reason, employment in the cleaning sector was seen as a great inhibitor for integration. Several interviewees who worked as cleaners described a situation which they explained as ‘having the key.’ This means that they work outside office hours, typically between 5 and eight in the morning and evening, where they ‘have the key’ to get into an empty office:

So I can work one office 6-8 in the evening, another office maybe 8:30-10:30. So I am working four hours. But that is with no communication. Alone. You don't talk with anyone. We have what we call *madrugada* – early morning – 5-8. And then, again, you are working on your own because you are cleaning the office before other people is coming. (Marcela)

In this way, those interviewees who ‘have the key’ correspond to the catch-22 situation of Colombian migrants interviewed by McIlwaine⁴¹ and Latin Americans generally as described by Carlisle;⁴² working unsociable hours in an environment where they are not able to routinely practice their English means that they have little possibility to improve their language skills, which, in turn, offers the primary opportunity to develop professionally. As Carlisle rightly points out, “[i]t is a vicious circle as the only jobs available to non-English speakers are ‘hidden’ jobs, which offer no opportunity to socialise or network with other English speakers.”⁴³ This situation is exacerbated for those who are at risk of being deported, as they are less likely to invest time and money to learn English.

The final aspect to mention in this section is the distinction – discussed in the *Identities* chapter – made between conduct and mentality. As already mentioned, some long-term residents felt that their Bolivian identity does not interfere

with their ability to integrate. Quite the contrary, Gabriel said that it was exactly the Bolivians’ wish to contribute and to be positively regarded which strengthened their sense of Bolivian-ness, a view which was held by a number of interviewees. Victor, for example, felt that:

We’re not coming here to say we’re Bolivian. You know, we come here to work ... Because the only thing you can show, to this society, that we are Bolivian, is because you’re going to see someone who is honest, hard working people. And suddenly, ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘From *Bolivia*.’ And that’s what I want. Because I don’t want to show to this society that I’m Bolivian by making myself notorious, or go and protest why we’re not recognised.

Indeed, projecting a positive image of Bolivians was considered to be a potential source of improved intra-community cohesion, exactly because it enhances pride in Bolivian identity. Promoting Bolivian culture could in this instance simultaneously serve to unify the Bolivian community, as was discussed in the previous chapter, as well as paving the way for social affirmation on the half of the native population. In this way, the distinction made between a Bolivian mentality and British conduct meant that interviewees felt both accepted into the fold of British society and allowed to retain their Bolivian-ness.

Conclusion

As the number of Bolivians finding their way to London progressively grows, so does the need for a clearer understanding of their experiences. As was mentioned in the introduction, little is actually known about Bolivians in London. It may therefore be tempting to draw on what is known about other Latin American groups when engaging with the Bolivian community. However, it is clear that one cannot simply equate Bolivians with ‘Latin Americans’ generally; a continent wide approach is certainly of limited use. A comparison with McIlwaine’s study⁴⁴ demonstrates that while many of the issues identified by the interviewees of this study

41 McIlwaine (2005: 33-34)

42 Carlisle (2006: 238-239)

43 Carlisle (2006: 239)

44 McIlwaine (2005)

overlap with issues faced by Colombians, others are unique to Bolivians. This should hardly come as a surprise, seeing that the political, social and cultural contexts of the sending countries are highly different. Furthermore, a longer history of sustained migration to London and far greater numbers where Colombians are concerned make the receiving contexts at variance as well, a point made by several interviewees. The support networks available to recently arrived Colombians are relatively extensive and well established,⁴⁵ while they are far less developed within the Bolivian community. Indeed, Bolivians rely to a certain extent on Colombian networks and community organisations, a situation which has both advantages and drawbacks.

One of the main problems mentioned by the interviewees was the fragmentation and disunity amongst Bolivians in London. Class distinctions and, to a lesser degree, place of origin – both important social markers in Bolivia – appear to have continued relevance in London. Many interviewees spoke of lack of social relations, even animosity, between classes. Similarly, there appears to be little contact between long-term residents and recent arrivals. Thus, there is limited transmission of the long-term residents' experiences and knowledge to recent arrivals, who in many ways are now in a similar position. While disunity is problematic because it attenuates intra-community cohesion, it also undermines Bolivians' relationship with the state. This was widely acknowledged amongst the recent arrivals, who generally felt that information and channels of communication were the two things that the government could provide them with. But as Hernando pointed out: "How you can give communication to people who are not organised? So the first step is to organise the community." Thus, while many interviewees felt discriminated against precisely because they are Bolivian, they also recognised that a collective Bolivian voice

would be a powerful tool to combat this discrimination.

However, while the fragmentation of the Bolivian community in London can in many ways be attributed to internal divisions brought along from Bolivia, current immigration policies do little to ameliorate the situation. For example, the student visa on which many Bolivians enter Britain allows them to legitimately work 20 hours. However, all of the recently arrived interviewees worked far more, and found it relatively easy to do so. Furthermore, in spite of tough Government talk on immigration policy – particularly where irregular migration is concerned – in practice would-be immigrants find a fertile field for living and working in Britain off the record. This relegates them to an irregular immigration status in the eyes of long-term residents as well as the authorities, which interviewees said was driving a wedge between long-term residents and recent arrivals. While this situation is unlikely to be unique to Bolivians, it does partly derive from Bolivia's particular place in the global economic hierarchy. As Farrant et al. remind us, "it is the policies of receiving countries that create irregularity."⁴⁶ In the current immigration policy landscape, Bolivian migrants come from the 'South' in the North-South divide that generates much migration in the first place.⁴⁷ This is reflected in their immigration status, which in turn contributes to intra-community divisions.

To conclude, we may join Vertovec in asking "what kind of forums, spaces and networks should be created and supported to stimulate inter-relationships of new-comers and settled communities?"⁴⁸ The situation of Bolivians is particularly tricky. The three platforms, listed by Baumann, on which discrimination is usually fought – civil rights, religious rights and ethnic rights⁴⁹ – are problematic where Bolivians are concerned. Obviously, a large part of recent arrivals have no claim on civil rights; not only do they lack citizenship, but often lack full administrative permission to work in Britain. Nor does religion appear to carry enough weight amongst Bolivians to provide strong claims to rights. While some interviewees stated that Catholic Church organisations are meeting places for Bolivians, this was considered to be

45 In spite of this, McIlwaine (2005: 42–44) reports a high degree of disunity and distrust within the Colombian community as well. Significantly, however, many of her interviewees said they receive substantial support from migrant support organisations.

46 Farrant et al. (2006: 8)

47 cf. Castles (2004: 862)

48 Vertovec (2006: 30)

49 Baumann (1999)

more for social reasons than religious. In any case, Bolivians are not discriminated against because of their religion. Finally, disunity and fragmentation amongst Bolivians means that, at present, ethnicity provides a fragile platform for fighting discrimination. Furthermore, current discrimination against recently arrived Bolivians is largely connected to their immigration status, and this is likely to be the case in the near future. Claiming rights along ethnic lines would not be enough to counter this.

Developing a collective voice to represent the rights and interests of Bolivians is an important and timely task. Many long-term residents spoke about the need to involve newcomers in their community activities. Indeed, this could lead to transmission of knowledge and experiences, which is currently limited. Developing a pan-Bolivian sentiment could also foster a stronger 'ethnic rights' discourse amongst recent arrivals. This is a pressing task, considering that many issues – such as the structure of intra-community relations and lack of developed community networks – are specific (albeit not unique) to Bolivians. However, considering the reported high frequency of irregular immigration status amongst Bolivians, recent arrivals could tap into a fourth rights discourse: migrants' rights. If social inclusion and good community relations are to be promoted, Flynn has argued that:

The relative degree of success in achieving these objectives depends on the capacity of migrant communities to represent their collective interests to the local authorities, to gather allies from amongst other groups in promoting their needs, and their ability to negotiate favourable outcomes with the various levels of power-holders.⁵⁰

In this sense, an affiliation with other people with similar experiences of the migratory process, but not necessarily of the same ethnic group, could provide irregular Bolivian migrants with support and a forum through which they could learn about and pursue their rights.

Nevertheless, there was a strong consensus

amongst the interviewees that intra-community relations need to be strengthened – if not to pursue rights, then certainly to nurture cohesion. Most were of the opinion that a potent Bolivian identity is in a symbiotic relationship with intra-community cohesion: one appears to be dependent on and nurture the other. Both are, in turn, conducive to inter-community relations, as healthy relationships within the Bolivian community would promote healthy relationships with other communities. Pride in Bolivian-ness, it was argued, would present Bolivians with a platform on which they could constructively interact with other groups. Indeed, the multi-ethnic character of Britain is a welcoming environment to build and retain a strong ethnic identity, which is vital for Bolivians to feel part of our community of communities.

⁵⁰ Flynn (2006: 2)

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