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‘Mama’s family’
Fictive kinship and undocumented immigrant restaurant workers

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ABSTRACT
Undocumented workers create social cohesion, which serves as a source of solidarity and identification for individuals who are otherwise pushed to the periphery by the dominant society. This article is based on a larger study examining the personal, social, and working lives of undocumented restaurant workers using an ethnographic approach in conjunction with the life history method. Based on observation of their day-to-day interactions in the restaurant and in conversations, this article discusses the ‘family’ or fictive kin relationship they establish with their co-workers and their employer. Despite their illegal status and low earnings, this group of undocumented workers is able to maintain their dignity, find ways of bringing joy to their lives, and attain a sense of belonging. Integration into the restaurant’s pseudo-family averts feelings of frustration and loneliness that are often the consequences of marginalization.

KEY WORDS
ethnography, undocumented workers, immigrants, life history, fictive kinship

Undocumented immigrants ‘live in the shadows’ as they run the risk of incarceration and deportation and suffer discrimination because they do not have legal residency in the United States. Scholars such as Douglas Massey, Leo Chavez, and Jeffrey Passel have offered important correctives to preva-
lent misrepresentations of ‘illegal aliens’ (Chavez, 1992; Massey et al., 2002; Passel, 2006; Pew Hispanic Center, 2007). However, negative stereotypes persist and have real effects on their lives. Undocumented immigrants are marginalized on multiple levels and pushed to society’s peripheries. They have limited access to social services and little redress when their basic human rights are violated. Their precarious standing jeopardizes their economic stability, health, social integration, and overall well-being.

Undocumented workers take on casual, low-paid, and onerous jobs in construction, factory labor, farm labor, landscaping, house cleaning, and restaurant work. Without ‘green cards’ that allow them to work legally, they have relatively few job opportunities; only employers who are willing to violate federal labor laws hire them. Agreements governing wages, hours, and conditions of work are informal, created with the best interests of the employer in mind, and employees have nowhere to bring their grievances. Hiring undocumented workers enables employers to exploit their employees.

Yet, in some situations, the employer and the undocumented workers coexist in interdependence. The article explores relationships among four workers and their employer at Mama’s, a Korean-Japanese restaurant located near a college campus in the northeast. Mama, a middle-aged Korean woman who self-invoked the name and title of ‘Mama’, is the owner of the Asian restaurant. In this medium-sized diner with a sizeable clientele, four adult male workers along with Mama enjoy a close-knit, family-like setting. Their fictive kin relationship developed when the workforce at the restaurant was stable. Indeed, the family metaphor and the behavior it promotes helps to stabilize the situation for undocumented workers by reconciling what might otherwise be conflicting interests between employer and employees and by promoting camaraderie among employees. At the restaurant, the workers are able to step away from the prejudice and threats they may face outside. Here, they are welcomed as family. They not only receive a steady paycheck but also are cared for with concern. Mama, who is a widow, enjoys playing the part of mother to these men, whose own families are far away. Her restaurant family suits her and gives meaning to her life, as she feels needed by her staff. According to Mama, the restaurant simply could not go on without her. From preparing the base for all the meals to giving practical advice to her workers, Mama asserts that she is the embodiment of motherhood. Mutual interdependence serves all the characters at Mama’s restaurant.

The fictive family that is created within the restaurant is fragile because these relationships are founded on the workers’ shared marginality and on the mutual interests of employer and employees. It is also temporary; these bonds do not have the same strength that kinship does. Still, the longevity of these workers at Mama’s is remarkable.
This article offers an ethnographic description of the restaurant and explores how, despite their illegal status and low wages, this group of undocumented immigrants has been able to maintain their dignity, find camaraderie, bring joy to their lives, and establish a self-concept that is not demeaning. Integration into the restaurant’s pseudo-family inhibits the feelings of loneliness and frustration that are often the consequences of marginalization. First, I explain how I was able to gain access to the restaurant and become included in the ‘family’. I describe the restaurant as an environment that mixes work with sociability. Then, life histories of two of the four workers at the restaurant help place their work experience in context. Next, I discuss the tactics that Mama uses as a business owner who hires undocumented workers. Finally, I conclude by analyzing the social integration of these workers through the fictive kin relationship.

**Mama’s place**

I began this fieldwork by randomly dropping into the restaurant unannounced. My relationship with Mama blossomed as I shared bits and pieces of my own immigrant story, growing up with Korean parents who worked long hours to make a better life for our family. Sharing my stories prompted her to share her experiences as an immigrant and a business owner. During times when the restaurant was empty or business was slow, I joined the others in watching TV, teasing one another, or playing board games. Engaging in their everyday activities allowed me to ask the workers about their families, their reasons for wanting to come to the US, and how they spend their time when not at work. To ask these personal questions, I had to gain their trust, which occurred gradually over many months. Most important was working alongside them. On busier weekend nights, I volunteered to help with serving customers, taking orders, and clearing tables. In order not to incite any concern from Mama that I might threaten her finances, I did not disturb the money left as tips. I realized that I had gained Mama’s trust when she taught me how to operate the credit card machine and the cash register. I watched and imitated other employees in their duties so that I did not need explicit instructions on how to do the work as Mama liked it done. Soon enough, my presence and volunteer efforts were welcomed and became expected.

The restaurant has 16 tables that seat approximately 64 people. There is a sushi bar on the left side of the restaurant and another bar perpendicular to it towards the back of the room where servers can place drink orders for customers. Workers usually stand at the back bar in between serving customers. The large kitchen is crowded with a metal table in the middle, two double-door refrigerators, a three-foot metal sink, and two gas stoves.
Through this kitchen is an open storage space where a walk-in refrigerator and a tall freezer are located. There are also two long wooden tables against the walls. Here during the restaurant’s slow times, the workers often engage in friendly yet competitive games of baseball with a small piece of carrot and a large wooden stick.

On a typical day at the restaurant, the servers listen keenly for the rattle of the first set of entrance doors, which signals that customers are arriving. Before the second set of doors opens, one of the servers walks to the front with menus in hand. With a monotonic greeting, ‘Hello, how many?’ the server leads the customers to their seats. Soon he returns with ice water for the customers while they peruse the eight-page menu. The server then goes directly to the kitchen where the cook and dishwasher wait to prepare the order. The workers engage briefly, with silly jokes as they playfully punch each other to see who is stronger. They make childish bets. ‘Five dollars if you can rip the phone book in half. [In] three minute.’ He who accepts the dare replies, ‘After I take order.’ The server goes back out, casually but professionally takes the customers’ orders, and returns to the back kitchen to begin his dare. This mixture of work and social interaction pervades daily life at the restaurant.

The workers begin each day by wiping down tables; setting up the utensils, a pair of wooden chopsticks and a spoon; vacuuming the carpet; stocking up and refilling the tubs of side dishes and the assortment of sauces; making traditional Asian corn tea; and cutting up carrots into flower shapes to use as garnish. Before 11 a.m., they eat a big, hearty meal that must carry them through the lunchtime rush hours. For their second meal, Mama and her employees wait patiently for the entire restaurant to be cleared of customers. When the last lunchtime customer leaves, the workers’ second meal is elaborately prepared. The workers push two tables together and slowly stack up the used plates, cups, and utensils. Mama makes a gesture to help, which only incites the workers to clean up faster. They grunt at her and tell her to leave it for them to handle. After their meal, depending on the flow of customers for the day, the workers gather along with Mama around the sectional sofa in front of the back bar. Until customers walk in, everyone sits in a comfortable silence either watching TV or surfing the Internet on Mama’s laptop. After the evening rush of customers, a fully prepared meal awaits for the restaurant family’s third meal of the day. It is not until this final meal is eaten together that the workers leave for home.

Placing workers’ lives in context

In order to comprehend and represent people as they live their lives, we must understand the context of the situations through which they navigate.
I use life histories, which allow my subjects to speak for themselves about who they are and how working at the restaurant fits into their lives. In interpreting their stories, I explore how they make sense of the world and how they meet everyday demands. This method allows me to portray these restaurant workers as individuals rather than as ‘illegal aliens’. During the first nine months of my fieldwork, four workers were employed full time: Alejandro, who cooked, and Karl, Jay, and Johnny, who were servers. The stories of two of the longer-term workers at Mama’s suggest the diversity of experiences, as well as the common needs, that brought them to restaurant work.

Alejandro’s story

Alejandro is a 21-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico. Before successfully crossing the border, he had made two previous attempts. On his first try, he was just 16. He recounts that he had already walked for eight hours before being stopped by a ‘white man in uniform’. The border patrol officer did not ask any questions but escorted him to Tijuana. He was frightened, since he comes from a small town closer to the border with Arizona and considers Tijuana a dangerous city; indeed, it seems a foreign place to most Mexicans. Conscious that the border patrolman ‘was still watching me’, Alejandro walked far enough until he felt he was no longer visible. He spent that night in Tijuana and the following morning boldly walked back to the border. Stopped by a patrolman once again, Alejandro did not give up and on his third attempt safely crossed the border to the other side.

Alejandro claims that even if it had taken him four or five attempts he would have tried over and over again. His bags were already packed, and with a bottle of water in hand he was prepared to make the two-day journey across the border. It took another five days before he finally reached his destination in the northeastern US where his aunt lives. His ‘auntie’ is a formerly undocumented immigrant who, many years before, paid a young man to marry her to gain US citizenship. Now she has a white boyfriend who is nine years younger than her and owns a small house where Alejandro and his older brother rent a room.

Alejandro has two brothers. The younger one, who is 19, lives in Mexico and is married with a daughter. His older brother, whom everyone calls Rambo, crossed the border last year and now works at a nearby Indian restaurant. Rambo has a wife in Mexico. Every night Rambo walks over to Mama’s restaurant after work and sits patiently outside waiting for Alejandro to finish up. Then the two walk to their auntie’s house, where they each pay $300 for a room they share.

Alejandro first walked into Mama’s restaurant when he was 16 years old, making this his fifth year with Mama. Previously he worked at an
Italian restaurant as a dishwasher and an assistant to the cook, who is also undocumented. When the cook felt that his position was threatened by Alejandro, he began to treat him harshly, which eventually drove Alejandro to quit. In his search for a new job, Alejandro went from restaurant to restaurant throughout the city until he was offered a position at Mama’s. Mama declares that she was able to tell immediately that Alejandro was a nice and innocent person. ‘He was just a kid’, she says, fondly reminiscing; ‘he couldn’t even grow a real moustache – just a little fuzz. He lied that he was 18, but I could tell he was younger’. At that time, Mama had been using a Chinese cook who, she explained, made everything taste like Chinese food. She claims that Mexican cooks are better because they have no idea what specific Asian dishes are supposed to taste like. Since they only eat ‘meat, beans, and tortilla’, Mexicans’ taste buds are not tainted by the assortment of spices that Asians use, so they are better at remembering and imitating specific Asian dishes.

At the restaurant, Mama prepares the base for all the dishes. She marinates all the fish and meat, makes gallons of fish broth for the soup dishes, and prepares all the side dishes that come with every meal. Alejandro’s job is to cook the prepared food and add the appropriate ingredients for the dishes when the customers place their orders. For the soup dishes, however, Alejandro scoops a spoonful and adjusts it to taste. As Mama sees it, this step is where being Mexican rather than Asian comes in handy.

As the only cook at this restaurant, Alejandro receives $500 per week, which amounts to about $6.94 per hour not including overtime. With this wage, Alejandro is able to pay for his minimal living expenses and send the rest back to Mexico. He has already purchased a house for his parents, as well as another house and a car for when he returns home. He proudly wears a long heavy gold chain with a large cross that he says cost $700; he has two others hidden safely at home.

When asked about his future plans, Alejandro says that undoubtedly he will return to Mexico and open some kind of restaurant. When I suggest that he open one for American tourists because he speaks English, he replies, ‘No, I don’t like American people. Gonna make food for Mexicans.’ Alejandro planned to keep working at the restaurant until he felt financially prepared to go back and open his own restaurant.

Karl’s story

Karl is a 23-year-old biracial undocumented immigrant from Thailand. While Karl’s father, who is German, was in Thailand for business reasons, he married Karl’s mother, and the two had three children. Karl’s sister is 17, and his baby brother is four. About three years ago, his father passed away, leaving Karl with the responsibility of taking care of the family.
Unfortunately, Karl’s mother does not receive any support from his father’s relatives because they do not acknowledge her as part of the family. So Karl applied for a temporary tourist visa and made the bold decision to come to the US to work so he could send money to his family and his girlfriend in Thailand.

When Karl arrived at the Los Angeles International Airport, his late father’s brother picked him up and took him to Las Vegas where Karl’s father’s family resides. Although Karl’s grandmother refused to help out his mother, she was willing to take in her grandson to help him make a living in the US. After working for about two months at his grandmother’s large restaurant in Las Vegas, however, Karl moved to the East Coast to be on his own. Karl felt that if he kept working for his grandmother he would not be able to learn to be an adult. He later explained that, since he had arrived on the West Coast, he feared that US immigration authorities would catch and deport him for having overstayed his temporary visa; he felt that being on the East Coast would be safer.

Karl and his girlfriend have been friends since they were young children. Although they have no plans to get married, Karl contributes to the cost of his girlfriend’s college tuition. They talk on the phone at least once a day, at a time coordinated around the time difference, his work, and her school schedule. Usually their conversations do not last for more than 10 minutes. Karl says, ‘What’s important is that I hear her voice. Just see what’s going on.’ On a wall calendar in the kitchen of the restaurant, Karl draws either a happy face or a sad face over each date, depending on whether or not he and his girlfriend get into an argument. The days are filled with happy faces, except for one or two angry or sad faces each month. This record also communicates to the others at the restaurant how he is feeling that day: when there is a sad face, Mama and his co-workers know not to bother him.

Karl has a set of keys to the restaurant and sometimes goes in on Mondays when it is closed to use the computer or the phone. He treats Mama with care and concern, often sharing in Mama’s worries when the business is slow. During a summer month when there were no customers, Karl refused half his salary from Mama and told her that she could pay him when business picked up again. A very quick and efficient server, Karl is Mama’s favorite. He receives $525 per week. Mama has a separate savings fund for him for when he returns to Thailand and treats him with special attention. For instance, at Mama’s daughter’s wedding, Mama’s son walked his sister down the aisle, while Karl, with his right arm tightly linked around hers, walked Mama down the aisle. For the special day, Mama purchased three custom-tailored Italian suits: one for her son, one for her new son-in-law, and one for Karl.

Karl, like Alejandro, says that in the future he will return home and open a restaurant with his sister. Although his initial plan was to stay for about
a year, 2008 is his third year in the US. He has no definite plans to return to Thailand anytime soon.

Why Mama hires undocumented employees

Mama argues that it is impossible to make any profit in the private restaurant business when workers are paid the wages that are legally required or when workers with green cards or US citizenship are hired.

Do you know how much kalbi [short ribs] is? Bean sprouts, lettuce, spinach. Everything is going up. Last week spinach was $20 for the same size bag and this week it’s $35! There’s no way I can afford paying hourly wages. Look at this (pointing to the empty restaurant), most of the time it’s this slow. I let them [the workers] sit around and relax. Sometimes it’s like this for hours. I can’t pay for that. But they can sit like this and not work. I don’t make them work when there’s no customers so it doesn’t make sense to pay hourly.

Mama argues that, between rising food costs and the failing economy, it would be impossible to make a profit after paying the proper amount in employee wages and taxes. In saying that her employees are free to relax when there are no customers, she implies that paying the minimum wage on an hourly basis would mean paying employees for not working. If she hired legal workers, Mama would not be able to construct a salary schedule that excludes overtime pay and ignores the minimum wage.

Mama states that one of the reasons she hires undocumented workers is that she is able to create a favorable and profitable situation both for herself and for her employees.

I used to have this international student and she always complained and talked about how much she’s supposed to make. She was nice, but I could tell she was going to give me a headache. I’ve used all sorts of people, black, Mexican, Chinese. The only ones who don’t complain are the ones without visas because they have to make money. I tell them how I pay and they can decide to take the job or not. And they don’t complain. And it’s better for them too because it’s steady. I pay them every Sunday without fail and they appreciate that so they stay. They don’t ask for vacations or days off because they need the work and I need consistent people.

Over the years, Mama has developed strategies for hiring and retaining employees. She carefully gauges how desperately the job-seeker needs money. She is wary about hiring workers who speak English ‘too well’, or inquire about break time or vacations; they might be too ‘demanding’. She
states that these characteristics are good indicators of who will be hard working rather than doing only the absolute minimum.

Mama has her own criteria for deciding who is suited for what job. When a job-seeker walks into the restaurant, she quickly scans the candidate. If they are Asian, they are automatically categorized as a potential server; if they are Hispanic, then they are potential kitchen workers. Mama explained her reasoning to me one day after a young man came in looking for a job. I recorded this interaction in fieldnotes:

A young Hispanic man of about 5’5” wearing dark blue jeans and a crisp white collared shirt walked in. Jay walked up to him to seat him, thinking that he was a customer. However, he returned to where Mama and I were sitting and said, ‘Mama, he looking for a job’. Mama quickly got up and walked to the front and talked to him. From afar, I watched her look at him and nod her head as the young man talked to her. Mama pulled out a small paper pad and signaled for him to write down his information. After this exchange the young man left the restaurant. Mama returned to her seat next to me and said that he was looking for a job. She said that a lot of people are being laid off right now because businesses are not doing well and employers are firing undocumented workers easily because there is nothing that binds them to any contract. ‘That’s why it’s sad. Because if they make one mistake they can get fired. Imagine how frustrating it must be for them. They come here thinking they can easily find a job and then lose it so easily even if you work so hard.’ I ask Mama what she thought of the guy who just walked in. She says, shaking her head, ‘I can’t hire him. He speaks English too well. He doesn’t have papers [visa] but speaking English that well and the way he was, I know he’s going to be trouble.’ When asked to elaborate, Mama simply stated that, as much as she feels bad for undocumented immigrants looking for jobs, she also has to look out for herself. If someone like him with an ‘attitude’ joins the restaurant staff, it may create disunity among the workers and disrupt the flow of the restaurant overall.

This incident reveals both Mama’s discriminatory mindset and her concern for maintaining smooth working relationships among her current employees who are all undocumented.

Mama is an astute employer and a shrewd businesswoman. She offers new workers a flat weekly wage with the potential to receive a raise when she feels that the worker is a good fit with the restaurant. Starting salaries are as low as $350, while experienced workers may earn up to $600 per week. Mama figures that a set sum, which does not include tips, is best both for her and for her workers, since they receive a steady income and she does not have to pay for the hours when there is no ‘work’ to do. She thinks that hiring undocumented workers is the only way that small businesses like hers can ‘survive’ and make ends meet.
Although Mama is aware of state and federal laws regarding employees’ wages, she shares with me stories that explicate the logic behind her decisions. For example, she says that her workers should be grateful that they are paid well compared to some other restaurants. She expresses pride in treating her workers well. ‘Where else will they be treated with respect? If they worked somewhere else, they won’t even be treated as human beings.’ In our conversations, the workers at the restaurant unanimously praise Mama’s benevolence and say they value the opportunities that working for her provides. As I observed during my first nine months at the restaurant, Mama treats her employees as if they were her own children. During shared meals, they sit around a common table set with napkins, silverware, and side dishes. At other restaurants I observed, workers are encouraged to eat quickly before the next surge of customers walk in.

The restaurant ‘family’

The co-workers at the restaurant have built strong relationships with one another. Even though they see one another at work during regular business hours from 10:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, they also hang out together on most Mondays when the restaurant is closed. On their days off, co-workers engage in various activities such as trying out different restaurants where they begin each meal with a celebratory cheer, ‘Happy Monday!’ They also take trips to the mall or supermarket to get groceries together. Since none has a car, they arrange by phone to meet at the bus stop and take public transportation to their destination.

The restaurant family celebrates everyone’s birthday. They make or buy cakes or pastries and exchange gifts for this special occasion. For one of Mama’s birthdays, the workers offered to paint the house she had recently purchased. Although at first glance this volunteer effort could be mistaken as a form of exploitation, the workers made this decision independently and considered painting her house not only a decent gift but also an enjoyable activity for themselves.

These restaurant workers, unlike some undocumented immigrants, do not express any deep or debilitating concern about their immigration status. Being ‘illegal’ – as they call themselves – is discussed light-heartedly, and the term is thrown around as they joke about not having any ‘papers’. Their evident lack of fear led me to wonder how the employees at Mama’s were able to feel confident, rather than threatened, amid the increasingly hostile climate toward unauthorized immigration in the US.

Although weekly earnings are low, payments are stable and consistent, which contributes to their comfort with the situation. Workers can save much of their income because they share living costs with housemates.
They do not have to pay for food on work days, or participate in costly leisure activities. I do not mean to imply that undocumented workers should not be offered a better standard of living or to dismiss the fact that rigid boundaries keep undocumented immigrants marginalized. However, using a face-to-face interaction approach to observe and participate in the everyday lives of these undocumented workers reveals a peculiar kind of situation: at Mama’s, the workers appear to be living comparatively normal lives and enjoy a sense of security on a day-to-day basis.

These undocumented workers are able to sustain normality in their everyday lives through the tight relationship they have fostered with one another and with Mama. This ‘family’, as they call it, allows everyone to help one another and feel at ease with their situation.7 Since most of the workers do not have any relatives by descent or marriage living in the vicinity, the restaurant family acts as a protective social system on multiple levels. The workers spend much of their free time together and enjoy having companionship when doing errands.

Like Alejandro and Karl, many undocumented workers are labor migrants rather than conventional ‘immigrants’ who wish to settle permanently in the country. They seek to make money and return to their home countries; they move from one job to the next until they find work that maximizes their income and offers tolerable conditions. However, the workers at Mama’s had been working there for an extended period of time: Alejandro for five years, Karl for three years, and the other servers for over six months. Each stated that the wage, rather than the type or conditions of work, was the main reason they took on their first jobs. The number of working hours was not as important as the amount of money they would be able to earn each week. However, through personal experience and by talking with other undocumented immigrants in the workforce, my informants learned that a good work situation is just as important as the amount of money they are able to make. Then they sought a work situation where they are comfortable and respected, where they would not only be paid decent wages but also feel less exploited. Mama is cognizant of this fact because she knows that when her employees are unhappy, it hurts her business. Consequently, Mama helps facilitate the formation of a pseudo-kin relationship among her workers. When asked why the workers at Mama’s continued to work for her, Alejandro responded:

Mama pay ok. I can work at Italian restaurant for five dollar more [a week] but they make you pay for food and people there are mean. Mama’s nice. I like Min [Mama’s daughter] and Mike [Min’s husband] and Karl and Jay and Johnny. We play around and have a good time, you know? Other place I work, we never talk, we never hang out. Just work. But here, it’s like family. We hang around each other all the time.
By calling their employer ‘Mama’, the employees endorse and uphold the notion that they are bound together by reciprocal ties that extend beyond the mere exchange of labor for wages.

At first blush, it appears as if this restaurant family is too perfect, as if the family metaphor is a forced or superficial relationship. However, the restaurant family plays a significant role in the lives of the workers as they deal with their marginality relative to the dominant society. For undocumented workers, the perception that they can rely on others beyond their own families in their native countries nurtures a sense of security and belonging. Mama also benefits from the restaurant family in emotional as well as economic ways. A widow with two grown children who no longer live with her, she enjoys a respected position as mother and caregiver to her workers, even though they are adults in the same age range as her own children. Co-workers, including Mama, are adopted as substitutes in the absence of relatives.

Fictive kinship is important for undocumented workers because it reinforces personal relationships and provides a social network and social capital. In *All Our Kin*, Carol Stack (1974) describes extended kinship organization in poor black communities. She asserts that people are welcomed into the group when they participate in the exchange of goods and services. In a similar way, the restaurant family functions both to grant rights and to require shared duties and mutual responsibilities. The concept and practice of fictive kinship among immigrants has been examined by several social scientists (Ebaugh and Curry, 2000; Kibria, 1993; Glenn, 1983). What makes the restaurant unusual in relation to fictive kin relationship is the inequality of power between undocumented restaurant workers and the employer. There is no room for negotiation between the two parties, which is the very reason why Mama prefers undocumented workers. After a potential hire meets Mama’s requirements of not being overly aggressive, she employs the new worker on a temporary basis while she lays out the rules and customs that govern the restaurant operation. Only those who ‘fit in’ remain for long.

As Nicholas De Genova suggests, ‘illegal aliens’ constitute a ‘profoundly useful and profitable’ social category ‘that effectively serves to create and sustain a legally vulnerable – and hence, relatively tractable and ‘cheap’ – reserve of labor’ (2002: 439–40). Hiring undocumented workers affords employers an especially profitable and tractable labor force. For these restaurant workers, considering one another ‘family’ allows them to work through long hours for little pay because work time becomes synonymous with ‘family time’ and leisurely sociability. For people who do not have the opportunity to join other social groups, the people they work with are very important; their co-workers form the only social circle they belong to.
Ultimately, my observations indicate that the ‘family’ is essentially a demand for respect and hard work through the symbolic values of a family it represents. The workers are able to hold their employer to standards that are higher than those most employers are expected to meet: they can exert some moral and social force to ensure that Mama treats them in what they define as a decent and respectful manner. Mutual expectations are reinforced and heightened and this notion of reciprocity gives workers some informal bargaining room. Working hard and performing their duties become workers’ moral obligations. The consequence of not accomplishing their duties, or not doing them well, is not fear of losing their job, but rather guilt about not satisfying Mama. Her care and concern are reciprocated by the workers’ concerted labor. Fictive parents must try to play the role of a ‘decent’ parent as proficiently as possible, and fictive children try to exceed what is expected of actual children. For example, Karl and Jay put on angry and concerned faces as they rush over to Mama when she tries to clear the tables herself. Although Mama is relatively young and able-bodied, the two young men display an exaggerated desire for her to avoid any kind of manual labor. With a stern voice and his face firmly frozen, Jay commands, ‘Mama, go sit down. Relax. You hurt yourself.’ In ‘protecting’ Mama from such physically demanding labor, the workers assert themselves as men who are capable of doing the job.

Conclusion

The pseudo-family provides a sense of belonging for undocumented workers and reminds them of their purpose in working and enduring in the US. Negative feelings associated with alienation are not expressed, at least when the workers are with one another. The position of undocumented migrants is especially poignant because they inhabit a marginalized space where their existence is officially disallowed and they must be discreet in order to remain. This situation creates social exclusion, pushing undocumented migrants into building their own community. Restaurant employees share their frustrations with the job as they talk about the micro-rituals associated with work. On a deeper level, they have both common aspirations and very limited opportunities to achieve the ‘American Dream’; their existence centers around working and making ‘enough money to go back home’. With very few avenues toward achieving upward mobility in the American social system, undocumented migrants find a small haven with their co-workers and others in similar situations. Within this social community, incorporation in or assimilation to American society seems extraneous.
Undocumented immigrants are never fully able to accumulate sufficient linkages to become incorporated into the mainstream society. As Leo Chavez explains these linkages, they include ‘relatively secure employment, family formation, the establishment of credit, capital accumulation, [and] a measure of competency in English’ (1991: 258–9). Marginalized individuals inhabit what Victor Turner (1974) calls a ‘liminal’ space. Undocumented immigrants no longer fully belong to the society they have left but are not a part of the dominant society around them, so they incorporate themselves into their own distinct social group (Chavez, 1991; Van Gennep, 1960). In this gray space that they can claim as their own, they develop a sense of belonging.

This study belies the common representations of undocumented immigrants as either crafty competitors for jobs or as pitiful, hapless victims of ruthless employers. These workers’ day-to-day working life at the restaurant is filled with ordinary interactions with their employer and co-workers. Although undocumented immigrants as a group face problems such as potential deportation, feeling homesick, and experiencing disrespect and neglect, the individuals in my study upheld a strong sense of community. Within their social circle, although they are well aware of their common predicament, they seldom discuss their trials and tribulations. Their fictive kin relationship helps them to remain content with their situation. Working such long hours at the restaurant is not merely a chore; it is the only social community they know and are a part of. They feel connected as they hang out with one another both in and outside of the workplace. In this situation, the negative feelings associated with limited resources and discrimination are counteracted by the sense of belonging with others who are undocumented.

Finally, it is important to recognize that fictive kin relationships are vulnerable to disruption. They are founded on a metaphor that requires continued performance and constant reinforcement within a set of business and personal situations that are inherently unstable. When workers are no longer content, they may easily opt to search for another job and find other ways to integrate into the new workplace. What is most important for these individuals ‘living in the shadows’ is that they have been able to counteract the problems of being marginalized by creating a social community of their own.

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Notes

1. All names in this article have been changed in order to protect the identities of informants.

2. I first walked into Mama’s restaurant at the end of September 2007. Since then, I have been showing up two to three times a week. This article focuses on the first nine months of the study, which is currently ongoing.

3. Restaurants that employ undocumented workers have various ways of paying them: 1) salary with no tips; 2) no salary, only tips; 3) low hourly pay with tips; 4) hourly pay without tips. Tips may be put into a common pot and split equally among all the servers as well as the kitchen staff. Some employers also include a temporary living arrangement for new employees.

4. A recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that ‘over half of all Hispanic adults [both legal and illegal residents] in the U.S. worry that they, a family member or a close friend could be deported’ (2007: 1). The Hispanic adults stated that they also feared that the heightened attention to immigration issues had negative effects such as ‘difficulty finding work or housing; less likelihood of using government services or traveling abroad; and more likelihood of being asked to produce documents to prove their immigration status’ (2007: 1).

5. In New Haven, the presence of undocumented workers in restaurants is, for the most part, expected and condoned. With the combined efforts of the current mayor, John De Stefano, and Yale Law School initiatives to protect immigrants, New Haven is regarded as a pro-immigrant city.

6. Scholars such as Burr and Mutchler (1993), Tienda and Angel (1982) and Tienda and Glass (1985) asserted that cultural values are key determinants of living arrangements among Latinos. However, a recent study by Van Hook and Glick (2007) shows that the migration process itself account for high levels of co-residence observed among recently arrived immigrants.

7. ‘Fictive kinship’, as anthropologists use the concept, involves the voluntary creation of a kin-like set of mutual obligations among people who are not relatives according to the society’s accepted model of kinship. In the US, immigrants’ strategic use of fictive kinship, the practice of calling an unrelated individual ‘family’, can be dated back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first law to restrict immigration. Chinese men working in the US were excluded from citizenship and not allowed to bring their wives, but they could bring their sons. Younger men who were determined to immigrate to the US became ‘paper sons’ to unrelated men already in the country and gained admission by proving through fictitious documents that they were related. See Lau (2006).

8. The idea of ‘pseudo-kinship’ has also been used to refer to family-like relationships in urban communities by Elijah Anderson (1999) and Elliot Liebow (1967).
Margarita Mooney (2003) finds that Mexican immigrants who have social ties to other migrants in the US are more likely than others to maintain their ties with their relatives in Mexico.

References


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