**How Good Are Networks for Migrant Job Seekers?**

*Ethnographic Evidence from North Carolina Farm Labor*<sup>*</sup>

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Migrant farmworker networks are vital components in their job seeking and underemployment minimization strategies. Yet, farmworker cultural, physical, and institutional isolation along with the itinerant and clandestine features of farmwork have become major obstacles in the development of robust lateral communitywide network ties that would otherwise favor reciprocity and resource sharing. Thus, contrary to the positive social capital assumption, we argue that the paucity and fragmented features of farmworkers’ lateral ties have increased their vulnerability and locked them in exploitative relationships in a hostile social environment that makes impractical or impossible the formation of alternative ties. Our study is based on participant observation through a 6-week stay in three North Carolina farm labor camps. On-site evidence shows that the two larger groups of solitary male farmworkers and farmworking families break up into smaller groups, each group in pursuit of its own short-term goals. We conclude that, even though farmworker networks help them to find and ensure temporary jobs, their inability to use the networks to share resources is ultimately detrimental for participants’ long-term socioeconomic prospects.

Despite being a recurring topic of many empirical studies, little is known about why social networks have had a negligible impact on reversing U.S. farmworkers’ depressed earnings and working conditions. In this article, we rely on evidence from three North Carolina labor camps to argue that, in full agreement with network theory, communitywide ties do grant migrant farmworkers access to temporary jobs; nonetheless, the network ties formed in labor camps are ineffective in improving their earnings and working conditions. We contend that the more committed the migrant farmworkers are to minimizing deportation risks, the more likely emerging network ties will become the employers’ controlling device that perpetuates depressed working conditions. We take an unusual approach to examine the links between networks and labor market outcomes, as our evidence comes from one of us taking the role of a migrant farmworker for 6 weeks in three North Carolina farm labor camps. The adoption of this role was critical in tracing the ways farmworkers’ working conditions are related to
the development of fragmented ties, with a declining access to a potentially large pool of community resources.

We first present an overall argument on how the underperformance of farmworker networks stems from behaviors aimed at minimizing the deportation and underemployment uncertainties associated with involvement in a cycle of perpetual migration and relocation according to the picking season. We argue that the itinerant nature of farmworkers’ workplaces, combined with their reliance on extra-legal arrangements at the time of relocation, have produced a depressed labor market that locks the workers in a destitute world of low wages, harsh work, and cultural and social insularity. Next, we describe the experience of the on-site researcher who spent 6 weeks living and working alongside male workers engaged in relocating plants in a nursery, picking cucumbers, and tobacco harvesting. The third section provides a description of job seeking, relocation, and survival strategies developed by the distinctive group of farmworking families settled in and near by the camps.

How Networks Become the Employers’ Controlling Device

In this section we deal with the ways migrant farmworkers’ networks are shaped by the itinerant features of farmwork and the legal and institutional constraints under which this activity is performed in the United States. Our argument is that farmworkers have developed networks that ensure them access to temporary jobs and assist them in their own underemployment minimization goals but remain largely ineffective in reversing depressed working and living conditions and cultural, physical, and occupational insularity. Once migrant job seekers are hired in a particular labor camp, we contend, they develop network ties that fit the requirements of a clandestine labor market with exploitative relationships involving unusually harsh work, low pay, appalling living conditions, and recurring relocation at their own expense. In their efforts to minimize underemployment and the risk of deportation, farmworkers engage in costly travel and relocation arrangements and cope with the changing social and physical makeup of both their workplace and living quarters. The itinerant and clandestine features of farmwork also strengthen, we contend, the utility of farmworkers’ vertical network ties and become a major impediment in the formation of long-term communitywide ties that would otherwise favor reciprocity, lateral learning, and worker solidarity (Flora and Flora 1993; Menjivar 2000; Schulman and Anderson 1999; for a skeptical view, see, for example, Mouw 2003). We argue, in sum, that farmworkers’ relocation and deportation anxieties constitute an inducement to the formation of predominantly vertical network ties that ensure job tenure while trapping them in exploitative relationships with labor contractors.

We contend that farmworkers’ short-term migration expectations, their lack of legal residency in the United States, and the shifting location of their
work account for the unusual strength of their employers’ bargaining position while inhibiting the formation of dense communitywide networks. As pointed out by Roberts (1995), migrants’ short-term expectations diminish their commitment to long-term communitywide ties and make adjustment more difficult because of ambivalence toward the norms of the host society. Farmworkers’ noncommittal attitudes increase as a result of their quest for temporary jobs in a clandestine labor market with repeated and costly relocation requirements. Under these conditions, farmworkers have few incentives to engage in long-term coworker cooperation and reciprocity which is either impractical or impossible as long as farmworkers cannot ascertain each other’s location once they leave the camps. Because farmworkers without legal residency in the United States face potentially high deportation costs that increase the more faraway their communities of origin, their priority is to minimize underemployment in order to ensure a steady flow of remittances to the household (Aysa and Massey 2004; Cohen and Rodriguez 2004; Davis, Stenklav, and Winters 2002; Papail and Arroyo-Alejandro 1996; Winters, de Janvry, and Sadoulet 2001). Further, with the end of each picking season, these workers face renewed deportation and underemployment anxieties and ethnic and racial hostility as they move once again to other areas in search of temporary jobs while the costly extra-legal arrangements that such relocation entails strengthen the hand of labor contractors and other providers of transportation. The fragmentation of farmworkers’ lateral ties is therefore costly because it impairs their access to an otherwise large pool of community resources and increases their vulnerability and cultural and institutional isolation at the bottom of the larger host society.

The term network and the related concepts of trust and social capital are admittedly broad and have often been used more as heuristic devices than as solid theoretical constructs (see, for example, Colclough and Sitaraman 2005; Portes and Landolt 2000; Tilly 2005; Wall, Ferrazzi, and Schryer 1998; Welch et al. 2005). In this article, we use the term network to designate a type of social structure based not only on useful contacts and ethnic or kin-based referrals, but also on a combination of self-interest and mutual obligations that entail a degree of loyalty to other members of the network and/or reciprocally beneficial behaviors. Social networks, accordingly, are formed and reshaped as members interact and involve differing combinations of moral commitment, self-interest, resource sharing, and trust building. The process of network formation may therefore produce differing configurations and outcomes depending on the predominant direction of ties (i.e., hierarchical versus horizontal ties), the amount of membership resources, the density of ties, the availability of these resources to members, and the geographical scope of the network (Menjivar 2000; Portes and Sesenbrenner 1993). Prospective employers, for instance, may use their power and location at the convergence point of many ties not only to monitor
job seekers’ reliability and loyalty, but also to present themselves as the only credible figure offering a measure of protection against both deportation and underemployment. As employers hiring undocumented workers also have law evasion goals, their recruitment strategies emphasize the formation of vertical ties with easily controllable and culturally isolated groups of workers from faraway foreign communities with a shared cultural and linguistic background and a lower cost of living. Migrant job seekers, by contrast, frequently find that the ties developed in their communities of origin with veteran workers or labor contractors open up job opportunities, while restricting their options once they are hired by a particular farm labor contractor.

While there is scholarly agreement on the importance of networks in the migration process, the extent to which the new arrivals benefit from network ties being formed within the migrant communities remains a highly contentious issue. In her study of Salvadoran migrants in San Francisco, Menjivar (2000) found that insufficient material resources could considerably weaken communitywide network ties and make them unstable and unreliable for recent arrivals. In a study based on a sample from the Census Bureau, Enchautegui (2002) reported that the chances of employment for recent immigrants are negatively affected when they co-reside even in relatively well-paid long-term immigrant households compared with recent arrivals who live in households with combined native-born and immigrant members. In the case of migrant farmworkers, Rothenberg (1998) and Griffith and Kissam (1995; see also Griffith 2000) noted that the brutal competition of labor contractors for the work assigned to them by farmers has forced them to carefully screen recruits to prevent an uncontrolled proliferation of potentially detrimental ethnic and kin-based lateral ties between veterans and new hires. Clearly, labor market outcomes and access to other network-related resources are contingent not only on migrants’ networks, but also on the new social environment encountered by migrants during their economic adjustment. Though farmworkers’ initial access to temporary jobs often depends on how they use network referrals from their communities of origin, their continued employability is related to their willingness to work long hours and continuously adapt to a shifting workplace.

There are two reasons that account for labor contractors being at the center of emerging farmworkers’ networks. First, the historical record shows how the high degree of physical and institutional control exerted by employers on farms and labor camps combined with increasingly stringent legislation against undocumented workers have become major barriers for successful union action and co-worker solidarity. As discussed by Jenkins and Perrow (1977), farmworkers’ unions relied heavily on various U.S. urban groups’ support which was crucial in union leaders’ efforts to challenge farmers’ and outside communities’ hostility. The impressive success of the California farmworkers’ movement in the late
1960s was associated with the movement’s ability to mobilize external groups, such as churches, universities, and so on, and their willingness to organize and support boycotts against growers. Once external support dissipated, the movement weakened and with this decline the horizontal ties the unionizing process had brought about were also severed. This decline intensified as farmers turned to labor contractors willing to assume the legal risk of hiring workers regardless of their residency status in the United States (Arce-Decierdo 1999; Griffith 2000; Martin 2003). Farmers’ reliance on labor contractors has also strengthened farmworkers’ vertical ties as the two groups, contractors and undocumented farmworkers, have engaged in conspiracies to avoid U.S. immigration law by means of extra-legal arrangements that lower the risks of death or apprehension (see, for example, Eschbach et al. 1999; Heyman 1998). Thus, the risks faced by both groups as a result of their shared reliance on extra-legal arrangements in a clandestine and largely unregulated economy solidify vertical ties despite the obvious exploitative relationships developed by labor contractors.

Second, labor contractors’ commitment to supplying a steady flow of work assignments, often from different farmers, is a powerful means of ensuring their employees’ loyalty, their willingness to remain in the camps, and their acceptance of an increasingly paternalistic rule in a shifting and institutionally isolated workplace. Given farmers’ refusals to confront labor problems, labor contractors become the only figures not only in charge of providing crews of about 100 to 150 workers with transportation and housing, but also of supervising them and keeping track of their daily production and hours of work (Griffith and Kissam 1995; Heyman 1998; Rothenberg 1998). Further, the more secluded the labor camps, the fewer the outside contacts available to farmworkers vis-à-vis the highly paternalistic rule of labor contractors over virtually every aspect of their lives. Thus, it is farmworkers’ isolation with respect to the host society that ensures labor contractors’ leverage over their workers and the adoption of multiple roles such as attorneys, marriage counselors, transportation providers, and loan officers (Rothenberg 1998; see also Griffith 2000; Griffith and Kisam 1995). As a result, new hires have few choices but to sustain a self-interested view of trust with respect to their employers as long as this relationship represents short-term reciprocal benefits for both parties (see, for example, Auyero 1999; Hardin 2002; Tilly 2005). Farmworkers’ vertical ties are in sum unique in the sense of involving short-term, rather than long-term, aims concerning job tenure and a degree of protection against deportation, even if the law evasion goals associated with these aims entail exploitative relationships and a growing institutional and cultural insularity that inhibit alternative earnings maximization strategies.

Some researchers, such as Aguilera (2005), Aguilera and Massey (2003), Mooney (2003), Phillips and Massey (2000), and Winters, de Janvry, and
Sadoulet (2001), have argued that network membership provides migrant job seekers with allegedly large stocks of social capital (for a skeptical view, see, for example, Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006). This assumption on the economic importance of networks is consistent with network theory and its description of networks as information channels and instruments of opportunity. Yet, research in the labor market experiences of Mexican migrants in rural and urban areas also shows important discrepancies in earnings patterns that indicate that workers in rural areas are less likely to reap the full economic benefits of network ties than their counterparts in urban settings (see, for example, Saenz 2000). As discussed by Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark (1996; see also Heyman 1998; Portes and Sesenbrenner 1993), job seekers without legal residency also face decreased opportunities for upward mobility, as their choices are hindered not only by downward leveling pressures exerted by their peers, but also by fears of deportation and “wage penalties” imposed by employers who take advantage of migrants’ legal and economic vulnerability. Bloom and Grenier (1996; see also Mora and Davila 1998) found that the earnings gap also tends to increase the more educationally and culturally isolated Spanish-speaking workers are in a given region. The discrepancies in earnings patterns clearly indicate the presence of higher levels of ethnic and racial hostility in rural settings toward the Spanish-speaking migrant. Most of the literature on networks has neglected the study of how useful networks are in structuring farmworkers’ response to this hostility. Further, it is the farmworker’s adaptation to a shifting workplace, and the costs associated with this adaptation, which explains the increasing fragmentation of communitywide ties and reliance on vertical ties to ensure this adaptation.

We argue along with Portes (1995) and Menjivar (2000) that social capital involves highly idiosyncratic structures of reciprocity and resource sharing and that the benefits from social capital are contingent on the material and symbolic resources available through the network and the prevailing norms within the network. Further, we concur with Fernandez-Kelly (1995:216–19) that social capital has toponimical features, that is, the direction of network ties (i.e., vertical versus horizontal) and network membership are defined by the institutional and cultural characteristics, terms of access, and physical and social location of the network. The social, legal, and institutional context of network formation and use is critical because it determines not only the degree of network multiplexity, namely the extent people in networks may develop ties in different arenas (i.e., residential, occupational, sports-related, etc.) simultaneously, but also the costs and economic opportunities associated with the use of these ties. Further, because networks entail not only reciprocity and trust building, but also a shared identity and a set of obligations and behaviors by members, the ties established within a network are also structured as rules of access, inclusion, and exclusion. Some
of these rules are behavioral, but others are clustered around ethnic, racial, and gender identities that go beyond an individual member’s willingness to gain access to the network and use it in the search for jobs and the pursuit of either long-term or short-term goals. Thus, the long-term economic effectiveness of lateral ties for migrant farmworkers is contingent not only on veteran coworkers’ referrals, advice, and ability to share resources, but also on how timely the expected co-worker reciprocity is in the context of a given set of physical, cultural, legal, and institutional constraints. Further, once migrant farmworkers become members of an established network, their own ability to use it depends not only on the extent to which their access to network resources meets their goals, but also on their own commitment to bearing all of the costs and risks of migration, relocation, and adaptation, and to demonstrating their ability to perform hard work in unusually harsh living and working conditions.

There are three major reasons for the fragmentation and economic ineffectiveness of farmworkers’ communitywide ties and the strengthening of vertical ties in the emerging network. First, once farmworkers are hired by a labor contractor, their short-term expectations on the duration of their migration decisions contribute to a radical devaluation of long-term communitywide commitments in the labor camps (Roberts 1995). The stakes involved in initial job referrals provided in communities of origin increase the more remote the starting point of the farmworker’s migration and the more dangerous the travel arrangements leading not only to good paying jobs for the upcoming season, but also to prospective employers hiring undocumented workers. Yet, once migrant job seekers move into a particular area, they may either find their way to the labor contractor of their choice or ignore the initial referrals and adapt to shifting situations as new opportunities emerge according to the changing labor requirements of the picking season. Thus, the resources available to and the migration choices made by farmworkers without legal residency in the United States often depend on robust communitywide ties at the point of departure, but once in the United States, new network ties emerge, typically with labor contractors and their assistants. Further, the new network ties are often assessed in terms of their potential to minimize underemployment and ensure a steady flow of temporary jobs. Farmworkers’ short-term goals therefore make impractical their search for contacts with co-workers beyond their campsites as the utility of this search in terms of job referrals or ability to share resources is regarded as uncertain and too risky. Thus, campsite isolation bolsters farmworkers’ ties to labor contractors who remain committed to offering a measure of short-term job stability.

Second, itinerant, highly volatile, and fiercely competitive farm labor markets considerably strengthen farmworkers’ paternalistic ties with labor contractors. As the literature on farmworkers has emphasized (see, for example, Griffith 2000; Griffith and Kissam 1995; Rothenberg 1998), the shifting location and
clandestine features of farmwork ensure that the shared linguistic and cultural bonds between the contractors and their employees evolve as the basis for reciprocal obligations and loyalty going well beyond a particular labor camp. These obligations, for instance, are particularly valuable at the time of relocation, when farmworkers’ hard work must be reciprocated by the labor contractor with additional work in other camps and suitable extra-legal transportation. Anecdotal evidence shows not only farmworker preference for well-defined relocation itineraries but also an unwillingness to use public transportation and proclivity to extra-legal assistance and informal travel arrangements involving, as far as possible, relocation in groups, an inclination that is obviously related to both their fears of deportation and their cultural, linguistic, and institutional isolation (see, for example, Conover 1987; Griffith and Kissam 1995; Valenzuela, Schweitzer, and Robles 2005). These fears also contribute to a radical devaluation of farmworkers’ ties with other workers in neighboring camps whose referrals could lead to relocation alternatives that may indeed represent better working conditions but unacceptably high travel and deportation risks.

Third, the few lateral ties formed in the farm labor camps are often not only temporary, fragmented, and unstable, but also ultimately detrimental for farmworkers as a result of the downward leveling pressures exerted by co-workers and other members of the network and their lack of tolerance for the host culture. Since co-workers are also roommates and co-participants in a variety of recreational activities in highly secluded camps, their overall isolation with respect to the host society also reduces the multiplexity of the ties formed in the camps and magnifies the downward effects of intolerance and co-worker leveling pressures (see, for example, Fernandez-Kelly 1995; Portes and Sesenbrennen 1993). Further, farmworkers’ institutional, physical, and cultural insularity combined with the itinerant nature of farmwork makes extra-community contacts impractical and difficult. As the literature on farmworkers consistently shows (see, for example, Conover 1987; Griffith 2000; Rothenberg 1998), the sudden dismemberment of crews as workers depart to unforeseen destinations also makes co-worker reciprocity and resource sharing unlikely and difficult. However, despite farmworkers’ temporary, rather than permanent, view of their migration decisions, their deportation anxieties and shared ethnic identity force them into stronger co-worker bonds in the campsite than a narrow self-interested view of their own temporary goals would suggest it advisable. Further, as pointed out by Fernandez-Kelly (1995), lateral ties become, under conditions of extreme community deprivation and extended cultural and physical insularity, the most likely vehicles for extensive symbolic exchanges involving network members’ search for respect, status, and recognition in lieu of tangible economic benefits. Thus, the very antagonism of the host society is likely to increase the symbolic rather than the material content of farmworkers’ exchanges, add to the burdensome
features of their horizontal ties, and undermine individual workers’ self-confidence to act independently.

Membership in the emerging network formed in the labor camps may have become instrumental in minimizing farmworkers’ short-term migration and survival anxieties, and yet the ties developed through the network remain a far more useful controlling device for labor contractors than channels of opportunity for job seekers. Again, a farmworker’s ability to develop and to use alternative network ties to maximize earnings is hampered not only by an employer’s control over the workplace, but also by obvious legal, institutional, and cultural constraints, such as lack of legal residency in the United States, fear of deportation and harassment if traveling into unknown areas, lack of English-speaking skills, and limited understanding of legal rights as workers. Looming large among these uncertainties, deportability is clearly the condition that commands the potentially most devastating economic, cultural, and psychological costs for the migrant worker. Moreover, the economic and human consequences of deportation vastly increase with the dangers and costs of re-entering the United States the more faraway the community of origin. Farmworkers who are denied the protection of the law must therefore be prepared to shoulder these costs regardless of how they affect the household. This lack of protection is the most obvious, albeit oppressive, result of the criminalization of their work. Further, it is deportability, rather than deportation itself, which makes migrant farmwork a disposable commodity (De Genova 2004; see also Heyman 1998).

The definition of farmwork as an itinerant and clandestine activity in a hostile social and institutional environment has favored the development of network ties that are merely responsive to psychological anxieties and short-term priorities. As shown in the extensive literature on migration and labor markets (see, for example, Aguilera 2005; Antoninis 2006; Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 1996; Lindsay, McCracken, and McQuaid 2003; Reskin and McBrier 2000), the greater the perceived vulnerability and social isolation of prospective employees, the more likely that employer use of network ties as a channel of recruitment perpetuates the biases built by initial hiring practices. Employers have a clear preference for workers who display suitable attitudes and whose performance and reliability they believe can be assessed in terms of highly visible markers, such as age, experience, family status, gender, and ethnic and national origin (see, for example, Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Yet, once farmworkers have proven their worth under the paternalistic rule of labor contractors, their adaptation to secluded and shifting work environments not only inhibits the formation of communitywide ties, but also sets severe constraints on the extent to which such ties could serve farmworkers’ long-term needs and aspirations. Further, farmworkers’ deportation anxieties also minimize the extent worker dissatisfaction may adversely affect employers’ hiring practices and ensures that
the emerging network serves their long-term recruitment needs. The account that follows on farmworker recruitment, relocation, and the social making of working lives in three North Carolina labor camps clearly illustrates our point.

**Interacting with Male Farmworkers**

One of us spent 6 weeks in three North Carolina farm labor camps working alongside farmworkers who happened to be there, observing their daily activities, and listening to them as they conversed in both the camps and in the fields. The research, which took place in the summer of 2004, was limited to 2 weeks per camp and the researcher made no effort to ask questions beyond those needed for daily interaction routines. The lack of in-depth interviews and any further questioning of the research subjects must be credited to the rules of our academic institution that made it difficult and impractical, because of time constraints, to undertake the research beyond a restricted form of participant observation (Molina 2004). Yet, these limitations may have worked to the ultimate advantage of the research, as the fieldwork involved a relatively short stay in each camp. We believe that the forced adoption of a first-person account may have spared the research from the well-recognized tendency among ethnographers to provide accounts based on informants whose marginality raises doubts about the validity of these accounts (see, for example, Geertz 1983; Shokeid 1988). The researcher, as a result, had to go beyond superficial impressions of people and places and capture the complexity of farmworkers’ survival strategies, their adaptation to life in the camps, and the usefulness of network ties in the adaptation process.

The three labor camps, which we label Camps “A,” “B,” and “C,” involve differing recruitment practices, quality of housing, organization of the workplace, level of skills, and ethnic identities by various groups of workers. While Camp A is located in a black neighborhood in the middle of a small town, Camps B and C are in typically isolated rural settings. The quality of housing was better in Camp A and worse in Camps B and C, with Camp C being the worst. Work in Camp A consisted of relocating plants in a nursery, in Camp B harvesting cucumbers, and in Camp C picking tobacco. There were a total of about 150 male employees working in the nursery, about 80 male and female pickers of cucumbers, and 80 male and female workers in the tobacco field. The language in all three camps and the workplace was Spanish. The field research conducted in the three camps followed a progression from Camps A to C.

When the researcher boarded the Greyhound to North Carolina, the only certainty about the labor camp where the research was to begin, was its location in the middle of a small town named Wilson. This town, the researcher was told, was productive until the decline of the tobacco market, which affected the town’s auctions, warehouses, and tobacco exports. A close friend was instrumental in finding the camp and connecting the researcher with the labor contractor in
charge of hiring workers for the farmer. In compliance with the law, the labor contractor asked for the documentation required of all job applicants to prove their employment eligibility at the time of hiring and made photocopies of the researcher’s documents in the nursery’s office. Contrary to his high expectations when walking for the first time through the door of Camp A, the researcher was struck by the fact that nobody cared to socialize and everyone seemed to be in a little world of his own. This pervading sensation of indifference and detachment from others who were not part of farmworkers’ formed groups was pervasive throughout the 6 weeks in the camps. The only person who attempted to make the newcomer welcome was the labor contractor. All others gave quick glances and nodded in greeting or just looked away to show their lack of concern for the newcomer.

The contractor assigned the researcher a bed in one of the large number of two-bed units in the main building of the campsite. The sleeping quarters were clean and seemed more like a run-down apartment complex than a campsite. Over time, the researcher came to be known throughout the camp as a tall southern Texan male student doing a summer job. Oddly enough, the newcomer was the only unmarried Texan, and was unrelated to the three extended families from South Texas at the labor camp. The families, who never attempted to acquaint themselves with the new Texan, lived in mobile homes located at the extremity of the camp and also kept a distance with respect to the group of about 40 Mexican male workers who were in the main building. The female members of the families were invariably in the trailer area and came to the camp escorted by male siblings or cousins at all times, and none of them ever talked to the researcher nor dared to look at him in the eyes. A few days later, the researcher learned that the Texan families, while acting as regular workers in the nursery, had no links with the labor contractor and only related themselves to the farmer should they have any problem or concern.

While Camp A was at short walking distance from Walmart and other convenience stores in the town, most male residents were reluctant to explore the surroundings of the campsite. There were signs posted along the tall fence around the camp stating that the black neighborhood was a crime watch area. The campsite was clean compared to the untidy aspect of the neighborhood. At dusk, the camp was usually silent, and the workers only left the camp in small groups and kept a low profile when stepping into the outside. Further, the researcher was advised not to wander alone in the town at night. One of the workers told the story of a relative who had worked the previous season and was badly beaten and robbed when venturing alone outside the campsite late at night. The perpetrator was never apprehended. As a result, camp residents felt it unwise to hang out off the campsite, with the exception of a few visiting the night strip where prostitutes roamed in the weekend. From time to time, residents
were glad to take advantage of rides offered by co-workers with cars to get them to the nearby stores.

The work in the nursery started at 7 o’clock in the morning, once the bus dropped off the workers in the different sections of the plant sales outlet. The work consisted of relocating plants within the nursery and was done by means of both tractors and manual labor. Most tractor drivers were younger than the average worker, spoke some English, and were handsomely paid at the peak of the season compared to the other workers. Driving a tractor was also a clear status symbol and required both extreme care in avoiding running over the lines of plants and the memorization of the exact location of all plants throughout the nursery. The arrival of the researcher took place toward the end of the season. Once the peak season was over, there were usually more tractor drivers than the number of tractors being used in a particular day and the tractor drivers were likely to resolve the problem themselves. If unable to do so, the foreman intervened and randomly assigned the few lucky drivers by means of a hardhat in which all candidates had selected numbers of the day lotto identifying them. Almost all tractor drivers not being selected for the day preferred to return to the campsite rather than perform manual labor.

For the most part, all other workers grabbed three small plants that weighed around a pound apiece in each hand at the same time and relocated them wherever they were told. The task of relocating plants consisted of placing them on a flatbed attached to a tractor pulling the flatbed to different sections of the nursery. New hires were shown videos in the office about the way they should grab the plants, the proper use of eye protective gear, the type of clothing they should use in areas sprayed with chemicals, and other safety issues concerning travel on top of the trailer being pulled by the tractor. The formation of workers’ horizontal ties took place after a few days, but only among those who relocated plants in the same section of the nursery, was limited to the daily routines in the section, and was narrowly task-related. The grabbing of plants is tiring on the hands, forearms, and fingertips, and the researcher’s first night of rest was accompanied by cramps and pain in all four limbs.

After 2 weeks, the researcher moved from Camp A to work in Camp B where, he was repeatedly warned, conditions and pay were worse. The researcher learned that there was demand for workers to pick cucumbers in Camp B after talking with a co-worker in Camp A who put him in contact with the labor contractor on a visit to a convenience store located about 15 miles from Wilson. The labor contractor from Camp B was prompt in taking matters into his hands and offering employment to the researcher. Labor contractors are quick to relate themselves with all prospective employees and eager to discourage any contacts between workers of different camps. In contrast to Camp A, male workers in Camp B were dependent on the transportation provided by the contractor and
could only reach the convenience store or Walmart on the weekend. Further, the contractor charged 10 dollars per worker to make his pickup available to them to buy items they needed for the week.

The researcher was relieved to see the labor contractor taking him as an ordinary Texan in search of work, rather than a student. This time, however, no documentation was requested and almost without realizing it the researcher was in Camp B. The campsite is located about a 45-minute drive from the town and the arrival of the researcher was greeted with the usual quick glances and overall indifference. The researcher found that the living quarters were intolerably hot during the day and dark at night, which was made worse by the fact that all empty rooms were without light bulbs or appliances and some of them had no electric outlets. Every new hire was left to his own devices and the researcher had to scavenge from the other men in the camp to avoid sleeping in complete darkness. There was no glass in the small windows. In lieu of glass there were protective screens that barely served to shield residents from mosquitoes. The dawn moisture reached the cement floor which became humid and very slippery, forcing all residents to exercise great care to avoid falling when getting up from bed in the morning. The lack of privacy was rampant. Anyone could listen to conversations taking place two or three rooms away and those taking a shower would find themselves separated from the restroom by a piece of moldy and decayed plywood. Yet no one complained, and workers in the camp seemed to have resigned themselves to the fact that people in other camps had it worse.

Picking cucumbers seems like a simple task in the eyes of a novice, and the researcher thought he could rely on his physical strength to perform the steps required to toss the bucket full of cucumbers to those waiting for it on the truck. The truck moves slowly in front of the faster pickers. Some pickers are closer to the path of the truck and therefore save time and effort in taking their load to the truck. The pay for each bucket delivered to the men on the truck was equivalent to 40 cents. While picking cucumbers, the researcher realized that the plastic gloves provided minimal protection from the hot dry soil. Shirt and shorts stuck to the body and the researcher felt his back burn and ache as he bent under the sun. After loading several buckets, the fingertips gently bled and the pain of peeled skin only disappeared when the dirt stuck and served as a Band-Aid. The researcher was painfully aware of the impossibility of keeping pace with the other workers. Fatigued and confused, the researcher was unaware of being surrounded by a small group of pickers who observed him. Once they were out of the sight of the men on top of the truck, one of the co-workers broke the silence. While displaying an amazing speed in placing cucumbers in an empty bucket, he said:

You will never make money working that way! Look at what you have to do. Put the small ones in the bottom, place the big ones in the middle with leafs, for the leaves prevent the cucumbers from falling into the gaps, and finish it off by placing the small ones again.
Camp B was different from Camp A in three major respects concerning the way workers related to farmwork and to other groups in the camp. First, by contrast with the permanent nature of most jobs at the nursery, in Camp B the large majority of Mexican residents regarded the campsite as a temporary work location. They expected to remain in Camp B only until the end of the upcoming sweet potato season, regarded as a better-paying job compared to the current cucumber harvest. Once the sweet potato harvest was over, the researcher learned, the workers would travel with the labor contractor to Florida for the tomato picking season. The second difference was the participation of a small group of Mexican women in the cucumber harvest. These young women were members of the only three extended Mexican families in the camp, made up almost entirely of Mexican male workers from the states of Jalisco and Chihuahua. The third major difference was that, by contrast with the slightly assimilated South Texan and Mexican residents of Camp A, in Camp B there was an overwhelmingly Mexican environment with the only exception being four male Guatemalan workers who were among the hardest-working people and despised by the Mexican workers. The Maya-speaking Guatemalans largely kept to themselves and were nonetheless visible because of their unique attire. The vast majority of Mexican residents were fond of their culture and music, which became noticeable late in the evening. Contrary to Camp A that was silent after 8 p.m., in Camp B loud Mexican music, in particular Rancheras, could be heard until midnight when a bass sound would indicate the beginning of complete silence throughout the camp.

The researcher’s shift to Camp C also took place through a lead to the labor contractor provided by a co-worker from Camp A. As in the other two camps, the labor contractor for Camp C was also a Mexican, with years of residence in the United States and some basic knowledge of English. The researcher was again driven to the camp on the contractor’s pickup without questioning or any request for legal documentation. Camp C is located about a 15-minute drive from Camp B and living conditions were worse compared to Camp B. As in Camp B, there were about 80 male workers and only two restrooms. In Camp C, however, the condition of the mattresses was almost unbearable, with most of the available ones stained with blood and other fluids and having the springs sprouting through both sides. Over time, the researcher learned that the best mattresses had been seized by the veteran workers who arrived at the camp prior to the peak season. Besides the claustrophobic living quarters, almost unbearable mattresses, and lack of privacy, the researcher met a social environment characterized by heavy drinking and frequent fights. As in Camp B, farmworkers in Camp C were predominantly Mexican males, many of them from the state of Jalisco, with their living quarters located at about a 10-minute drive from the farm in a typically isolated rural setting. Because of its secluded location, all
the solitary male workers were more dependent on the transportation provided by the labor contractor than in Camp B. Despite the lack of verbal communication, the researcher also felt under the continuous scrutiny of the veteran workers, who observed every aspect of the newcomer and seemed to doubt his ability to perform the job.

The question came before the bus arrival to the tobacco field, when some of the men asked the researcher whether he had done the job before. When they heard the negative reply, all the men in the bus shook their heads in disbelief. Some of them came closer to the researcher and attempted to explain to him how the work had to be performed. The confused researcher could only grasp the importance of keeping up with the slow-moving tractor. Once in the field, the researcher observed how other co-workers reached the sticky stem of the tobacco plant with their garden gloves and reaped off the bottom row of leaves, tucked them underneath the arm, and moved to the next plant to repeat the same task over and over. The leaves were no longer green as they had been sprayed with pesticides and other chemicals added to dry the plant. While keeping the bundle of golden brown leaves under the arm, every worker had to stoop and keep their torso bowed to reach the next plant and pick up the next bundle. Standing was only possible at the time of dropping off the leaves on a flatbed being pulled by the tractor. Falling behind was a problem for the entire group, as the other workers were then forced to help the researcher to avoid slowing down the tractor motion.

Everyone was aware of his place in the field, with older workers being near the tractor and fast tobacco pickers further away. This time the newcomer was offered the row closest to the tractor in an attempt to ensure a smooth and timely process. Before the beginning of a new row, the workers picked up dirt from the ground and rubbed it against their garden gloves. They called to the newcomer to do likewise to help keep the sticky dark substance off his gloves. They also advised the researcher not to breathe when bent over. The counseling came with the usual laughter, which left the researcher wondering about the value of the advice. Yet, after several hours of continuous work that helped the researcher to build confidence in his abilities, he was struck by a strange feeling of respiratory uneasiness that persisted while he traveled in the bus back to the campsite. All of a sudden, the new worker was vomiting his lunch.

“We told you not to breathe through your mouth that much when you were bent over,” a passing figure said. “Now you have tobacco poisoning.”

The evening and the following day the symptoms of tobacco poisoning became clear. The researcher’s body violently rejected all fluids and repeated vomiting came along with dizziness, cold sweat, and uncontrollable spasms. The researcher’s return to work had to wait for a day of convalescence using homemade remedies well known to the tobacco pickers. As the researcher
returned to the field, he learned to avoid water and have milk, orange juice, or beer before going to work. To this day, it is unclear whether these fluids serve more as a psychological cure or as a physical antidote against tobacco poisoning. The origin of the poisoning could perhaps be traced to the pesticide sprayed on the plant and thus the cure could come also as a result of the immunity developed by the body once it becomes accustomed to it.

There were strong disparities in the average earnings of the male workers lodged in the three labor camps as a result of different compensation systems. The nursery workers in Camp A, for instance, earned either minimum wage or a little above minimum wage, and their work was clearly organized in 8-hour shifts. Weekly pay for unskilled work in the nursery was about $220. Only the small group of tractor drivers in the nursery was paid on a piecework basis, yet they had considerably higher earnings determined by the number of truck loads delivered per day. By contrast, the working day for cucumber pickers lodged in Camp B ran from sunrise to sunset, with an average weekly pay of $130 for the most seasoned workers. Finally, the working day in the tobacco field for the male employees housed in Camp C was the shortest but the most intense. The average pay for experienced tobacco pickers was $200 per week. In both Camp B and Camp C, workers were paid at a piecework rate that they compared disapprovingly with that of the incoming sweet potato season. As observed by the researcher during his weekend visits to the farmer-owned convenience store, workers cashed their checks there and many of them sent a sizeable amount of their earnings to their families and relatives. There were nonetheless strong individual variations in the amount involved in the remittances, these variations being clearly reflected in workers’ drinking habits. While workers from Camp A used a Western Union desk available in Walmart, most of the workers from Camps B and C approached the postal service in the farmer store to send up to half of their paycheck to their families in Mexico.

The greater extent of farmworkers’ cooperation in the tobacco fields compared with the relentless worker competition observed in the nursery and the cucumber field brings attention to a set of intriguing paradoxes concerning farmworkers’ behaviors and lifestyles. It would seem that the forced cooperation of tobacco pickers in the workplace created additional tensions leading to heavy drinking and to the fist fights frequently observed in Camp C. Competition among workers may after all represent a form of gambling and search for honor among powerless people. While in Camp C, for instance, the researcher learned about another nearby labor camp that only hired Haitian farmworkers. Only a relatively small group of tobacco pickers felt they had anything in common with the Haitian workers, for both this group and the Haitians were heavily engaged in cock fighting. Interestingly, the Haitians were generally feared among camp residents because of their alleged voodoo powers, and none of the
workers in Camp C dared to go alone to the cock fights taking place in the Haitian camp. Yet both the Haitian and the Camp C workers bet heavily on each occasion.

Gambling and the search for status and honor were common in all three camps, even if it took different forms. In Camp A, for instance, workers engaged in American sports such as basketball, volleyball, or softball despite their lack of skill in these sports. They would bet on their performances and required that losers buy Gatorade for the opposing team. Tractor drivers from Camp A engaged in gambling as to who could get done with his tractor list the fastest or which soccer team from their place of origin was the best. As one of them would say, “My whole life is a gamble; it is about taking the best chances and hope for the best.” This approach strongly suggests a fatalistic belief that their lives are in the hands of a higher power. Thus, they had the psychological need to feel reassured that, even though they might not be in control, the unseen power was on their side when betting. The researcher witnessed other highly competitive behaviors in the recreation activities of the workers in Camp B who picked cucumbers. The activities consisted of playing soccer, the most popular sport, and other pastimes such as fishing that were reserved for those owning a car. Some male workers even regarded themselves as “players” because of their fondness for prostitutes. In these activities, participant workers invariably saw themselves as defeating a real or imaginary opponent.

Throughout his stay in the three camps, the researcher faced an uphill struggle to blend in and be accepted as a regular worker. Despite his brown skin and “Mexican complexion,” the researcher’s sheer size and clumsiness in performing farmwork made it difficult to pass as an ordinary resident in any of the three camps. The researcher, for instance, was never invited to participate in any of the sports or events in Camps B or C, and felt only welcome as a player in the volleyball games in Camp A, chiefly because of his height. Further, it was the researcher’s awkward grammar or mistaken choice of terms in otherwise ordinary talk that betrayed him and revealed his un-Mexicanness. Someone in the circle of male residents would inevitably complain about his broken Spanish and call him “pocho,” a term widely used to designate Mexican Americans from the borderlands with a slightly corrupted Spanish. The researcher was painfully aware that his obvious blunders and lack of speed and dexterity in performing farmwork were a frequent source of disbelief and amusement among the most respected veteran workers, some of them in their late 50s, who displayed amazing strength, agility, and endurance on the fields. As a result, the status of the researcher, and the social privileges associated with it, never went beyond that of a newcomer, slightly above the older men and the Guatemalan workers, and yet clearly below that of the crew leaders and the faster pickers.
The Farmworking Families

Observing the farmworking families in the camps was a more demanding task for the researcher as a result of the mixture of detachment and vigilance that characterized attitudes toward all solitary male workers. There was only a narrow range of opportunities available for him to observe the various groups of families in the labor camps, their daily routines, and the family life and adaptation in each camp. Because of these limitations, our approach in this section focuses on some of the observed routines, how these routines were related to the ties developed by the families through daily interaction, and a few unusual episodes that illustrate tensions within established relationships. We describe in particular the intra-family cooperative practices observed by the researcher and how these practices favored clan-like behaviors with few horizontal ties being formed beyond the extended structure of the family. Further, we show that family contacts with the male workers in all three camps were largely involuntary. Indeed, wherever the contacts were more frequent, they were more likely to become a source of friction and tensions for the entire family, with a negative impact on their weakest members, in particular women and children. Needless to say, the section delves into the striking contrast between the cooperative behavior within the farmworking family and the behavior of the male family members who interacted with the predominantly male workforce on the basis of the same competitive behaviors as well as the same obsession for the search for status and honor that were pervasive in all three camps.

The families in the labor camps were split into two distinctive groups: one group included the families of labor contractors and crew leaders, and the second, larger group was made up of ordinary farmworking families. The families of the labor contractors were from the Mexican state of Jalisco, like the large majority of the workforce recruited in the three camps. Yet these families had many years of residency in the United States, were lodged in farmer-owned trailers, had their own trucks, and could speak some English. While both the labor contractors and crew leaders made every effort to keep fully engaged in camp life and in continuous contact with all the male workers, their own families remained withdrawn from the campsite. Moreover, in their attitudes toward the farmworking families, crew leaders’ families assumed their higher status and frequently snubbed them, keeping contacts to a bare minimum. Yet, all the families on the camps shared analogous cultural preferences and tastes, for they would listen to the same Mexican melodies and prepare and eat similar Mexican food.

All ordinary farmworking families, with the exception of the three Texan families and one family from Florida in Camp A, were extended Mexican families with many years of residency in the United States, most of them with
U.S.-born children. While farmworking families formed a distinctive group in all camps, there were differences among them concerning status and ties with the predominantly male workforce. The differences were more pronounced the closer the relationship with the farmer and the greater the level of autonomy that the separate location of living quarters and car ownership granted them. The farmer-owned lodging made available to each family was frequently, but not invariably, the most conspicuous marker of its higher status relative to the male workers. In Camp B, for instance, all ordinary farmworking families were scattered throughout the two main buildings of the camp that they shared with about 50 male workers, whereas families in Camp A and Camp C were typically housed in either a separate pavilion or in farmer-owned mobile homes. In most cases, the mobile homes were parked in a separate area of the labor camp or, in the case of Camp A, in a trailer park a 10-minute driving distance from the camp.

The researcher observed farmworking families’ efforts to deal directly with the farmer and to minimize their contacts with both the labor contractors and the male workers. In Camp A there was a large group of nine extended farmworking families, many of them with run-down automobiles. Four families were either from Texas or Florida, the others from the Mexican states of Chiapas, Veracruz, and Jalisco. The larger group of families of Mexican origin had years of residency in the United States. Four of these families lived in trailers owned by the farmer in a separate location only to be seen when the bus took a 10-minute detour to pick up a few riders, all of them male workers, before heading toward the nursery. The routines of the extended Mexican farmworking families in Camp B were, by contrast, visible to the researcher as they had no separate living quarters and had to share the kitchen and do their laundry in a common area also used by the male workers. One of these families did not own a car and was therefore forced to depend on the labor contractor and crew leaders to a larger extent than the families who could rely on their own cars as a means of transportation. In Camp C, five extended families were lodged in mobile homes in another section of the camp, close to the farmer’s home. Two of these families, despite having their own cars, were like the other male farmworkers in the camp under the direct command of the labor contractor. In all cases, trailer residents’ interactions with other workers were limited to members of the same gender even if it included sports and other recreational activities in the weekends.

For farmworking families, owning a car, no matter how old or in need of repairs, was not only a means of transportation, but also a powerful status symbol. Family members with a car were treated with deference by other workers, who would address them as “Don” or “Dona.” However, any family not owning a car could find itself in serious distress. In Camp B, for instance, the researcher could hear almost every evening a heated family dispute taking place in a
neighboring room about money matters and the husband’s inclination to spend the family resources on drinking. Conversely, farmworkers with cars were highly regarded by their peers in the camp, as they became an alternative to the more expensive transportation provided by labor contractors. Yet, car ownership could itself become very addictive, because some owners would go to extremes in order to fix any serious malfunctioning of their cars, such as the engine or the brakes. If unable to repair the car on their own, they would seek assistance or advice only from other car owners and spend whatever time necessary to fix it. In one case, a car owner stopped going to work for several days for fear of losing face if seen riding the bus.

Despite his limited access to the families who lived in the mobile homes, the researcher became increasingly aware of the wisdom of keeping women and children at arms’ length from the male workers. In Camp B, for instance, farmworking families had priority as first users of the shared kitchen facilities, and women typically were earlier in the morning to cook, at times not only for their families but also to earn some additional income by preparing food for other male workers. Yet, on one occasion, also in Camp B, the researcher witnessed how a husband remained seemingly indifferent to the challenges faced by his wife when washing the family clothes and taking care of her two small children under a continuous attack of mosquitoes. The researcher was initially puzzled by the husband’s harsh words to his wife, whom he depicted as “unusually slow” in doing the chores after both of them had been picking cucumbers in the field. On close inspection, however, the husband’s tyrannical attitude was a typical macho display in front of the other male workers in accordance with culturally shared assumptions on his appropriate masculine role as head of the household. Clearly, the husband felt ashamed by the public perception of his obligation of taking care of his own children as a way of helping his distressed wife. These socially awkward feelings to males’ occasional need to do some feminine work were in stark contrast with the chivalry invariably shown by male farmworkers picking cucumbers in the fields, when female workers doing masculine work were treated with an unusual degree of courtesy by their male counterparts. The combination of lack of privacy and culturally enforced rigid gender roles added to family tensions and could eventually become a burden on farmworking families who felt forced to conform to stereotypical behaviors against themselves.

Compared to male farmworkers, extended families had more effective short-term strategies to maximize earnings, were more likely to own a car, and faced a more difficult relationship with the labor contractor. In Camp B, for instance, the families were the fastest pickers given the specific tasks each member was assigned in accordance to his or her abilities. The mother and the younger children would only pick the cucumbers and fill the bucket, whereas the father and older siblings were in charge of carrying the buckets to the
Yet, the labor contractor was concerned with the possibility of the farmer getting in direct contact with these families as their higher productivity and U.S.-born children could entice the farmer to hire them directly and thus undermine the labor contracting system. Matters could worsen for the labor contractor if he failed to pay attention to the complaints of the families concerning the behavior of the group of male workers, who engaged in fights and heavy drinking and patronized prostitutes. From the perspective of the Spanish-speaking families, overcoming the language barrier was the most serious impediment in gaining the farmer’s confidence and doing away with the labor contractor.

Unsurprisingly, farmworking families’ efforts to relate themselves to the farmer and do away with the labor contractor encountered the most resolute resistance by the latter. For the labor contractor, every new contact between a farmworker or members of his family and the farmer was a way of undermining his role as a middleman between the Spanish-speaking workers and the English-speaking farmer. While picking cucumbers during his stay in Camp B, for instance, the researcher observed a working 12-year-old boy walking up to the farmer in a timid manner and initiating a conversation that eventually led to laughter. Other farmworkers stopped picking while they witnessed the unusual exchange between the boy and the farmer. As the farmer was patting the boy on the shoulder, the labor contractor hastily emerged from the distance to interrupt the conversation. The boy felt compelled to excuse himself in the presence of the two adults and return to work. By continuously meddling, the labor contractor ensured that he remained in control of the vertical ties he had created as a middleman between the farmer and the farmworking families.

By contrast with the families in Camp A, the farmworking families in Camps B and C were less successful in ensuring their autonomy with respect to the labor contractor. The need for relocation to other camps, for instance, increased deportation risks forcing the families without legal residency in the United States into a greater degree of dependence on the labor contractor than they might wish. As one of the male co-workers in Camp B explained to the researcher, everyone—including the families—wanted to keep a low profile and this was no longer possible at the time of relocation. Once the incoming sweet potato season came to an end, the researcher was told, the labor contractor would provide bus transportation to all male workers and families without cars to the tomato fields in Florida. Thus, the relocation process, if undertaken under the guidance of the labor contractor, reinforced the vertical ties that families would otherwise want to sever because they were widely regarded as more beneficial to the contractor than to the workers. As deportation risks escalate with relocation, even those farmworking families with cars felt it advisable to join the convoy formed by the buses and trucks of the contractor and crew leaders.
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Farmworking families’ uphill struggles for greater autonomy in the camps have become one of the major obstacles for the formation of a closely knit farmworkers’ community. While farmworking families remained isolated from, and shunned by, the contractors’ and crew leaders’ families, both groups of families also kept contacts with the male workforce to a bare minimum. Further, the numerical inferiority of farmworking families compared to the larger crowd of solitary male farmworkers defined the process of adaptation and contacts with the male workers in the same narrow competitive terms developed by the latter. Farmworking families realized that, however difficult their contacts with the farmer, it was not to their advantage to be pulled together along with the larger male workforce. Families, therefore, had every reason to seek ways of developing ties to the farmer that would ensure their future recruitment independently from the labor contractor. By the same token, they also had little inclination to develop ties that would likely become more useful for the male workers than for the families themselves. As a result, families became one among many distinctive groups of farmworkers recruited by labor contractors on the basis of their reliability, higher productivity, and little inclination to develop ties with other groups.

Conclusions

We have argued that migrant farmworkers’ networks in the United States assist them in their job seeking and underemployment minimization goals, but these same networks ultimately become employers’ recruitment and controlling devices. We have also contended that, throughout the relocation process, the orientation of farmworkers’ network ties becomes increasingly hierarchical while the lateral ties formed in the labor camps remain transient, fragmented and largely ineffective in maximizing workers’ earnings. The fragmentation of farmworkers’ networks contradicts the widely held assumption of social capital theorists on the timely access to community resources by network membership (see, for example, Aguilera 2005; Aguilera and Massey 2003; Antoninis 2006). Yet, the reasons for farmworkers’ impaired access to network resources should not be sought in a physical shortage of the resources; this access is restricted because of the clandestine nature of their work in a shifting workplace with a recurring need for extralegal arrangements for relocation, transportation, and housing. Thus, it is the antagonism of the host society, rather than farmworkers’ unwillingness to develop lateral ties beyond the labor camps, that compels them into a growing degree of cultural and physical isolation. As farmworkers lead increasingly nomadic, secluded, and compartmentalized lives, their networks also become increasingly transient and fragmented as many of their potentially more valuable ties are no longer searchable (see, for example, Watts 2004). While much of the literature takes for granted networks’ searchability, our
research suggests that farmworkers’ shifting workplace and continued physical and institutional isolation entail a decreasing access to communitywide resources and make horizontal ties beyond the campsite increasingly irrelevant for the workers.

Farmworkers’ institutional isolation in a clandestine occupation has other effects on network formation and ethnic solidarity. As shown in the research, the network ties formed in the labor camps lack multiplexity because workers are simultaneously residents with shared leisure, sports, and pastime activities performed in or around the campsite. Thus, by contrast with migrants’ adjustment in urban settings, farmworkers’ interaction with co-ethnics and native residents in other occupations is the more unusual the longer they are committed to farmwork. The opportunities for ethnic solidarity and reciprocity also decrease accordingly. Yet, this isolation intensifies their antiassimilation bias. Further, the insularity of farmwork as an occupation makes it impractical and difficult for any attempt to shift to other better-paying options. It is therefore the lack of network multiplexity and growing insularity of farmwork as an occupation which becomes a strong inducement for the development of short-term goals and expectations.

Our research provides additional evidence on the detrimental effects that an increasingly fragmented and transient network structure has on migrants’ long-term adjustment. As shown in Menjivar’s (2000) account of the travails of Salvadoran migrants in San Francisco, migrants relying on fragmented networks may have little choice but to develop short-term survival strategies. In the case of farmworkers, it is the shifting location of their workplaces, rather than the scarcity of material resources per se, which makes it impractical to develop ties beyond the campsite and compels workers to cultivate vertical ties with the labor contractor. In contrast to the urban setting described by Menjivar, where migrant workers’ networks are fully searchable, the network ties developed by farmworkers beyond the campsite are not only increasingly transient and fragmented, but also underutilized. Thus, farmworkers’ social capital is toponomical because their access to network resources deteriorates as a result of prevailing adverse physical, legal, and institutional constraints. This deterioration is also conducive to the farmworker’s search for a self-interested relationship with the labor contractor, who remains the only credible figure capable of ensuring not only a higher degree of co-worker deference, but also a flow of work assignments consistent with underemployment minimization goals. Clearly, the temporary nature of the campsite and the farmworkers’ physical, cultural, and institutional insularity inhibit the formation of an actual community either inside or beyond the campsite. This makes them vulnerable to exploitative relationships.

The ethnographic evidence shows how farmworkers’ deportability and cultural isolation contribute to strengthening the vertical ties controlled by the
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labor contractor. Even the more assimilated Camp A workers who could produce legal documentation at the time of hiring felt culturally and psychologically isolated and were reluctant to venture alone at night to stores located only a short walking distance away in a hostile neighborhood. Further, as evidence from Camps B and C suggests, it is in the more secluded and physically isolated campsites that the price of minimizing deportation anxieties comes in the form of appalling living and working conditions. While farmworkers often feel reassured by the protective mantle of their shared language and cultural identity, the evidence also shows that the likelihood of exploitative relationships increases with the use of transportation provided by the labor contractor. Yet, overcoming isolation and dependency on the labor contractor is difficult even for the farmworkers who own cars but lack basic English-speaking skills. Further, their cultural and physical isolation only ensures a rather shaky form of co-worker identity that paradoxically becomes, as pointed out by Portes and Sesenbrenner (1993), the basis for strong downward leveling pressures and a shared distrust for the values and expectations of the host society.

The research also indicates that, however transient and fragmented, the ties formed in the labor camps remain the basis for an extensive mobilization and competition for symbolic resources. This description of network horizontal ties as vehicles for symbolic exchanges is consistent with Fernandez-Kelly’s (1995) depiction of networks in the urban ghetto, where powerlessness induces membership to assess success in symbolic, rather than in narrow economic, terms. The research suggests therefore that it is both farmworkers’ cultural and physical insularity and the lack of economically relevant horizontal ties that compels them to compete for the limited material and symbolic resources available to them. These resources range from access to transportation to ethnic affiliation and preferential ties to labor contractors that help them ensure temporary jobs. Some of this competition takes place along ethnic lines, with groups as diverse as Spanish-speaking Mexican males, Tex-Mex-speaking South Texan families, Maya-speaking Guatemalan males, and French-Creole-speaking Haitian males seizing the opportunities available in the camps. Yet, there are scant economic advantages to the farmworkers who are seemingly ahead. Mexican workers from the state of Jalisco, for instance, may regard themselves as better off than the small Guatemalan group of co-workers in Camp B, but both groups were subject to the same exploitative treatment by the Jalisco-native labor contractor. Even car ownership yields few tangible advantages for undocumented farmworkers, since owning a car may be a powerful status symbol but does not eliminate farmworkers’ dependence on the labor contractor. This dependence becomes prominent at the time of relocation, as once farmworkers feel reassured on a suitable picking itinerary, they have good reasons to get along with the labor contractor despite the vertical orientation and exploitative nature of
existing network ties. The more isolated the migrant workforce, the more likely is that it gives priority to the minimization of deportation and underemployment risks. It is therefore the devastating legal uncertainty of developing alternative ties for seeking better-paying jobs outside the campsite which prevents farmworkers’ networks from functioning in a regular labor market. Rather than being a result of the farmworkers’ inability to improve network ties, acceptance of exploitative relationships is a result of deportation fears, efforts to reduce underemployment risks, and the overwhelming need to minimize the anxieties created by these legal and economic uncertainties.

Deportation anxieties further contribute to farmworkers’ isolation, lack of searchable network ties, competitive behaviors, and the strengthening of the vertical orientation of their network ties to the ultimate advantage of labor contractors. As observed in all three camps, it is the labor contractor who undertakes the most vigorous efforts to prevent the formation of farmworkers’ horizontal ties by intervening every time workers from different labor camps talk to each other in the town store or elsewhere. Clearly, the presence of various and easily controllable farmworking groups in the camps is in the long-term interest of the labor contractor. The group of solitary male farmworkers, for instance, seemed to believe that they had some flexibility concerning their migration and relocation choices, but almost invariably felt forced to seek direct ties with a labor contractor of the same ethnic group. For them, a contractor speaking the same language and coming from the same region of Mexico provides some reassurance and the bonds created by heritage and custom meet their emotional needs in an otherwise unmanageable environment. Male job seekers’ anxieties are lowered by the paternalistic ties, cultural bonds, and seemingly unlimited self-confidence of labor contractors, and regard these ties as useful and trustworthy as long as they ensure the continuity of their remittances that constitute the only reason for taking the jobs offered to them. Given their high deportation anxieties at the time of relocation, solitary male farmworkers feel reassured that their close ties to the contractor also make them less vulnerable to the animosity of the host society.

Farmworking families, by contrast, are less likely to harbor any illusions about their relocation choices. Indeed, despite shared deportation anxieties and cultural isolation alongside the shifting crowd of male workers, ordinary farmworking families are likely to face, over time, divided commitments among its members, as the new generation of U.S.-born children becomes aware of the opportunities outside the campsite. Cultural isolation, as pointed out by Roberts (1995; see also Portes 1995), may certainly delay, but not bring to an end, the adoption of a new identity by the U.S.-born children of migrant workers. Farmworking families’ growing ambivalence to the host society is further complicated by their reluctance to develop ties with the larger group of solitary males
whose families are beyond reach and therefore useless for developing shared long-term commitments. Thus, while farmworking families’ extensive reliance on child and female labor has increased their output on the fields and ensured them uncontested supremacy in their struggle for status and recognition, their experience and economic goals differ considerably from those of the larger group of male farmworkers. Further, despite the fact that the families residing in the camps may have come to take for granted the presence of these men, their faces often vary from the earlier season.

As observed in the research, none of the three labor camps ever developed as an actual community. Despite sharing a common language and similar ethnic identities, the large crowd of solitary male farmworkers, the extended families, and the labor contractors and their assistants were all in pursuit of different goals and survival strategies. Further, despite the fact that some of these goals may indeed be compatible and become the basis for cooperation beyond work in the fields, the camp residents’ own view of the workplace as temporary undermined the formation of long-term communitywide ties. The camps therefore became transient repositories of overlapping survival strategies with success being continuously assessed in highly competitive terms. Under such conditions, farmworkers could only prove their worth by engaging in a seemingly endless search for status and recognition, and by showing their frustration in self-destructive but socially acceptable behaviors, such as gambling and heavy drinking.

However, the lack of community and farmworkers’ seemingly unproductive obsession with competitive behaviors was in striking contrast with evidence showing them as caring people willing to assist those in need. The examples of co-worker solidarity in the case of learning how to properly pick cucumbers and the researcher’s tobacco poisoning clearly illustrate this point. As a result, the analyst should be careful in not reversing the causal relationship. The portion of male workers’ paychecks sent to their families certainly varied greatly depending on drinking and gambling habits. In a search for status and honor, competition, gambling, and drinking emerges as a consequence of powerlessness and depressed living and working conditions rather than the cause of their troubles. Further, the migrant farmworkers’ cycle of exploitation and powerlessness has taken place in a highly unfavorable political and institutional context that has ensured the invisibility of their plight in the eyes of the American public.

ENDNOTES

*An earlier version of this paper was presented in the 2005 Meeting of the American Sociological Association in Philadelphia. We are grateful to our anonymous referees, who provided sharp criticism and valuable suggestions that helped us improve the structure of our argument.
Initially the focus of the field research was on the interaction of migrant farmworkers and smugglers (or coyotes) along the U.S.-Mexican border. Yet, the lengthy process of getting the approval by the Internal Review Board (IRB) for human subjects research yielded an unexpected outcome. The research was not authorized on grounds of being “too dangerous” for the researcher. We learned about this decision in May 2004 and decided not to include the coyotes but to focus on the working and living conditions of farmworkers through a contact the on-site researcher had in North Carolina. Since it was already late in the picking season, the on-site researcher began at once with the field research rather than having to postpone it for another year while waiting for the new IRB approval.

REFERENCES


