

CHANGES IN ETHNIC SOLIDARITY IN CUBAN MIAMI*

HEIKE C. ALBERTS

ABSTRACT. Many people describe the Cuban community in Miami as a prime example of ethnic solidarity; others see it as internally divided. This study argues that the contradiction can be resolved when ethnic solidarity is seen as encompassing various components and when changes in cohesiveness in response to external and internal influences on the ethnic community are taken into account. These influences include the context of reception in the United States and the relationship between established Cubans and more recent immigrants. We need to refine our understanding of what constitutes ethnic solidarity, how it changes over time, and what role it plays, both within the community in general and within the ethnic-enclave economy in particular. *Keywords:* Cubans, ethnic-enclave economy, ethnic resources, ethnic solidarity, Miami.

Many academics and journalists celebrate the Cuban community in Miami for its extraordinarily high degree of ethnic cohesiveness. They further argue that the economic success of Cubans in the United States is based at least partly on that ethnic solidarity (Grenier and Stepick 1992; Portes and Stepick 1993; Stepick and Grenier 1993). Others, by contrast, describe the Cuban community as divided over foreign-policy issues such as relations with the Castro regime (Garcia 1996). Today the Cuban community is divided not only about foreign policy but also along social lines. According to one journalist, Cuban Miami is becoming “less cohesive . . . with each batch of immigrants that win the annual visa lottery and each of the smuggled boatloads of Cubans that land almost daily in South Florida” (Navarro 1999).

How can we explain why some people see strong internal divisions within the Cuban community while others consider it a prime example of strong ethnic solidarity? I suggest two different but interconnected explanations for this apparent contradiction. Even though numerous researchers refer to ethnic solidarity as a basic trait of immigrant communities, they do not agree on what ethnic solidarity actually is and how it can be measured (Mahler 1995). Ethnic solidarity can be defined in different ways. It can refer to the initial help that previous migrants offer to newcomers, such as making donations, offering a place to stay, or helping them find a job. The Cubans who came to Miami through the Freedom Flights, for example, could count on the help of those who had migrated right after the Cuban revolution. Alternatively, ethnic solidarity can be an expression of belonging together due to shared experiences, which has been called “bounded solidarity” (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). The Cubans who came to Miami in the same migration wave had undergone similar experiences and challenges and therefore felt united. Similarly, ethnic solidarity can develop in response to discrimination or feelings of iso-

* I would like to thank Helen Hazen, Kavita Pandit, Steve Holloway, and Adam Paffenroth for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

✉ DR. ALBERTS is an assistant professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, Wisconsin 54901.