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Legal Latins? Webs of (ir)regularity among Latin American migrants in London

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Abstract
Drawing on fieldwork conducted among Latin American migrants in London, this chapter responds to recent calls for a greater scholarly engagement with migrants' practices of citizenship. Starting on the assumption that migrants should have a say about their own integration in society, the chapter examines Latin American migrants' collective engagements with the political process in Britain around issues of exploitation and social and cultural recognition. Particular attention is paid to their practices of citizenship and their impact as well as to the context -of current restrictive immigration policy and neo-assimilationist public discourse - in which these practices develop.

Keywords:
Latin Americans, migration, irregularity, coping strategies, survival, London

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Introduction

Few migration issues engender such passion, division and debate than the immigration status of migrants. Irregular migration is rarely out of the public arena in the UK and beyond. Most commonly referred to as ‘illegal migration’ by the UK government and media, there is a tendency to both criminalise and demonise irregular migrants (Harris, 2002; IPPR, 2006). Although popular accounts of the extent of irregular migration usually exaggerate its significance in reality, its importance cannot be over-stated (Koser, 2005). Not surprisingly, research on immigration status has burgeoned in parallel with concerns about the effects of irregular migration on state sovereignty and national security. Despite our increasingly globalised and transnational world, the effects of increasing restrictions on people’s movement are being felt across the world as people negotiate barriers to their movement in ever more innovative ways (Cornelius and Tsuda, 2004; Waldinger, 2008). However, academic debates have either tended to focus on the relationship between immigration policy and regularity especially at a European-wide level (Guiraudon, 2003; Samers, 2003), on citizenship and the exercise of rights (Carens, 2008; Morris, 2002), or on the specific circumstances of migrants who have no regular status or a specific legal status (Bailey et al., 2002; Leitner and Ehrkamp, 2006; Menjívar, 2006). Much less research has focused on grassroots perspectives in relation to the ways that migrants themselves have to negotiate regularity across the entire spectrum of legality in complex ways (although see Erdemir and Vasta, 2007; Vasta, 2008; also Però, 2008 on citizenship from below). In addition, while the blurred boundaries between regular and irregular migrants have long been recognised as important (Black, 2003), there remains considerable scope to address the implications of all forms of regularity for the everyday lives of migrants (although see Black et al., 2006; Jordan and Duvell, 2002).

The current paper explores two broad dimensions of these processes drawing on qualitative research with Latin Americans in London, focusing specifically on Colombian, Ecuadorian and Bolivian migrants. First, it examines the complex negotiations around how migrant (ir)regularity is constructed in relation to the changing and increasingly restrictive legislative regime; second, it considers
how (ir)regularity affects migrants’ ability to ‘get-by’ economically and socially. The paper illustrates how the migration regime embraces and rejects different national groups among Latin Americans creating hierarchies (ir)regularity. At the same time, migrants challenge and subvert these restrictions on their movement in diverse (legal and illegal) ways akin to webs rather than hierarchies which in turn, have important implications for the ways in which they cope with living and working in London.

**Understanding migrant (ir)regularity**

There is a huge literature on issues of legality, irregularity and documentation that relates to theoretical discussions of definitions and rights (Anderson, 2007; Carens, 2008, Miller, 2008). At the outset, it is important to clarify what they mean, not least because they have been defined in many different ways. The terms ‘irregular’, ‘undocumented’, ‘illegal’ and ‘unauthorised’ migration all refer to a situation whereby people enter a country without authority to do so and are potentially open to being deported as a result (IPPR, 2006; Jordan and Duvell, 2002). Importantly, it should be recognised that defining migrants as illegal, irregular or undocumented reflects the actions of states rather than individuals (see Black, 2003). Thus, as Samers (2004: 28) notes, immigration status is effectively ‘an epiphenomenon of migration and citizenship policy’ in that it is only produced through the application of legislative processes. Yet, the specific name assigned to people who circumvent immigration rules has been open to much debate. On the one hand, there has been a conflation and a manipulation of the different types of terms especially by the popular media as well as a confusion over what constitutes ‘illegal’, ‘irregular’, or ‘undocumented’ status (ibid.). It is generally agreed that ‘illegal’ is the least helpful primarily because of its inherent criminalisation of people who have crossed borders in an unauthorised manner. However, it has also been critiqued because it strips people of their human rights, it ignores the fact that migrants who break national laws are still subject to international law, and because it can jeopardise claims made by asylum seekers (Koser, 2005; Samers, 2004). Although the terms ‘undocumented’ and ‘unauthorised’ are free from explicitly negative labelling of people, they are still unclear. Both can be used in different ways that can denote not having the legally correct papers as well as not being officially recorded by the receiving country. As a result of these confusions, irregular is the most widely used and value-free term
among scholars and international agencies. This said, both the EU and the UK government continue to use ‘illegal’ (Koser, 2005; Pinkerton et al., 2004). Although it is important to acknowledge that a person cannot be irregular but rather can have irregular status (ibid), it is the preferred term because it is the least judgemental and the most flexible in terms of incorporating the wide range of different ways that people become irregular. Further confounding the distinction between regularity and irregularity is so-called ‘semi-compliance’ where a migrant might be residing legally but contravening conditions of their immigration status (such as students working longer than the 20 hours per week) (Ruhs and Anderson, 2006).

Further adding to the complexity, it is also crucially important to recognise that immigration status is extremely dynamic. On the one hand, it can be brought about by a range of different processes which include entering a destination country without documentation (being smuggled) or with false papers, overstaying visas or violating the terms of visas, as well as staying on after an asylum application and/or appeal have been rejected, and residing without documentation or applying for asylum in another country while residing elsewhere (IPPR, 2006; Koser, 2005). On the other, these types of processes can merge and intersect depending on the individuals and their specific life experiences (Black et al., 2007; Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2007). Indeed, the so-called ‘super-diversity’ of immigration in London today has been partly linked with the huge diversity of immigration statuses found within specific national and ethnic groups (Vertovec 2007: 1039), an issue of particular pertinence among Latin American migrants.

It is widely acknowledged that immigration status permeates the rights available to migrants in all aspects of their lives economically, socially, culturally and politically (Cornelius et al [eds], 2004; Engbersen and Van Der Luen, 1998; Samers, 2003). Immigration status not only influences where migrants move to in the first place, where they live and their experiences in the labour market, but it affects who they are, how they live and who their friends and colleagues are (Broeders and Engbersen, 2007; Kemp et al., 2000; Wills et al., 2009). This can lead to deep-seated divisions among migrants between those with status and those without. Indeed, the chasm between the experiences of different groups of migrants is so great that some have suggested that distinct social classes have emerged with very differential access to resources, rights and citizenship (Menjívar, 2006). Differential access to immigration status also creates a stratified
sense of belonging and marks out those who are irregular as deportable and therefore excluded from the society and economy (ibid.; Bauman, 1998). Bauman (2004) further points out how patterns of social stratification have become ever more selective over time with the result that irregular migrants are being increasingly pushed towards the margins of the labour market and denied any access to the welfare states of so-called advanced welfare economies (see also Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2007). Drawing on Castle’s (2005) notion of ‘hierarchical citizenship’ together with Morris’s (2004) ‘hierarchy of statuses’, Vasta (2008) shows how migrants in the UK with certain types of citizenship have differential access to rights and status depending on whether they are regular or irregular. This is the result of a state that ‘creates the contradiction of integration and fragmentation; of promoting security for some groups and intimidation and threat for others; it regulates through laws and disorganises through incompetencies’ (p.17).

Reflecting the marginalisation of regular and irregular migrants in the low-paid urban economies in cities such as London, it has been suggested that a ‘migrant division of labour’ has emerged. Referring specifically to London, this describes a process whereby migrants are concentrated in the lower echelons of the urban economy where native-born British are no longer willing to work (May et al., 2007; Wills et al., 2009). However, what this and other research highlights is not a strict division between those with or without regular status which is important per se, although this is obviously influential. Instead, it is the complex ways in which migrants find themselves on the edges of societies and economies and are excluded from full participation in the life and economy of a given country or labour market that is significant. Irregular migrants can be firmly integrated into formal labour markets through formal work contracts, paying taxes and receiving work-related benefits, yet they may also be excluded from accessing other state resources because of their irregularity as well as suffering widespread social and political exclusion (Duvell, 2003; Leitner and Ehrkamp, 2006). This can be beneficial for employers as well as the government more widely, which in the British case until recently has tolerated irregular migration in order to meet much-needed labour demand (Wills et al., 2009; see also Vasta, 2008).

While obviously migrants with regular status and the concomitant rights associated with such status fare much better than those without, it is also important to recognise that regularity is highly dynamic, fluid and
multidimensional. Migrants must deal not only with being regular in some aspects of their lives while irregular in others, as suggested above, but they can also be open to the vagaries of changing immigration regimes that can render migrants irregular literally overnight. Given that migrants are rarely granted anything other than temporary visas on entry to a country, changes in immigration legislation can have deep-seated and often damaging effects on their lives. This has been particularly important in the case of Latin Americans in the US. For example, Bailey et al. (2002) examine the situation of El Salvadorans in the US who have temporary legal status which results in them living in a state of ‘permanent temporariness’ or in what Menjívar (2006) refers to as ‘legal liminality’. In a similar vein, Menjívar’s (2006) research includes Guatemalans in the US who do not have access to TPS, but who have been subject to multiple changes in deportation, asylum and settlement rules. Again, this has led not only to the blurring of the distinction between regular and irregular migrants but also the creation of heightened anxiety among people as they deal with their legal limbo (see also Mountz et al, 2002; Miyares et al, 2003).

Thus, ‘status insecurity’ (Leitner and Ehrkamp, 2006) among migrants in its various guises has become an important issue of concern. As noted in the introduction, this is rooted in the fact that immigration restrictions around the world have grown ever tighter (Neumayer, 2006; Waldinger, 2008) making entry and settlement more difficult, and somewhat perversely creating a large population of irregular migrants (Engbersen, 2001). Indeed, it is increasingly being recognised that there is a growing chasm between the objectives of immigration control policies and the effects of these policies (Cornelius et al [eds], 2004; Joppke, 1998). This said, we still know little about the specific impacts and implications of these policies on the ground and the outcomes for migrants’ in terms of their everyday well-being as they negotiate the continuum of (ir)regularity or what I call webs of (ir)regularity among Latin Americans in London (Black et al., 2007; Cornelius and Salehyan, 2007; Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2007).

**Migrants dealing with (ir)regularity**

Migrants are not victims of the restrictions that nation states impose on their movements and attempts to settle. Indeed, agency is at the core of mobility as international migrants move in order to improve their lives for a range of complex and interrelated reasons. Not only do migrants develop a range of innovative ways
in which to enter their country of choice, but once in their destinations, they create various practices or ‘tactics’ to cope with the demands of their lives in destinations (following de Certeau, 1984) (Datta et al., 2007; Wills et al., 2009). With roots in both early research on migration as a strategy for ensuring household and individual well-being in terms of risk-sharing and so on (Stark and Bloom, 1985), as well as on how the poor in the Global South and Central and Eastern develop practices to cope with economic hardships (Rakodi, 1999), there has been burgeoning work on how international migrants develop livelihood or coping mechanisms (de Haas, 2006; Snel and Staring, 2001). Some have adopted a capitals perspective (see Kelly and Lusis, 2006 on Filipino migrants in Toronto; also Nee and Sanders, 2001 on ‘forms-of-capital model’ in Los Angeles) or an assets-based approach. The latter has been developed to examine how migrants build up financial assets transnationally through remittances (Orozco, 2007), how hometown associations can provide an important asset base for migrants (Cordero-Guzmán and Quiroz-Becerra, 2007), as well as on the gendered nature of transnational asset accumulation (Gammage, 2007).

In the European context, research has tended to concentrate on the nature of coping practices among a diverse range of migrants in relation to patterns and processes of exclusion, only occasionally adopting the lexicon of livelihoods or assets (Engbersen, 2001; Snel and Staring, 2001). In particular, it has highlighted how the process of negotiating exclusion and settlement is fundamental to the lives of migrants and the nature of their coping revolving around immigration legislation, labour market configurations and housing (Evergeti and Zontini, 2006, Samers, 1998; Wills et al., 2009), with gender, ethnicity, nationality and length of residence being critical in how successful they are (Wall and José, 2004; Zontini, 2004). In particular, exclusion has been shown to undermine coping and lead to widespread fragility of economic and social relations (Andreotti, 2006; Collyer, 2005). With reference to low-paid migrants in London, Datta et al (2007) identified how migrants from a wider range of different nationalities developed tactics (rather than strategies) that were reactive rather than proactive in order to get-by in the face of extensive exclusion in the labour market and beyond (also Wills et al., 2009). These included a range of income-generating activities such as taking on additional jobs, as well as adapting household economies, minimising expenditures and mobilising social capital. It also highlighted that exclusion emanated not just from the mainstream native population, but also from other
migrants who were jostling for scarce resources from the same and different ethnic and nationality groups (Gryzmala-Kazlowska, 2005; Herbert et al, 2008; Kosic and Triandafyllidou, 2003; Williams, 2006). Overall, this research has shown that international migrants face additional pressures of everyday processes of discrimination that non-migrants in home or host countries do not (Cheong, 2006).

As mentioned above, while economic coping practices of migrants are central to the maintenance of their livelihoods in foreign countries, their concentration in low-status jobs in the lower echelons of labour markets (May et al., 2007), and especially in care and domestic work among women (Anderson, 2007; Lutz [ed], 2008), has further exacerbated their marginalisation (Wills et al, 2008). In addition, research on the social coping practices, often conceptualised as social capital has shown on one hand, that they are extremely important in creating and sustaining migrant livelihoods and dealing with inequalities (Faist, 2000; Snel and Staring, 2001). Yet on the other, it has increasingly been viewed as highly ambiguous and a potential tool for further exclusion and atomisation (Collyer, 2005; Levitt, 2001; Menjívar, 2000; Zetter et al., 2005). This latter point is invariably overlooked by policymakers in the UK and beyond who have shown considerable enthusiasm for the building various types of social capital, despite the burgeoning evidence that such an approach overlooks widespread experiences of discrimination, inequalities and hardships and can exacerbate them (Cheong et al., 2007; Evergeti and Zontini, 2006; Spicer, 2008). Yet, while empirical research has increasingly highlighted these negative dimensions (Guarnizo et al, 1999; Menjívar, 2000), much less is known about how various axes of differentiation and exclusion affect how migrants relate with one another within a given ethnic ‘community’ of different nationalities as in the case of Latin Americans in the UK (although see Amin, 2002).

While the issues of immigration status has been implicit in much of this research on coping, only recently has work begun to focus specifically on how irregular migrants deal with the challenges of living in foreign countries. In particular, research in the Netherlands has identified a range of risk-avoidance strategies adopted by irregular migrants. Engbersen (2001: 223) conceptualises residence strategies as ‘strategic activities aimed at prolonging residence in the Netherlands and preventing deportation’. These include the ‘(1) the mobilisation of social capital, (2) (sham) marriages, (3) the manipulation of one’s own identity and nationality, and (4) operating strategically in the public space’ (p. 224).
Similarly Broeders and Engbersen (2007: 1798) develop this further and identify a range of ‘counterstrategies’ that include ‘making use of bastard institutions [smuggling organisations and informal markets used to access housing, labour markets etc], mobilisation of transnational social capital, and manipulation of their identity’. Similarly, in the UK context, Vasta (2008: 4) has shown how migrants have dealt pragmatically with their irregularity by ‘developing flexible or fluid life and work strategies’ that often entail creating ‘irregular formality’ through buying, renting or borrowing papers and creating ‘legal’ identities.

Drawing on these ideas, the current working paper identified the types of strategies and practices created by Latin American migrants in London in order to both enter and settle in the city. These include migrant entry strategies which are carefully created, some of which are legitimate in the eyes of the state and some of which are not, but which also reflect the attitudes of the state towards different nationalities. Once migrants are living in London, they develop a range of economic and social coping practices that variously revolve around strategies of ‘isolation’ and ‘identity’ depending on whether migrants are regular or irregular. Some of these are actively developed to avert risk, especially among irregular migrants, while others are more reactive practices that are aimed primarily at coping with the exclusions of life in London. Before exploring these practices in greater depth, it is important to provide some background on the Latin American community in London.

**Latin American migration to London: setting the scene**

Latin Americans represent a ‘new migrant population’ with no direct colonial links with the UK as well as being unorganised, legally differentiated and non-citizen (Vertovec, 2007: 1027-8). On the other hand, Latin Americans have a long history with the UK in terms of trading and in providing a home for political exiles. Historically, London has long given refuge to Latin American political exiles, diplomats, writers, artists, political activists and business people dating back to the seventeenth century (Miller, 1998).

Yet the actual number of Latin Americans moving to the UK was very small and comprised mainly of the elite (Decho and Diamond, 1998). None the less, the numbers grew steadily throughout the twentieth century augmented in the 1960s and 1970s by exiles from the repressive regimes in Brazil, Chile and Argentina (together with Uruguayans, Bolivians, and Colombians). However, not until the
late 1970s were there significant migration flows of ‘ordinary people’ when Colombians arrived as the first non-Commonwealth group to take advantage of the work permit system to take-up jobs in domestic service, as au pairs and in catering. After 1980, migration of Colombians continued through social networks and asylum seeking as people fled the worsening armed conflict (Bermúdez Torres, 2003; Román-Velázquez, 1999). Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of Ecuadorians migrated, especially in the 1990s, together with Peruvians, Brazilians, Argentineans and more recently, Bolivians with the majority moving because of the various economic crises in their home countries (Carlisle, 2006; Evans et al., 2007). Entry is currently most likely via student and tourist visas with only a trickle now claiming asylum. For instance, between 2002 and 2004 asylum applications from Colombians declined by 45% from 420 applications to 120 (McIlwaine, 2005: 11). By 2007, there were only 30 applications from Colombians, 10 from Ecuadorians (the only 2 countries mentioned) and 85 from ‘other Americas’. All the Colombian and Ecuadorian cases were refused. Also significant is that the success of appeals is very low as well; of 40 appeals in 2007, only 5 were allowed, the rest being dismissed.3 This all suggests that asylum is closed to Latin Americans as a form of entry into the UK. In light of this, it is not surprising that they are entering via other means (see also Morrison and Crosland, 2001).

More generally, despite comprising a huge range of nationalities, ethnicities and diverse cultures, Latin Americans are generally referred to as a community. However, it is important to emphasise that this is a ‘community’ in a sense of denoting people from the same continent, sharing a language (with the exception of Brazilians) and a very loose cultural affinity. It is not one based on homogeneity and social cohesion (see Kivisto, 2001 for a conceptual discussion; also Carlisle, 2006). This said, services and resources tend to focus on Latin Americans rather than specific nationalities, mainly because of the small numbers involved. This is reflected in the growing institutional support for the Latin American population from civil society organisations over time. Most current migrant organisations were first established to campaign against military dictatorships in Latin America and then evolved into service-oriented groups. These included the Campaign Against Repression in Latin American which became Carila Latin American Welfare Group and the Latin American Women’s Rights Service, the Chile Democrático group that became Indo-American Migrant and
Refugee Organisation (IRMO), as well as the Latin American Advisory Committee which was instrumental in the creation of Latin American House (Cock, 2008).

As to the size of the Latin American population today, estimates vary for the reasons suggested above. Official statistics based on the 2001 Census identify a combined population of Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Bolivians in London as 11,863, with Latin American nationalities together making-up 46,325. The Labour Force Survey data suggests higher numbers indicating that there were 18,000 Colombians in 2006, together with 25,000 Brazilians, and 4,000 Argentineans. However, these are underestimates as it is now acknowledged that Latin Americans are a largely invisible population. This is mainly because of high numbers with irregular status, and because many arrive via Spain and Portugal using (legitimate and false) EU passports, as well as their classification as ‘other’ in ethnic statistical procedures. In trying to overcome these under-estimates, a recent Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2007) report suggested that there were between 700,000 to 1 million Latin Americans. Of these, there are approximately 200,000 Brazilians, 140,000 Colombians, 70-90,000 Ecuadorians and 10-15,000 Peruvians (see also Guarnizo, 2008; James, 2005; McIlwaine, 2005; Sveinsson, 2007), most of whom reside in London. Whatever the true numbers, it is clear that Latin Americans are a growing population who are often overlooked and who have remained largely invisible until recently. This is evidenced in a recent report using Labour Force Survey data that showed that between 1998-2005 as many Latin Americans were arriving in London as Poles (5% of the total) (LSE, 2007).

Beyond the numbers which are never likely to be accurate, the current study outlines some broad characteristics drawing on qualitative and ethnographic research based on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 70 Latin American migrants in London together with 3 focus group discussions conducted between November 2006 and July 2007. More specifically, interviews were carried out with three main Latin American nationalities: 28 Colombians (as the most established group), 22 Ecuadorians (as the second most established) and 20 Bolivians (as the most recent), with a total of 26 men and 44 women. The focus groups involved 17 migrants and included people from Brazil, Peru and Venezuela as well as the other three nationalities. A further 10 interviews were conducted with members of migrant organisations, churches and embassies with a longer term overview provided by two years of participant observation as the Chair of a
Management Committee of a migrant organisation serving the community (between July 2006-October 2008).

In terms of the characteristics of those interviewed, the sample was chosen to focus on ‘ordinary’ migrants and thus excluded obvious elite groups such as embassy staff, graduate students and those working in professional jobs in the UK. Among the 70 in-depth interviewees, most were aged between 21 and 30 and were relatively well-educated, with almost a quarter having completed tertiary education (24%). The majority had a job, with 5 women defining themselves as housewives or unemployed and 4 men who received welfare benefits, with a further 16 studying English as their main occupation, although all worked as well. For those employed, the majority was concentrated in cleaning and catering. Cleaning comprised working as contract cleaners for large companies in offices, shops, banks as well as some hourly domestic cleaning. Also common was work in cafes in kitchens or serving, with a minority working in factories, laundries or in their own businesses. This also represented considerable de-skilling for many migrants who had previously worked as professionals or managers such as teachers, accountants, and engineers. Acknowledging the difficulties in identifying migrants’ legal status, the majority reported that they were living in the country legally (60), with only 10 reportedly irregular. Twenty-two had student visas (31%), with a further 22 stating they had residence acquired either through asylum, by marrying someone, or by having Spanish passports (legally or illegally). Importantly, many of those interviewed were ‘semi-compliant’ in that they breached the conditions of their visa, most commonly working for more than permitted via student visas (thus making them irregular), with just under half (33) having residency rights through citizenship or Indefinite Leave to Remain (both of which allow claims on public funds). Most migrants had arrived in the previous 10 years and settled in a range of dispersed locations across London, despite some concentrations in areas in the South (in Lambeth and Brixton) and North (Holloway Road and Tottenham) (see McIlwaine, 2007; McIlwaine and Velasquez, 2007 for further details).

Challenging hierarchies and creating webs of (ir)regularity: migrant entry strategies
The UK has always had a controlled immigration policy which has been especially restrictive since the 1960s as the government tried to curb immigration from the
former Commonwealth countries. Yet, migration has occurred since then, accepted largely because of labour shortages (Cornelius and Tsuda, 2004). However, in the last five years or so years, as with many other countries of the industrialised North, the UK government has placed more and more limits on immigration with the current ‘managed migration’ policy being among the most restrictive (Flynn, 2005; May et al., 2007; Wills et al., 2009). It is likely that the UK’s recent immigration policies, as is the case elsewhere in ‘Fortress Europe’, have also served somewhat ironically to boost the numbers of irregular migrants (Engbersen, 2001). This said, it wasn’t until 2005 that the UK’s Home Office tried to make an estimate of the number of irregular migrants coming up with a median of 430,000 with a low of 310,000 and a high of 570,000 based on the 2001 census (Pinkerton et al., 2006; IPPR, 2006: 9). This figure is not only a rough estimate, but also hides the huge complexity of irregular migration (Koser, 2005). As noted above, this complexity is based on the fact that irregularity can come about for a range of different reasons ranging from clandestine or fraudulent entry, through to abusing the asylum system (ibid.: 6; see also Black et al., 2006). Although there is little available data on the nature of irregular migration in the UK, it is thought that most is generated through people overstaying their visas (IPPR, 2006: 10). This supports the views of those who criticise restrictive immigration policies elsewhere in Europe for effectively ‘criminalising’ migrants as a matter of course by making legal status ever more difficult to secure and to maintain over time (Calavita, 1998; De Genova, 2002; Engbersen, 2001).

All these issues are especially pertinent for ‘new migrant’ groups such as Latin Americans who have arrived in relatively large numbers and without the protection of Commonwealth status. While for some, UK immigration policies have afforded migrants a warm welcome and access to full legal citizenship rights, they have also created vulnerable populations where uncertainty has become the norm (see also McIlwaine, 2005). This has led to deep-seated divisions within and among Latin Americans as each nationality has had particular legal stipulations and prescriptions attached to their entry and settlement, which has been further cross-cut by gender, class and race (see also Anderson, 2007). Thus, strategies of entry and the subsequent status attained as a result fundamentally affected the lives of migrants as they settled in London reflecting a marked hierarchy of access and regularity constructed by the British state (reflecting Morris’s 2002 ‘hierarchy of status’).
While the reasons why Latin Americans have migrated to the UK are manifold and very difficult to disentangle at an individual and a group level, the UK immigration regime has created a complex set of hierarchies. Colombians, as the most established group of economic migrants and refugees, were at the top being the most likely to have regular immigration status and residency, with Ecuadorians ‘in the middle’ being the next most established, with more recently arrived Bolivians being the most likely to be irregular. While the migration regime certainly gave preferential access to Colombians in the past and to a lesser extent, Ecuadorians, both nationalities have required visas before entry (since 1997), while Bolivians were able to arrive without visas until May 2009 (see below). Thus, entry was effectively easier for Bolivians even though the grounds of entry, which were usually short-term tourist and student visas, were much less favourable (see below). Therefore, in reality these hierarchies were mediated by the changing immigration regime as well as by a range of other factors depending on the specific life situations of migrants. As such, it is more appropriate to talk about ‘webs of regularity’ as it is not possible to make simplistic interpretations based purely on the role of immigration legislation and nationality.

Acknowledging this, it is also critically important to highlight how Latin American migrants were not victims of immigration regimes, but rather actors who manipulated and negotiated their entry and settlement through these webs of (ir)regularity. The earliest mode of entry was through the work permit system that was associated with Colombian migrants who effectively forged the path for migration for subsequent groups of Latin Americans as well as privileging Colombians over other groups. Among Colombians, their initial entry on a relatively large scale in the 1970s was facilitated by the 1971 Immigration Act and work permit system that allowed non-Commonwealth people into the UK for the first time. With two employment agencies in Central London run by Italians forming the epicentre, a Colombian man from the coffee region in the province of Quindío established links between the Italians and people from his home area selling work contracts mainly in restaurants and cleaning jobs, as well as in hospital cleaning in Surrey (Cock, 2008). Although by 1980, work permits were withdrawn for low-skilled jobs, Colombian migration networks had already been established and many migrants stayed on. These networks strengthened as the political and economic situation in Colombia worsened throughout the 1980s and 1990s.
While it is extremely difficult to distinguish between economic and political Colombian migrants, the armed conflict and the perception of the UK as a safe haven for those seeking refuge from political persecution served to bolster migration flows (Bermudez Torres, 2006; McIlwaine, 2005). Although Colombian migrants also migrated because of perceived benefits of the London labour market as well as social reasons such as social networks and family crises, it was the provision of asylum that profoundly affected entry strategies among this group in particular during the 1990s (see also Favell and Hansen, 2002). Indeed, of the 28 Colombians interviewed, 12 had entered through asylum, although several of these had claimed asylum after they had already entered. In addition, 4 Ecuadorians and 2 Bolivians had been through the asylum process, although all had secured asylum through the Family Amnesty programme. This gave those who had at least one dependent child in the UK and had claimed asylum before 2 October 2002 the right to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain and gave them full rights to remain in the UK and to work.\(^5\)

The case of Esperanza from Colombia illustrates the complexities of why people migrate, but also the ways in which networks and immigration legislation influence decisions. In 2000, when she was 43 years old, Esperanza migrated to London from the coffee zone of Colombia. There, she was a single parent living with her mother and her one daughter. She owned and ran a restaurant which she found exhausting and financially unrewarding: ‘I lived so stressed out because I was alone and in order to earn these 3 minimum wages, I worked Sunday to Sunday for 6 years and in this time I only had 3 days off ..my decision was to look for better opportunities in my life’. However, Esperanza’s situation was exacerbated by the fact that her husband had been killed in the civil war leaving her with sole financial responsibility for her daughter who was studying at college and who wanted to become a doctor. Esperanza knew that she wouldn’t be able to pay university fees: ‘Since she was a little girl, she wanted to study medicine, and I was wracking my brains trying to think how I would pay for it’. In realising her only option was migration abroad, she contacted one of her brothers who had previously been a political activist and had moved to London five years previously fleeing death threats and in search of asylum. Despite arriving on a tourist visa, Esperanza also claimed asylum. Her case was rejected although she did finally secure Indefinite Leave to Remain through the Family Amnesty programme.
Esperanza’s case also identifies the importance of using tourist visas as an entry strategy and then claiming asylum, overstaying or applying for student visas. Although this was no longer an option among Ecuadorians and Colombians (see above), it was widespread among Bolivians who mainly arrived after 2000, most arrived on tourist visas and then changed these into student visas or became irregular through overstaying.\textsuperscript{6} While their reasons for leaving Bolivia were related to the economic and political crises linked with the Presidency of Evo Morales and the conflict with Santa Cruz in eastern Bolivia from where many Bolivian migrants hailed (see Dunkerley, 2007; Shroeder, 2007), immigration legislation also played a part. As people sought to leave the country and as the US became more difficult to enter, so Bolivians turned to Europe. While Spain was often a first choice and destination for all three nationalities (see below), several people reported that travel agencies in Bolivia had identified the UK as a ‘good destination’ because a visa was not required. For example, Juliana who was 50 years old and from Trinidad in eastern Bolivia had 6 children all of whom wanted to go to a private university. Although Juliana worked as a hairdresser and her husband was a mechanic they could not afford university fees. She described how she and her husband went to a travel agency to find out how to migrate:

'We went to the travel agency and told them we wanted to migrate to any part of Europe in order to pay for our children’s education. The first option they gave us was Australia, but then they told us that we could work in England, that there were more sources of work here for men and women. Then we borrowed money, gave our house to a relative and we came here with only our fares'.

They reported how the agency told them nothing about visas, only that they didn’t need one to enter. However, after applying for a student visa (with her husband as student and Juliana as dependent) and renewing it twice, they had been irregular for over a year at the time of the interview. Juliana had resigned herself to remaining in London for another year continuing to work as a hairdresser (and her husband as a cleaner) so that all her children would be able to complete their studies and praying to God that she wasn’t caught by the police and deported. The case of Juliana also shows how people’s status is dynamic, shifting from
regular to irregular over quite short time periods as migrants try to get-by by whatever means available to them.

Entry through student visas in the first instance was also widespread, reflected in the fact that 22 out of 70 had arrived through this route, all purporting to attend English classes. While among Colombians in particular, these visas tended to be used by lower middle class migrants in genuine attempts to learn English, for many Ecuadorians and the vast majority of Bolivians they were specific strategies to enter the UK with very few actually studying. Even among those who were actively studying, the vast majority were ‘semi-compliant’ and working more than 20 hours per week, making them irregular workers in the process (Vasta, 2008). Therefore, migrants entered as regular migrants and then made themselves irregular by violating their visa conditions.

There was also widespread evidence of irregular or clandestine entry. Many migrants subverted the hierarchies imposed by the migration regime that favoured Colombians and created irregular ways of entering the country. While no cases of trafficking were reported by those interviewed, smuggling and especially entering the UK using false papers was widespread among all nationalities. Most smuggling took place between Spain and the UK rather than directly with Latin America, usually in the form of buying false passports in Spain (costing between $US1000 and $1500), and sometimes paying someone to accompany them on the journey. Indeed, 21 out of 70 interviewees reported having migrated via Spain; all but four had moved without legal immigration papers. Interestingly, irregular entry did not automatically mean that migrants would continue to live in the UK on an irregular basis.

Edilma from Palmira in Colombia recalled how, in trying to leave the country because of political violence and economic hardship, she had her visa application for the UK turned down. So she and her husband recruited a smuggler in Colombia: ‘A man helped us, it turned out to be really expensive, but it was quick, about a month. We paid the money, we were very innocent but very anxious, and he brought us. He brought us in with other names via Spain’. They flew initially to Madrid and then in a car for 24 hours to London. After several months, Edilma contacted a migrant organisation in London that helped her and her husband to claim asylum. However, although their case was initially refused, they were able to secure Indefinite Leave to Remain (residency although limited access to state benefits) through the Family Amnesty programme. At the time of interview Edilma
had just got her British passport after passing the UK government’s ‘Life in the UK Test’ (the UK government’s citizenship test).

The form of entry was obviously critical in the nature of the subsequent nature of settlement and coping among migrants. For those who managed to negotiate the migration entry system legitimately, then their settlement tended to be more straightforward; for those who were unable to do so in legitimate ways, then their coping mechanisms were more complex and underpinned by anxiety and isolation. Not surprisingly, this had ramifications for the types of jobs people were able to secure as well as the quality of their social relations and social networks. Before moving on to examine these in more depth, it is important to provide an overview of what regularity means in general for Latin American migrants.

The meanings of (ir)regularity for migrants in London

Perhaps not surprisingly, regularity and irregularity were recognised as fundamental to everyday life for Latin Americans in London. Partly due to the fact that people moved in and out regularly over their life course and/or because the changing migration regime also led to increasing irregularisation of migrants, the issue was identified as one of the most important among all Latin Americans regardless of their specific status. Together with problems with speaking English, more than 70% of migrants interviewed identified legal status as a major problem affecting them or their community. This was further reiterated in the focus group discussions (see Box 1).

Box 1: Prioritisation of problems facing the Latin American community (discussed by group of 2 male and 4 female adults of Colombian, Brazilian, Bolivian, Peruvian and Ecuadorian origin)

Language = 1 (joint)
**Status = 1 (joint)**
Lack of health services
Lack of decent work
Lack of affordable, quality housing
Mental health problems – stress and depression
Pressure from a consumer society

‘Legal status affects everything, the work you get, access to services and your state of mind’ (Ana Maria, Ecuador)
While irregularity affected the ways in which people ‘got by’ economically and socially in London, as outlined in greater detail below, it also led to high levels of stress and anxiety. This was partly linked with isolation which was sometimes an active strategy in order to maintain a low profile, akin to Engbersen’s (2001) ‘operating strategically in the public space’ or was an effect of being unable to move around the city freely. For example, Alba from Santa Cruz in Bolivia arrived in London with her two small children in 2006 to join her husband who had moved 2 years previously. Although her husband had British nationality through a paternal grandfather, Alba arrived on a tourist visa since expired and rendering herself and her children irregular. Alba was afraid to use any services; although her children went to the local primary school she said she never went to school meetings or spoke to anyone at the school gates because she was afraid of being reported. In addition, despite significant ill health from the stress she endured because of her status, she was too afraid to go to the doctor: ‘I am ill from nerves, I’m very stressed, everything gets to me, and unfortunately I can’t go to the doctor because I’m illegal ... I’m so scared that I’ll be caught and arrested and deported’. She also couldn’t work beyond a few odd sewing jobs, and she felt completely dependant on her husband with whom she had a conflictive relationship, and who she argued, manipulated immigration status to maintain power and control over her (see also McIlwaine, 2008a).

Emotional costs were not confined to those who had entered in a clandestine manner or who were living without documents. For those who had legally claimed asylum, uncertainty also caused severe stress as people had to wait for up to 8 years in limbo waiting for their claims to be dealt with (see also Bailey et al, 2002; Menjívar, 2006). This often involved living in hotels and hostels which was another source of physical and emotional hardship for migrants as Clarena from Colombia recalled. Having arrived in 1997 after fleeing death threats from the FARC guerrillas because her husband was a former soldier in the army, Clarena, her husband and two small children claimed asylum at London’s Heathrow airport. They were sent to a hotel in a run-down area of London to a hostel to live for 9 months:

‘It was really hard as there were people from different countries with lots of children. People arrived from everywhere and the hygiene was very difficult,
I had to clean the bathrooms all the time, and the kitchen, it was really uncomfortable ... I was very nervous about the asylum claim, I was very tense because the country was unknown and I had the children'.

However, in the end, after waiting 6 years to hear about their claim, they eventually secured their status through the Family Amnesty and attained Indefinite Leave to Remain.

As well as the emotional costs, people also had to deal with criminalisation. Clara from Colombia who had entered the UK with a false passport that she bought in Barcelona and who had since claimed asylum and secured legal status through the Family Amnesty yet whose boyfriend was irregular noted: 'It’s really sad, we haven’t robbed, we haven’t killed, and yet we have to do bad things. I’m not saying we are perfect, but we like to do things honestly, but we can’t’. Mario, from Santa Cruz in Bolivia had migrated first to Spain to join his parents in Valencia and then to London on a tourist visa and escaping a detention centre at London’s Heathrow airport noted the irony of criminalisation:

'It’s incredible that us people who are illegal, we are treated like criminals when we are detained. They don’t realise that the reality is that we are the best behaved of anyone in this society because we are afraid of being caught; there are people who have been living illegal here for 8 years and all this time they have never broken a plate’.

Migrant (ir)regularity and economic coping practices

The webs of (ir)irregularity identified above permeated the economic lifeworlds of migrants affecting access and entry into the labour market, as well as their working experiences once they managed to secure jobs. As noted above, economic coping practices for Latin Americans tended to revolve around the low-paid elementary sector of cleaning and catering. Over half those interviewed worked in cleaning (51%) with a further 11% employed in cafes or restaurants, with men and women working in broadly similar numbers in these sectors (McIlwaine, 2008a). If those not working are excluded, the proportion in cleaning and catering was even more marked, and while many students reported that education was their main activity, the vast majority also worked in cleaning or in cafes. There were also distinct occupational patterns reflecting differences by
nationality that in turn, were influenced by settlement patterns and immigration status.

In general, the most recently arrived migrants were most likely to be working in cleaning. Therefore, among the 20 Bolivians interviewed, 13 were cleaners (including a window-cleaner), 3 worked in catering, with the remainder working in a range of nanny and hairdressing positions (see also Sveinsson, 2007). Occupational patterns among Ecuadorians were slightly more diversified but cleaning and catering still dominated (with 12 in the former and 2 in the latter out of 22). Colombian migrants had the most diverse range of jobs despite a continued concentration in cleaning, caring and catering with 8 cleaning and 5 working in catering out of 28 (see also Guarnizzo, 2008). Partly linked with the greater likelihood of Colombians having regular immigration status and more established networks and access to information and credit, they were also the most likely to have their own business. Indeed, of 8 migrants (5 women and 3 men) who had their own businesses, 5 were Colombian, together with one Ecuadorian and one Bolivian, and all had been living in the UK for at least 6 years. Even though several had actually started their life in the UK on an irregular basis, they had all secured their permanent status before engaging and investing in their lives in the UK. For example, Edilma discussed above, established a ‘giro’ (remittance-sending agency) in one of the Latin American market areas with another Colombian woman. This was once she had secured residency and a British passport with each investing £500 that they had saved (and she kept on 2 hours cleaning a day as a safety-net). The dominance of Colombians in the commercial life of Latin Americans in London is also evidenced by the fact that most of the businesses in the two main market areas in the city, Elephant and Castle in the South and Seven Sisters in the North, are owned by Colombians. Colombians also own the main newspapers for the Latin American community as well as playing an important role in Latin American community organisations (Cock, 2008; McIlwaine, 2007).

Despite this nascent entrepreneurial activity, cleaning and catering dominated the economic practices of Latin American migrants in London as well as their psyche. Even if people had managed to find alternatives to cleaning, the vast majority had begun their working life in London either in the cleaning sector or washing dishes in a restaurant. Despite many people leaving behind jobs in Latin America as professionals or managers, their lack of language skills, the lack of
recognition of their qualifications and especially their immigration status, militated against their employment anywhere except in cleaning or catering.

Migrants’ strategies to access the labour market channelled them more or less automatically into cleaning and catering. With patterns established in the 1970s as a result of the work permit programme (see above), ethnic networks ensured that Latin Americans continued to work in this sector where labour demand has been relatively buoyant over time, and where no pre-requisites were demanded. Everyone interviewed reported that they got their jobs through friends and colleagues who were co-nationals or other Latin Americans; cleaning companies in particular usually recruited through supervisors who tended to employ people from their own nationality or ethnic group (see also Datta et al., 2007; Wills et al., 2009). However, while entry into this sector has generally been relatively easy over time, many noted that it was becoming ever more difficult. Not only was competition from Eastern European migrants increasing, especially Poles, Lithuanians and Slovaks, but demands from employers for documentation were becoming more stringent as the UK government placed more and more requirements on employers (Datta et al., 2007; Wills et al., 2008). So for example, people complained that original copies of passports and visas were required by employers, when this had not always been the case. This has led to several unorthodox practices of securing jobs such as one reported by an Ecuadorian cleaning supervisor, Carla, who described how in her company she had discovered people selling their jobs to friends and colleagues for £50. This operated as a form of ‘sub-letting’ and was especially common when someone was going on holiday and wanted to keep their job open while they were away (see also Vasta, 2008).

Not surprisingly, the increasingly restrictive labour market conditions had severe ramifications for irregular migrants who developed a range of innovative identity strategies in responses. As with immigration documentation, false working visas or passports (usually Spanish) were used to secure jobs. These could be bought permanently, borrowed or rented for money or paid for in kind. Elisabet from Quito, Ecuador who had lived for four years with no papers, worked as an office cleaner with false papers that her father had sent her from Spain, while her husband worked in two bastions of British life, as a full-time cashier in the supermarket chain, Tesco, and as a cleaner in the evenings at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), both with false Spanish papers. Supervisors
often colluded with these identity strategies in allowing irregular migrants to work under the names of former (regular) employees who had remained on the payroll. Indeed, several migrants reported how they used different names for each of their cleaning jobs (McIlwaine, 2005; Vasta, 2008).

Once a job was secured, the isolation of many cleaning and catering jobs meant that those with irregular status could easily maintain a low profile from the authorities. Although there were reports of immigration officials making raids on office blocks in the city, in restaurants known to hire migrant workers, and in underground stations, several people said that working outside normal working hours helped them to avoid the authorities. Yet this also meant that irregular migrants in particular were often afraid to change jobs undermining any prospect of occupational mobility. Dolly, a Bolivian who was irregular, spoke about her fears: ‘I have never moved jobs because I’m afraid. I tried to get another job in the early morning, but I was afraid as they asked for my passport’.

Regularity also affected working conditions which were already poor in the cleaning and catering sectors in London (see Wills et al., 2009). In particular, wage levels across the board were low, with irregular workers the most likely to be earning less than the minimum wage (£5.35 per hour at the time of study). The only exception to this was in domestic cleaning where it was possible to earn between £6 and £10 per hour with no documentation required (and which was dominated by women with irregular status) (see McIlwaine, 2008a). Yet, irregular migrants were the most vulnerable to exploitative working conditions in general. Most common and extremely frequent was retention of wages. Although it happened to regular migrants, the lack of legal comeback meant that it was most likely to happen to irregular workers. For example, Manuela from Bolivia recalled a job she had at a university while she was claiming asylum (and thus officially unable to work):

‘after working there 2 months of going out in the early morning they asked me for my work permit and my bank account, I only had a National Insurance number, they got me like that. I cried with anger. I made allegations, but I got tired and they won’.

These practices were often perpetrated by supervisors and managers from the same community; Edilma said that she knew a Colombian supervisor who told her
manager that she contracted 15 people, but she only employed 10 (Latin Americans). She kept the extra money and made the 10 employees work harder (see also Cranford, 2005). These exploitative working practices were further compounded by the attitudes of clients towards migrants. Alvaro, a Bolivian who had no papers explained: ‘In these countries, rich people think that someone who cleans is the worst, the lowest because we deal with dirt. Some might speak to you in the office but outside they don’t want to know you’. Alvaro had been a computer engineer in Bolivia but his salary was so low he moved first to the US and then to the UK. He worked as a cleaner to support his son back home where he had also bought a plot of land with money he had sent home on which he was building a house ($1,000 per month).

**Migrant (ir)regularity and social coping practices**

Just as the economic practices of Latin American migrants were imbued by the spectre and reality of the webs of (ir)regularity, so too were social relations. As immigration restrictions have tightened, migrants have turned to smugglers or to people much more distant to them to ensure entry (Collyer, 2005; Koser, 1998). In addition, and in contrast to much early work on the positive effect of social networks and social ties on migrant well-being, it is now increasingly recognised that social capital among migrant groups can be weak, fractured and limited. In situations where people experience widespread exclusion and where their resource base is extremely constrained, assisting co-nationals or co-ethnics is not always possible or desirable leading to what Levitt (2001) calls ‘mistrustful solidarity’ (see also Menjívar, 2000; Nolin, 2001; Vasta, 2008). This situation is particularly marked among irregular migrants whose ability to make any claims on the state is absent and who are unable to engage in reciprocal relationships (Engbersen, 2001). These processes have been shown to lead to hostilities and mistrust among nationalities and within ethnic communities, which are made even worse when security issues come into play as has been shown among Algerian and Colombian migrants (Collyer, 2005; Guarnizo et al, 1999; Guarnizo and Díaz, 1999). In the case of Latin Americans in London, social networks often played an ambivalent role for migrants strongly underpinned by immigration status.

As noted above, entry strategies into the UK were influenced by social networks of family and friends. This was usually in terms of providing accommodation for friends and family in their first few weeks after arrival and
helping people to find jobs (see also Kelly and Lusis, 2006). The use of social networks, as indicated by the case of Esperanza from Colombia above, applied whether people were seeking asylum or arriving as economic migrants (Koser, 1997). Also important was helping out other co-nationals whom those assisting did not know; several people reported helping out others just because they were from the same country and to a lesser extent, also from Latin America (but see below). Yet, several people also spoke of arriving on their own and knowing no-one, yet being helped. There was also evidence of providing assistance for people who were very distant family members or acquaintances from home, and especially when it came to employment. Daniel, a Colombian is a case in point:

‘I think that Latins help each other. I’ve known many Ecuadorians and Bolivians that are very nice and they have helped out a lot. I know that the day that I need something one of them is going to help me. I have always had a job thanks to Latin solidarity, I have only looked for work once’.

However, in line with recent research with other new migrant groups, social networks that facilitated entry tended to be ‘weak ties’ as outlined by Granovetter (1973) used for instrumental reasons to access certain resources, and played a less important role than might at first be expected (Collyer, 2005). Furthermore, nationality also emerged as important with Colombians being more likely to use family-based social networks to enter the UK with Bolivians being the least likely linked with the length of establishment of the groups.

While not always a conscious strategy, everyday social relations in terms of friendships and socialising were generally discussed as isolationist. Probably more of a practice, people spoke of very small friendship circles, with few having any friends beyond their own nationality or other Latin Americans. A frequent comment when asked about friends was ‘yo no soy muy amiguera/o’ (I’m not a very friendly person). Regardless of nationality, most people reported that they had 2, 3 or 4 friends whom they trusted and confided in and saw on a regular basis. Beyond these small circles, people were very wary about extending their friendships. Ximena from Colombia’ views reflected this broad pattern:

‘I’m not very friendly, I like to be alone, I don’t have people knocking on my door. I have three other ladies the same age as me and we see each other
for baptisms of grandchildren or birthday parties ... I like to be alone. I like to prevent any gossip. I don’t want people to look at me and whether my house is clean or not, what I’m eating. I want to stay away from the envy that affects Latins here in the London’.

Even when people had family in London, relations were often described as distant as Erika from Ecuador noted: ‘There’s no trust and everyone lives their own lives, even within the same family. I have 4 brothers here but everyone does their own thing. Sometimes we see each other if we have a party or something, but not apart from that’.

While Ximena identified the need to ward off gossip as a reason for maintaining a degree of isolation, envy or envidia was also especially important. Envy was described as being rooted in jealousy and individualism in relation to employment and earnings, with those who had moved out of cleaning in particular being subject to envy, which in turn is linked with immigration status. On one hand, people were envious of others who had regular status and rumours were said to abound about the various ways that people managed to secure it. On the other, there was a fear of association among both regular and irregular migrants linked with anxieties about deportation. While obviously, irregular migrants lived in fear of being caught by the authorities and being deported, those with regular status were afraid they might get into trouble by associating with those without papers or by helping them. William from Colombia, who had regular status explained that: ‘there is envy when you meet someone from your own country. I think there’s fear about people’s status; they think that if someone is legal they will denounce them in work so that they will lose their jobs’. Indeed, several people spoke of using denouncement to the Home Office as a tool of control in disagreements regardless of whether people were actually regular or not (see also Jordan and Duvell, 2002; McIlwaine, 2005).

Social distancing was sometimes linked with constraints on physical mobility around the city as well. Those who were irregular rarely went out except to work or to take children to school as in the case of Alba noted above. People were also especially afraid of places that were identified as being specifically Latin American such as Seven Sisters Market in north London and the Elephant and Castle shopping centre in south London. Rosa from Bolivia who was irregular said:
‘I don’t go to Latin places because I’m afraid that they’ll do something to me. I never go to Latin restaurants or clubs, I practically don’t leave my house except to go shopping. Places like Elephant and Castle are full of immigration these days and they are detaining and deporting people who go there. I’ve had very bad experiences with Latin people because of envy, people trying to take my job, they like to gossip about illegals’.

Similarly, Isabel from Colombia, who did have regular status, spoke of Seven Sisters market:

‘Seven Sisters is a place where you can’t go, it’s tremendous, it’s all about making gossip. They talk about who came the week before with such and such a woman … they say, this young guy takes drugs, this other one is illegal. That’s what Colombians do there’.

Envy and mistrust have been identified in Colombia as important informal social mechanisms to ensure the survival of a given group (see Wade 1993; McIlwaine, 2005). Mistrust and rivalry appeared to be the foundations for social relations in London as people tried to get by the best they could in a situation of scarce resources. Rumour and gossip appeared to be the glue that underpinned many aspects of social relations, themselves rooted in the vagaries of immigration status. Isolation was often the only way that avoiding these social controls was possible.

There were also differences among different nationalities. Among Colombians in particular stereotyping over drugs permeated social contact; not only did Colombians have to constantly deal with comments from other non-Latin nationalities about drugs, but commentaries about drugs were often used among Colombians to fuel envy as Esperanza noted ‘such is the level of envy among Colombians, that if you have something nice, people will say that you are involved with drugs’ (see also Guarnizo and Diaz, 1999; Guarnizo et al., 1999). This was further exacerbated by political conflicts with the legacy of the armed conflict rearing its head in London as people were afraid to discuss political allegiances (McIlwaine, 2005). Having said this, and somewhat ironically, Colombians were thought to be the most united of the three nationalities in London, although this
perception was often made on the part of other Latin Americans. Libia, an Ecuadorian said:

‘I think that the Colombian people are more united ... for us in general there is selfishness which sometimes also includes getting jobs. For example, when you try and help someone, people won’t collaborate, the Ecuadorian doesn’t help much’.

However, Colombians themselves perceived other nationalities as more united. Many Bolivians also complained that the mistrust among them was linked with historical divisions in their home country rather than the difficulties associated with being a migrant in London. Among Latin Americans a whole, there were also rivalries between nationalities, with resentments against Colombians being the most common mainly because they were the most established and most likely to have regular status.

In terms of more formal social relations, it is also telling that only 5 people out of 50 people interviewed through snow-balling techniques had ever used the services of a migrant organisation. While this was partly because of lack of awareness that some existed and provided services, it was also linked with fear and immigration status. Although organisations that serve the Latin American community deal with irregular migrants, people were often afraid that they would be reported to the authorities as Alvaro, a Bolivian who was irregular noted: ‘I don’t like organisations, you always have to give lots of information about yourself, I suppose that I’ve never gone nor would I think of going, I don’t like to get involved in this, I’m fine how I am’. In contrast, people turned to the church, both Catholic and Protestant, for social support as they were perceived to be less formal and less likely to report people to the authorities than migrant organisations. In particular, the Evangelical churches were popular with migrants, with many who had been practising Catholics in their home countries becoming Evangelicals in London. For example, Fernanda joined an evangelical church in London despite being brought up a Catholic in Bolivia:

‘Here, I had no friends. But I always watched TV and there was a programme about evangelicals. It made me think. When the only friend I
had went to Italy, and I was left alone, my best friend, therefore I went and looked for a church’.

Echoing this, a Colombian evangelical pastor who ran a church in North London noted how they provided one-one counselling care in people’s homes as well as family activities, all linked with Bible teaching. He noted that his church had saved many migrants from depression and loneliness. This applied to those who had little religious faith; several people spoke about not being believers but attending church in order to meet people. Thus, many Latin Americans negotiated their religious identities in order to access support and to help them to cope with life as a migrant in London.

One final area where immigration status had important ramifications was gender relations. While I have discussed this more fully elsewhere (McIlwaine, 2008a), it is important to point out that while women who were able to secure regular status were often able to make significant improvements in their lives partly through accessing the benefits system, women were often more likely than men to suffer from irregular status. This was especially the case in relation to domestic abuse where several cases showed how men had abused and manipulate legal status to ensure power over women. In some cases this was where a couple had an abusive relationship but their irregular status meant that the woman was afraid to seek help. In other cases, women were dependent on men’s immigration status and despite experiencing abuse, could not easily leave partners as they would have to forfeit their status (see McIlwaine, 2008b).

**Conclusions**

This paper has attempted to highlight the central role of migrant (ir)regularity in the lives of Latin American migrants in London. It shows how immigration status affects the psyche of Latin Americans as well as their ability to get-by economically and socially, regardless of whether they are regular or irregular. In contrast to the tendency of many studies to focus on irregular migrants alone or those with a specific type of legal status, this research has examined how immigration status affects regular and irregular migrants as a group and in relation to the outcomes of this for their daily lives. By including three nationality groups from what can be called loosely the same community of new migrants in London, the paper argues that the state creates a hierarchy of regularity via its immigration policies and
stipulations, reflecting the notion that immigration status is inherently very dynamic (Samers, 2004; Vasta, 2008). The UK government decides who can come in and out of the UK at a given time, with a trend towards ever tighter restrictions (Wills et al., 2009). In this way, migrants are at the behest of the structural conditions of the migration regime which in turn determines how migrant communities form and in what ways. However, the paper argues that when viewed from the perspective of migrants themselves, the reality of regularity is a web rather than a hierarchy. This is first, because migrants have actively negotiated complex and diverse ways of entering the country legally and illegally as the system closes up through the recently introduced Managed Migration policy and points-based system (ibid) and the exclusion of irregular migrants becomes more marked. Second, a web is a more appropriate way of capturing the dynamism of how Latin Americans experience regularity over their own life courses and how this intersects with changing migration regimes at home and in the UK.

These webs of regularity that reflect hierarchies among nationalities in particular, have important outcomes for how Latin American migrants live and work in London. Although it was possible to find work in the formal sector of the labour market with irregular status, this was invariably on much more exploitative terms than those who were regular. The outcomes for social relations were equally negative with implications for all migrants across the board. While certain types of support existed through weak ties and faith-based organisations, Latin Americans were not a cohesive community, but rather one permeated by mistrust and fear. Much of this was rooted in the insecure legal status of its members and the concomitant exclusions experienced by them as a result. With irregular migration likely to continue and increase in the future, it is no surprise that there have been growing calls for regularisation. This has entailed turning ‘strangers into citizens’ and legislating for an earned amnesty for migrant workers from outside the EU who have served the city without recognition for the past twenty years (London Citizens, 2008; see also Evans et al, 2007; Flynn and Williams [eds], 2007). It remains to be seen if this becomes a reality in the near or distant future.

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Bibliography


**Endnotes**

2 El Salvadorans were granted 'Temporary Protected Status' (TPS) from deportation in the US in 1990. This could be granted to those who could not return to their homeland because of conflict or natural disaster.

3 These types are usually referred to as bonding social capital (strong ties among relatives, neighbours and close friends), bridging social capital (weak ties linking individuals who are acquainted in a horizontal pattern), and linking social capital (vertical ties among individuals and those with influence in formal institutions) (Portes and Landolt, 2000; Woolcock, 1998).


5 For a full outline of the conditions of this 'concession' which by November 2005 had benefited 16,870 families in the UK see [http://www.ncadc.org.uk/resources/familyamnesty.html](http://www.ncadc.org.uk/resources/familyamnesty.html) (accessed 26 November 2008).

6 The ability of Bolivians to arrive as tourists and then change their visas to students was disallowed in April 2007 (McIlwaine and Velasquez, 2007: 16).

7 Of this four, two had regularised legally in Spain through one of their amnesties and two had come with legal student papers.

8 Since the interviews were conducted, this situation has worsened. In February 2008 a 'civil penalty regime' instituted under the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act, 2006 has instituted tougher penalties on employers to monitor the immigration status of their employers (since they were first required to do so in 1997). This entails an increase in the penalty for employing an unauthorised worker from £5,000 to £10,000 and making it a criminal offence to continue to employ someone known to be unauthorised and which can potentially lead to prosecution and a maximum 2 year prison sentence (MRN, 2008).

9 Gutiérrez (2007) notes that Seven Sisters is also known as 'Seven Chismes' (Seven Gossips).