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### **“Trabajando Duro Todos Los Dias”: Learning from the Life Experiences of Mexican Origin Migrant Families**

A forty-year-old woman speaks haltingly of her arduous work in Michigan’s summer farm fields. “It is hot, very hot,” she says. “We went last Sunday and we are still sore.” Another’s husband will put in almost a hundred hours a week...for as long as there’s work to be had. A young mother prepares for the next day’s early start by putting her children to bed dressed in tomorrow’s clothes. It makes it just a little bit easier to get them moving in the morning, and she must be at work by five a.m. One wife tells how her partner suffers through long, physically demanding workdays despite a painful hernia, no medical coverage from his employer, and the occasional failure to receive payment for the overtime he works. Toxic chemicals and hazardous working conditions sicken some...kill others. School children are unable to learn through a language they can’t fully understand, and both parents and offspring are relegated to the fringes of a mainstream society that refuses, year after year, to let them in.

It doesn’t sound like a lifestyle anyone would consciously choose for themselves or their families. Sometimes it’s hard to understand why conditions like these still exist in today’s world, or why they continue to be tolerated. Still, the waves of migrant farm workers that follow the flow of harvest through this country, each year retracing the path of the previous season, demonstrate a determination and resilience to match the challenges that confront them.

This demanding, marginalizing, and frequently dangerous lifestyle may offer rewards difficult for outsiders to understand.

Yet understanding is what Dr. Jose Ruben Parra-Cardona, an assistant professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Michigan State University, along with his research associates were seeking as they undertook their current study. Springing from a larger, ongoing multi-state endeavor centering on low-income rural families in the context of welfare reform (Rural Families Speak, North Central Regional Project NC-223/NC-1011), Parra-Cardona’s team honed in on a sub-sample of migrant families of Mexican origin who repeatedly return to swell Michigan’s agricultural labor force each harvest season. Even though they play a very necessary part in the state’s continuing economic vitality, these people remain some of the lowest paid and socially underserved

in the state. Wanting to gather first-hand information on this group's experience of circulatory migration, the researchers paid special attention to the common challenges faced by such workers, as well as the influence of Latino cultural values on their resilient adaptation to them.

Team members conducted three yearly waves of 1-3 hour interviews with women and one husband and wife couple representing 13 migrant families, and all participants were engaged in their preferred language. An initial set of qualitative questions illuminated specific issues of migrant life, such as living and working conditions, availability of community services, healthcare, etc. A second round of questions enabled participants to personalize and expand on their experiences, and the format used made it easy for interviewers to revisit and update these experiences in ensuing years. Each wave of data was analyzed separately using a system of open, axial and selective coding; data was then compared longitudinally in order to examine trends. Researchers compared and contrasted information from the collective participants, as well as individually over time. Efforts were undertaken to eliminate bias and increase the methodological trustworthiness of the study.

Some challenges reported by Mexican migrant families were economic disadvantage and huge wage disparities, dangerous or otherwise poor working conditions, racial and ethnic discrimination, social isolation, inadequate community services (including discrimination by human service providers), lack of medical coverage, and educational obstacles (especially language barriers). In accordance with Developmental Systems Theory, which considers an individual's development in light of the context in which it occurs, it is possible the challenges these families meet in the face of the larger society might be mitigated, at least in part, through the creation of strong personal support networks and diverse communities.

Despite many difficulties and dissatisfactions, study results showed participants' sense of resilience remained strong and their overall perceptions of life were basically positive. One influential factor is the extreme hardship faced by many in their lives prior to beginning migrant work. One participant is quoted as saying of his current situation, "I got a place to live, and somebody else doesn't have a place." After recalling how difficult life was in Mexico, another acknowledges, "Here there is work...the children study...there's something to eat...to live." One woman took college classes that landed her a better job; another couple has even built their own home. From the perspective of those who've lived with so very little, migrant work has definitely brought changes for the better.

Underlying it all are some very strong connections to traditional cultural values. *Trabajando duro* (working hard) is reflected in the Mexican migrant worker's commitment to giving the best they can give, and to taking advantage of whatever opportunities are offered them and putting their best effort forth. In time, they hope their hard work will be rewarded through promotions, education, improved living conditions and the achievement of family goals. Equally important is *estando todos juntos* (being all together). This value is imbued with the importance of both immediate and extended

family in the lives of these Latinos. Parents are highly committed to the welfare of their children, and family and neighbors share a sense of cohesive community that holds the assurance of support – given and received – during stressful times.

The Parra-Cardona team notes several implications for practice from their research which include: the need for training culturally competent, and culturally respectful providers in all human service arenas; the importance of tailoring intake procedures and methods of service provision to encourage the development of warm, positive worker/client relationships, and the need to employ bilingual workers who have the ability to communicate not only the language, but also the unspoken values of the Latino culture. Ensuring implementation of oft-ignored agricultural safety standards would be a strong step in the right direction, and establishing a practice of pursuing policy development from a more nurturing, strengths-based perspective would be another. The formation of collaborative educational agreements between the school systems through which migrant families move is also critical.

When speaking of the migrant population, Parra-Cardona emphasizes, “...there is still much work we need to do in terms of understanding their life experiences across different contexts and within group differences.” He goes on to say, “I firmly believe that research with Latinos should not stop at a place of only describing their experiences, but should expand to explore the ways in which such an understanding can help us improve their lives by carefully analyzing if the available community resources are responsive to their needs.”

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**This study is published in the current special issue of *Family Relations* (Vol. 55, No. 3) on “Latino Families.” Media wishing to receive a PDF of this article please contact [journalnews@bos.blackwellpublishing.net](mailto:journalnews@bos.blackwellpublishing.net).**

Since 1951, *Family Relations* has covered areas of critical importance to family professionals. Content emphasizes family research with implications for intervention, education, and public policy.

The research team for this study included: Jose Rube Parra-Cordona, Ph.D. and David Imig, Ph.D. (co-PIs); Laurie Bullock, M.A.; Francisco A. Villarruel, Ph.D., and Steven J. Gold, Ph.D. all of Michigan State University. The research was supported in part by USDA and by the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station. Dr. Parra-Cordona can be contacted at the Department of Family and Child Ecology, 3 D Human Ecology, East Lansing, MI 48824 ([parracal@msu.edu](mailto:parracal@msu.edu)). Dr. Joyce A. Arditti is the editor of *Family Relations* and can be contacted at the Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 359 Wallace Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061 ([frjourn@vt.edu](mailto:frjourn@vt.edu)).

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