

Farm Population, Migration and its Implications on Health and Safety: an Anthropological Approach

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A. Introduction

This paper focuses on the analysis of ethnographic data provided by the third and last stage of a three year research project on the so called migrant "farmworkers". It presents them instead as a moment, a temporal-spatial instance in the multiple and varied occupational displacements of these internally differentiated and transnationalized subjects (Kearney 1996). It was carried on in México and in agroindustries located in eastern United States. The field research consists of twenty seven ethnographic and semi-open recorded interviews done to Mexican subjects ("migrant farmworkers") with migratory experience in that area and some of their relatives in the municipality of Moroleón, Guanajuato during December- January 1998-99. Their representations of the corresponding and relevant practices are emphasized (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997) , as mediated through our "ethnographic" interventions, of the whole range of complex, somewhat dispersed, fragmented, alleatory and contingent aspects of the migratory processes in which they are constantly involved. It is stated, therefore that there is a lack of regular patterns in the multiple transnational contexts where they operate, within the arbitrary and highly controlled and exploitative contexts of flexible (despotic) agroindustrialism in its varied and highly particularized segments.

There are also transnational networks related to and that mediate these population movements along migration "constructed pathways" that are constantly created, transformed, discarded, modified. The reconceptualization of the characterization of "migrant farmworker", as stated previously is perceived as a segment of a a multiple laboral identity that is related to this lack of patterns and to these multiple and contingent contexts. These specific instances, contexts and practices impinge upon the nature and character of these migrants flows and displacements, as in the varied and fragmented workplaces with its dynamics, related locations, like living quarters, transportation and communication contexts. The main orientation is about the implications that these processes, contexts and practices may have on these subjects health and safety and to develop specific recommendations for research.

B. The Reconceptualization of the "Migrant Farmworker"

The unitary characterization of "migrant farmworker" must be substituted by another based on multiple laboral identities that involve multiple and varied occupational displacements by internally differentiated and transnationalized subjects. Kearney (1996) has proposed its substitution by the term "polybian". The alleatory and contingent character of the so called labor market, with its flows and displacements; the status of "farmworker" is considered, from this perspective just as an instance, a moment in a series of flows and displacements, including its operation within the same agricultural sector. "Contracts" in this kind of market are characterized

by precariousness and contingency and on very unstable short terms. Frequently you find that you work and do not get paid; those responsible just do not fulfill their responsibility. At the same time these flows and displacements, "navigation" as it is frequently called, constitute an integral part of the strategies that the subjects, as polybians implement, or try to, as they attempt to maximize their acquisition of value (Kearney 1996; Bordieu 1986) in the working contexts so as to be able to transcend contingency and uncertainty. While navigating they frequently meet conditions that they cannot control, and have to make short term decisions. This involves constant risk taking, with both potential positive and negative results:

This constancy forces subjects to search repeatedly for migratory displacements that lead them in the last instance towards aiming at working under conditions of producing absolute surplus value (Marx, 1998). As part of this process, they develop a "consciousness of alternatives", of having always at hand a potential and manifest repertoire of resources that could result in a productive insertion in working contexts. It also implies a constant positive and negative evaluation of these resources and contexts, due to the uncertainty and everchanging conditions of the labor market.

This uncertainty extends to contexts where there has been a relatively positive insertion in a productive setting. The working subject, acting and being defined mostly as an internally differentiated and transnationalized agent (Kearney, 1996), is not correspondingly subsumed under the state's containment legal discourse, and this intensifies the risks and corresponding uncertainties even while having achieved a relatively positive insertion. Additionally and quite frequently, but also operating in a very contingent and aleatory manner, the state operationalizes the containment discourse that can, with its subsequent impact on the subject, crystallize in the de-insertion from the productive context and the territorial displacement to a non-productive setting. This operationalization, that could properly be characterized as an intervention, can assume a fully controlled one, with the subjects being directly displaced to a non-productive setting in the original communities. Or it can create a situation where the person opts for a return on its own initiative.

This type of intervention obliges or displaces the subject towards the search for alternative networks of flows and displacements at all times. The person develops a perspective towards outside and unknown and uncertain factors that could imply potential interventions in the flows and displacements and constitute an obstacle for the achievement of productive insertions. This is reflected in the verbalizations obtained through interviews, the style of the language, heavily ambivalent, confused and conditioned, insinuating the utilization of defense mechanisms.

Some subjects structure a comparative image by way of contrast, suggesting nostalgia, between two situations within the migratory and work contexts. In one the context is one heavily controlled by the state intervention, the flows and displacements are presented as stable, constant and secure. This "totalized" situation then breaks up and a chaotic picture emerges with its correspondingly internally differentiated and transnationalized subjects. It is exquisitely summarized in the verbalized quote; "Then when the "contrataciones" ended now it began to displace like this, in the wet style, breaking barbed wire fences, without papers." (B. Zavala, personal interview, January 9, 1999)

C. Transnational Networks, Population Movements, "Constructed Pathways"

There are also transnational networks related to and that mediate these population movements along migration "constructed pathways" that are constantly created, transformed, discarded, modified. These networks, movements and "constructed pathways" serve as links with the work environment and contexts where the subjects operate. It is relevant to emphasize that they are multidirectional and fragmented. People inserted already in work processes acquire value (Kearney 1996; Bordieu 1986) and transfer it towards their contexts of origin. But they perceive and experience this as a gradual, non lineal process of accumulation that can be interrupted and even nullified quite frequently. Personal projects that are configured in these transnational contexts thus depend, are contingent on one being able to maximize insertion in workplaces and on the magnitude of value produced and acquired.

Thus there is an element of calculus, minimum as it may be in terms of being explicit, or to some degree implicit, almost taken for granted, between the value consumed (invested) in the migratory flows and displacements, "the costs" and that which can be produced and acquired and transferred to the place of origin. This type of orientation reflects the expectation that alleatory and contingent conditions can emerge at any time. Transnational contact is constantly mediated through the backup provided by networks that provide access to insertion in the productive contexts by facilitating cultural, symbolic and social capital or resources frequently on a very risky base. Some of these resources constitute attempts towards transcending the limitations of territoriality by means of the utilization of "user friendly technologies" in the living context.

These mediations through networks are constantly invented and reinvented: as situations change, new adaptations are constructed. Actors in specific contexts may move to new ones, and the nature and direction of flows of value acquired in work contexts, may be redirected.

But these accommodations, and similar ones in different contexts, do not constitute a guarantee that will assure success. The adaptation may fail, and values can be lost in the exchanges in a very definitive manner, being lost forever. These impacts oblige the emergence of new adaptations, and so forth.

The flows and displacements through networks of value imply movements both of people and these values, as they are the frequently the carriers. They can be interrupted abruptly by the state apparatus of the country of origin. Practices of dispossession can be implemented at the border, of different magnitudes, when subjects return, by government officers utilizing paralegal and indirect means. This implies that these flows are redistributed, and the processes of value accumulation by migrants are impacted negatively.

The transnational networks and "constructed pathways", as expected, do not always lead to achieving a positive insertion in productive contexts. Their highly alleatory and contingent character can result in locating subjects in non productive situations. As such, there is a continuous preoccupation in many people that they could fall into such types of situations, many of which involve dispossession. When so called illegals are captured by "La Migra" and jailed, the time spent in prison is perceived as a monetary deficit, as a great loss of value, with negative impacts in health and security both for the subject and his family and any other type of relative,

associate and/or friend. When this happens, networks backups are activated, and the comments about specifics reflect the non productive situation while at the same time consumption continues, increasing the deficit. Continuous comments by people who have been in this type of situation reflect an awareness and a sense of being dependent on someone else.

"Residential communalism", a kind of transnational residential community, where people pool together resources constantly for assuring a place where they can stay near the work context, constitute a network and "constructed pathway" that aims at providing the production and reproduction of residential arrangements in spite of all the flows and displacements with its potential hazards and contingencies.

There exist flexible transnational networks that have an everyday relevance and that connect contexts in the living and workplace with the place of origin, and channel and combine assistance for problematic situations and crisis. Values are displaced and replaced, following the direction and context where they are needed. It must not be forgotten that many of these transnational networks and "constructed pathways" operate at the margins of official discourses, and that are similar to the so called "underground economy". They move people, value (s), information and they involve practices that repudiate the state's discourse of containment (Kearney 96)

D. Specific Instances, Contexts and Practices and Their Impact

In this section we examine specific instances, contexts and practices where working subjects are impacted negatively. The impact cannot be imputed directly in terms of health and safety as interpreted in conventional terms; the consequences may appear subtle and mediated but nonetheless can be brutal and dramatic, altering or impacting fundamental aspects of the lives and contexts of the participants in both health and safety.

Workplace 1: Violence

Situations in the workplace can involve the use of violence as a means of avoiding the payment of work already done. The work is concluded, but the patron commits an act of aggression against the worker who has claimed the payment of his wages, using it as a stratagem to avoid payment. It can also be used directly against the worker in the workplace by supervisors, like pulling the worker's hair, claiming that the worker is not concentrating in his work, and shouting angrily at them.

Workplace 2: Exploitative Strategies

There are other instances whereby the value produced is not accounted for or registered, in situations where there is piece work. They perceive this as a partial breakup or discontinuity in the processes of production and reproduction, and produces uncertainty. It may even be implemented by members of the same ethnic group, pointing towards the analytical priority of class relations over ethnic ones. The workers are highly aware of these exploitative strategies utilized by their superiors in the workplace and they perceive this process as continuous,

transindividual, and intentional.

Workplace 3: Discipline

They are also conscious of the impact of specific disciplinary measures implemented at the workplace, and their negative economic impact both in absolute, monetary terms and of future employment opportunities.

Working Conditions

Many of them also are keenly aware of negative aspects of their working conditions, such as deficient productive infrastructure under which frequently they have to operate, the negative consequences that may result, and try to search for alternatives.

WorkPlace 4 : Narrow Parameters in Health and Safety Assistance:

In critical moments, as in situations involving health problems, at the work place level, it appears that resources are not enough and workers have to transcend the immediate context, searching for a solution, at the level of macroethnic community organizations:

In this and in the safety area there is a trend, by the farm owners to minimize health costs. After much pressure, they are only willing to finance in minimal terms only those aspects immediately and directly related to the work place.

Workplace 5: Continuity, Manipulation

Patrons have a strong interest in the continuity and stability of the productive processes, even in situations where the worker claims that he has injuries related to his functioning in the working context, and take great pain to maintain the subject active, while at the same time not willing to pay for medical services. There is consciousness about situations like the previous one where patrons don not want to break the continuity of the productive process.

Patrons can sometimes manipulate productive operations in a manner which means the carrying out of additional (but not paid) work by the worker. This can involve a diminution of the magnitude of the labor force, the intensification of operations and efficiency requirements, such as quality control leading to more complexity, additional tasks: "Like performing special tasks that cannot be made with the mushroom's boxes and overturning them, they empty yours and one is forced to go back and fill them again. Q. What do they want you to do? A. That mushrooms come out very clean, neatly placed. Q. And that cannot be done, due to the quickness required in picking it. We try to perform the impossible, but we cannot be perfect." (A. Guzmán, personal interview, January 2, 1999)

All this at the same time that the worker is trying to maximize productivity as he is working on a piece rate basis: "When one is cutting the smaller mushrooms and they are thrown into the floor, one has to return and clean it. Q. But, how is that named, the working houses, are there not people who clean? A. It is true, but in spite of that they make you clean again. Q. Do they pay that? A.

No, they do not pay. Q. Do you have to engage some time in that? A. You have to move quickly, you finish, but you have to go over it again because it is "contract" and you have to walk.. After you have finished cutting you have to return and clean? A. Yes Q. That does not benefit you, because if you do not cut you do not get paid. A. Yes. Q. And .. A. Excuse me, previously, there were workers that executed that operation, but they were discarded and now we are forced to do it. Q. In one interview we made to a worker he mentioned it, that they had been discarded. A. They had also workers that received the boxes collected by us, but that was also left out, and now we do it all." (A. Guzmán, personal interview, January 2, 1999)

In other instances, patrons utilize other strategies; the type of agricultural product is changed and there is also corresponding changes in type of payment from piece work to a time based one, which workers perceive as diminishing their incomes: "It was white mushroom. They eliminated it, and planted one that is brownish, and another, that is not white. Due to that, we have not returned, they left us without the white mushroom, that was worked on a piece rate basis, and this one will be paid on an hourly rate, this is not profitable, we earned more money by "contract" than by the hour." (S. Zavala, personal interview, January 6, 1999)

This may provoke displacements to other work contexts, only to find that the same situation emerges there: " Q. And then, how many years did you worked in The Swine? A. In The Swine. After it, I returned to the company that was bigger but I was paid by the hour, I worked there for three months only and did not like it, because I was being paid by the hour, the minimum." (G. Zavala, personal interview, January 14, 1999)

A decrease in the harvest eliminates piece work and provokes a change to time based remuneration; this may be accompanied by the performance of different tasks, workers are required to work as record keepers, cleaners, sweepers; tasks are multiplied in the same productive space: "I am mostly paid by the hour. Previously, they gave us fifty two pesos to each of us that registered what was produced. They pay us by the hour, and when the mushroom harvest is finished we have to sweep floors, of all the working houses. You work in everything, just for fifty two pesos. (B. Zavala, personal interview. January 9, 1999)

Workplace 6: Patron And Workers'Contingency:

Patrons

There are conditions in the agricultural productive and mercantile context that are very contingent and that cannot be fully controlled by patrons; as such they have to make constant adjustments in both contexts. These have great repercussions on all the aspects of the workforce: "They put pressure to work very quickly when you are being paid by the hour and they pay little and force you start very early before dawn. They give you a very short production schedule and then they harvest the product very early and need to deliver a product that is fresh and of a high quality and that does not lose weight. I was forced to rise from bed at one or two o'clock in the morning when there was an abundance of mushroom and at six when it was scarce. They want us to work swiftly to collect the product as early as possible to be able to send the mushroom to the "packing"; it does not lose weight because the longer it stays there after being cut, it loses weight." (B. Zavala, personal interview, January 9, 1999)

The situation may also force the farm owners to elaborate strategies directed at segmenting and locating the workers in extremely competitive situations, stimulating the working arrangements based on piece work and subsequently creating internal conflicts among the workers. "And there was a person that came in, at about eleventh at night, to work, and when the rest came later... Later they established a working schedule, it was very difficult. We had to start at two in the morning, If we arrived later we found many people working that had already collected most of the product that was available and we got almost nothing." (J. Zavala Zavala, personal interview, January 15, 1999)

Workers

There are also other additional conditions that cannot be controlled by the workers and that have negative repercussions on their employment: "We just worked one month there, because we were paid by the hour, we worked very swiftly, it ended too soon and we were sent to "rest". (L. Zavala Hernández, personal interview, January 17, 1999)

The "non documented" status of many of these workers have a highly negative impact on the magnitude of their income when it comes to deductions from their paycheck. They are afraid to request claims or explanations on the nature of many of these, the result being that the amounts are practically lost. They cannot relate to the state apparatus within a legalized position: "Most of the cases they keep them, because we cannot fill as we lack the requisites, the money stays there, all of it." (M. Medina, personal interview, January 9, 1999)

In an identical but not exactly equal situation, many workers lack the official governmental information in processes that affect them like the payment of income tax, related to their monetary compensation. They frequently resort to the utilization of intermediaries who cheat and deceive them. The negative consequences can have a double aspect; you lose by being cheated and frequently you have to reimburse money to the state, under the menace that if you do not pay you will not be able to work: "I knew, one left the papers and they stated that you can come back to get them back and filled. She did not ask if our family was there or here; she said that she was going to write down that your family is here so that you will get the credit and one trying to get more said yes and now we have the problem." (S. Zavala, personal interview, January 6, 1999)

Conclusion: Workplace 7: The Extension Of Working Time:

There emerges with great frequency situations in the workplace where workers perceive that there is an increase in the demand for labourers and a corresponding scarcity of workers; this propitiates the extraordinary extension of working time by workers from an individualized, fragmented and alleatory perspective: "We really have people we know there and those friends, we arrived with them. I had cousins that had gone there previously, I went with them. It was easy to get a job, at that time there were plenty of opportunities. Q. Was there much work or less people there? A. Both things, I think. There was plenty of work and also less people. One worked more, at that time, at times one worked up to eighteen hours, twenty hours, there was less people". And: "Q. If one does not want to rest, one can work and they let you work another working day? A. Yes, for instance if _____, I do not want to rest ____, And if one wants to rest

also. Q. Do you work that day or do you rest? A. No, no, I always work that day. Little, because I only come for four or five months. I want to earn some money here." (J García López, personal interview, January 15, 1999)

But these contexts must be analyzed as changing; what started, from the worker's perspective as a highly remunerative situation might just engender at any moment a situation of decreasing returns, and the expectations might remain just that: " I tried to work in another, in another small company, I worked a few days. They pay was not good, I had to pick very small mushroom, some here, some there, I earned more or less, I picked three carts by the hour, and said to myself, I am better not working, I did not earn the minimum." (G. Zavala, personal interview, January 14, 1999)

Employment, Labour Market

The alleatory and contingent manner in which labourers are selected frequently has a negative impact on the work done by some. Sectors of heavily non-qualified occasional workers may not be efficient and others more experienced may be called upon to repeat and go over it again after they have done their regular work, without the payment of additional wages; "They leave spaces unpicked and then we have to go there and finish the job" (A. Guzmán, personal interview, January 2, 1999)

Wide Spectrum of Lack of Self-Sufficiency

Many of the situations, related to the functioning of the work place such as living arrangements and food processing are many times controlled by the farmer and owners: "A. No, he has houses in there too, but there you are forced to live with six persons per room, and that is too many, you can find up to six or eight people in a small room. Too many people for one room, I did not like it." (M. Medina, personal interview, January 9, 1999)

And: "They came from New York in a truck and there they had workers, cooks. To provide food for the people they had working there. Q. The cooks were Mexicans? A. No, Puerto Ricans." (H. Cerrato, personal interview, January 10, 1999)

This can have a negative impact on vital aspects of their lives. It and may also imply a full, totalized control over subjects in areas not related directly with their work engagements and routines: "That is why we are there with them because this man owns the dwellings, the owner of Kaolin. And that is why we are living there full time and also working with him." (T. Hernández, personal interview, January 16, 1999)

At other times, but trying to gain control of some of these situations, workers resort to extremely collective mechanisms that would minimize operating costs but that will probably produce negative situations in terms of health, for instance: " Q. And how are you able to pay the rent? A. We make a collection, according to what we expect. Q. How many people live there? A. About fifteen. Q. About fifteen? And how are you able to accommodate? A. You can always find a

space to sleep." (R. Zavala, personal interview, January 7, 1999)

Labour Market Unstability: Impact

The unstable and uncertain nature of the labor market and its flows and displacements can have a negative repercussion on some workers. For instance, raids carried out by "La Migra" in a very specific moment can eliminate a substantial number of illegals, leaving only documented laborers. As a desperate measure, the farmer may bring more more illegals from other sources. They work just for a few hours, do not like the work and cannot meet standards and abandon the workplace, with the corresponding negative results, the expectation being that the ones who remain will be exploited in a more intensive manner: " Migration appeared and carried all of them away, and only us six that had papers were left. The they brought up some chinese, sixteen chinese, men and women to pick and cut, but they were able to work only about three hours, could not resist and they left." (A. Lara, personal interview, January 16, 1999)

Another indicator of the fragility of the insertions in productive contexts is illustrated by the "daily contract" system whereby laborers are supposedly contracted and paid on a daily basis. The uncertainty is practised in both situations, in the act of contracting, by not fullfiling promises and even if the worker is employed, payment is not realized immediately after. It can also be characterized by the disappearance of the employers, whose origin is multiethnic: "They said to many, we will hire you again tomorrow, and will pay you tomorrow, or in this date, but they did not appeared. It happened to me. Q. It happened to you? A. Yes. Q. But many times or? A: It happened about twice. Q. And those contractors, from where did they come? To where they belonged? A. From the towns around there. Q. Were they Mexicans? A. No. Q. Gringos, Gringos? A. Yes. Some were blacks. And Mexicans. They had from all." (J. Zavala, personal interview, January 6, 1999)

This "daily contract" system can be combined with "the selling out" of subjects, where patrons pay a fixed amount per head when workers are made available to them by intermediaries: " That office sent many people to many of the states, it made arrangements with patrons, for providing _____, food and everything. And they charged some five hundred dollars per head, persons." (J. Zavala, personal interview, January 6, 1999)

E. Implications on Health and Safety

The contexts, situations and practices presented in the previous section have multiple repercussions for the health and safety of the working subjects. A strictly empirical or quantitative account does not lead to an understanding of this impact. For a start there is the constant mention of the use of violence in everyday practices. It may mean physical harm or the locating of the subject in an individualized, weak, and defenseless situation that can degenerate.

In the workplace, workers face situations that can lead to a diminution of resources, as when the productions records are not registered properly or are manipulated. This can also mean that productive operations can sometimes be manipulated in a manner which means the carrying out

of additional (but not paid) work by the worker; more time, more effort is involved, with the corresponding hazards in terms of health and safety.

This constitutes a loss of resources for the workers efforts. The implementation of disciplinary measures also must be considered in its impact, specially if it involves the de-insertion of the working subject from its production context and its repercussions. The existence of deficiencies in the productive infrastructure, is also perceived by many subjects as a threat in terms of health and safety, and additionally as damaging the continuity of the productive and reproductive capacities.

There is also the problematic, in situations involving health problems in the workplace, of a tendency on the part of patrons to minimize their costs and investments, forcing the laborers to transcend their immediate contexts and search for assistance at the level of macroethnic organizations. This may lead to a fragmented situation where the individual looks unsuccessfully for a solution to his health problems.

In related contexts and practices, patrons have a strong interest in the continuity and stability of the productive processes, even in situations where the worker claims that he has injuries related to his functioning in the working context, and take great pain to maintain the subject active, while at the same time not willing to pay for medical services or trying to minimize them. In some instances, workers may be afraid that they may be fired if they report injuries, and decide to keep silent about it and just keep working, while injuries and/or pathological conditions aggravate. There are conditions in the agricultural productive and mercantile context that are very contingent and that cannot be fully controlled by patrons; as such they have to make constant adjustments in both contexts. These can impose conditions that cannot be controlled by the workers and that have negative repercussions on their health and safety.

The highly unstable and uncertain nature of the labor market with its constant flows and displacements can have a negative repercussion on workers. Unexpected raids carried out by "La Migra" illustrate the fragility of the insertions in productive contexts. This is also demonstrated in "daily contract" system whereby laborers are supposedly contracted and paid on a daily basis. This contingent condition greatly influences the constant search by most of the workers either towards the intensification of working processes (piece work) or towards the lengthening of the work time (hourly rates). The impact of this trend in the health and safety should be expected to be negative as it is maximized, in either version.

Workers have a wide spectrum of lack of self-sufficiency that impacts basic aspects of their lives. Many of the situations, related to the functioning of the work place, such as living arrangements and food processing are many times controlled by the farmer and owners. This can have a negative impact on vital aspects of their lives. It and may also imply a full, totalized control over subjects in areas not related directly with their work engagements and routines. This trend is also reinforced by the lack or misunderstood information that they have in many essential aspects of their lives.

F: Recommendations for Future Research

1. Reinterpret the concept of "migrant/seasonal farmworker" that is mostly presented in unitary terms in terms or contexts other than the agricultural and supposedly fixed and immobile location and how that impinges on health and safety aspects.
2. Rethink and reconceptualize, from an anthropological and ethnographic perspective, both health and safety conceptualizations.
3. Focus on the contingent and uncertain aspects characteristic of certain segments of the agricultural economy and the relations with power, inequality, the lack of control of situations on the part of the workers, and how these types of asymmetrical relationships relate to the intensification of working practices by the workers, and to explore the relation of all this with health and safety elements.
4. There is an urgent need to study the non working related contexts in which these subjects move and how they relate to the work contexts and how are they relevant or not for the study and understanding of the variables under analysis here.
5. Means should be explored that lead to more empowerment on the context of the direct producers in the field of health and safety.
6. At a macro level, connections and understandings must be established between this highly alleatory agricultural economy and the specificity of health and safety situations and practices within it.
7. Future research must take into consideration gender differences and the possibility of differential impacts on health and safety.

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