

“Tres dólares por hora por hacer roofing en esta clima! ”: Evaluations of Work Experience of Migrants on the U.S. Texas-Mexico Border.

Fazila Bhimji

University of Central Lancashire
Humanities Department

Fylde Building
Preston, PR1 2HE

E-Mail: fbhimji@uclan.ac.uk

Gabriele Kohpahl

California State University, Northridge
Women's Studies Department

Northridge, California, U.S.A.

E-Mail: gkohpahl@hotmail.com

Abstract

The paper examines the ways in which Mexicans and Central Americans speak of their work conditions on the U.S. Texas/Mexico border. Much scholarship has examined the experiences of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. However, there is little literature on the discursive practices of undocumented migrants during their stay on the border while they work to accumulate resources to move further into the United States. This paper illustrates the ways in which male migrants assert their agency through talk while they describe their work conditions. Many of them who work as construction workers are economically exploited since they are paid below standard minimum wages. However, these temporary migrant workers display much knowledge of their rights and entitlements through discursive practices such as evaluations, knowledge of their exploitative conditions, resolutions to move further into the U.S., or to find alternative means of income. In doing so, I argue that the migrants express much discursive agency and ultimately challenge their vulnerable conditions through their talk and determination to move out of their oppressive conditions. Data are based on interviews of 15 male migrants residing at a temporary shelter in El Paso, Texas.

Key Words: U.S.-Texas/Mexico Border, Migrants, Economic Exploitation, Discursive Agency

Resumen

Este trabajo examina los modos en que los mexicanos y centroamericanos hablan de sus experiencias de trabajo en la frontera de Texas y México. Muchos de los que trabajan en la construcción son explotados, dado que su salario es menor al mínimo interprofesional. Los trabajadores inmigrantes temporales demuestran el conocimiento de sus derechos a través de prácticas discursivas tales como las evaluaciones, el conocimiento de las condiciones de explotación y las resoluciones que incluyen seguir adelante en Estados Unidos o encontrar modos alternativos de sustento. De este modo, los inmigrantes expresan un alto grado de agencia discursiva que les lleva a desafiar sus condiciones vulnerables a través del habla. Los datos se basan en entrevistas con quince hombres inmigrantes que residen en un centro de acogida temporal en el Paso, Texas.

Palabras Clave: U.S.-Tejas/México Frontera, Migrantes, Agencia discursiva, Explotación Econimicamente

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“Tres dólares por hora por hacer roofing en esta clima!”: Evaluations of Work Experience of Migrants on the U.S. Texas-Mexico Border.

1. Introduction

The paper examines the ways in which 15 Central American and Mexican undocumented male migrants negotiate the U.S. and Mexican border during their temporary stay in a West Texas border town. More specifically the paper demonstrates the ways in which these male immigrants challenge their work conditions through their discursive practices. The study is based on in-depth interviews of male participants of their experience in the U.S. border area of El Paso during their temporary stay in a Catholic hospitality house run and managed by mainly white American volunteers. In doing so, the study shows the multiple challenges Central American and Mexican immigrants encounter at the border during their stay in El Paso as they make further plans to cross these imposed borders. Once in El Paso the migrants face further challenges as they need to cross immigrant check points on the U.S. side. Moreover, they need to accumulate resources to continue their journey further into the United States as well as to send money home to their families in Mexico or Central America. Once in the border area many of the migrants also connect with each other and form networks in order to find ways to cross this area. Hence, the border city on the U.S. side becomes a crucial factor in determining their success of further crossings.

The migrants experience much vulnerability in this liminal space as the region is swamped by border patrol officers and national guards. In 2006, President Bush stationed 6,000 National Guardsmen along the border and the US congress vowed to build a 700-mile wall to keep illegal immigrants out. According to Gary Younge (The Guardian Weekend, October 21, 2006) as the Government has deployed more agents and National Guardsmen at known crossing points, people have started exploring more dangerous routes and the majority who die out there are old people and young children. However, once in the U.S. border area, the migrants continue to experience difficulties. The work that many of the male migrants do find is mainly in the area of construction which is of temporary nature. The men find that there is intense competition, and the employers tend to exploit the migrants to the fullest degree. In case of Central American migrants the situation is worsened as they have already crossed two borders i.e. the Mexican as well as the U.S. and have yet to cross further check points. The employers being well aware of their situation tend to pay Central Americans even less and exhibit preferences in hiring them because of their vulnerable situation.

There has been much focus on migration from Mexico and Central America into the United States but little attention has been given to the lived experiences of the many undocumented immigrants in U.S. border towns. As the border becomes increasingly tightened making it challenging for more and more people to cross as well as move further into the United States it becomes even more crucial to examine the ways in which undocumented migrants negotiate the border. As Heyman and Cunningham (2004) point out that in order to gain insights into movements on the border it is important to see it within the context of mobilities enjoined with enclosures and to view borders as sites where movement is structured within the context of unequal power relations.

There has been much theoretical discussion on the lives of undocumented immigrants. For example, several scholars have written on gender and undocumented immigrants. Powers, Seltzer and Shi (1998) discuss the gender differences in the occupational status of undocumented immigrants. They report that men continued to report higher status jobs than women although women do somewhat better after their status is legalized. Chavez, Hubbell, Mishra, and Valdez (1997) did a comparative study of documented and undocumented Latina women and non-Hispanic white in Orange County, California. They found that undocumented and documented Latina women use of public assistance was very low and that many are among the working poor mainly relying on their own and their family's resources for financial support. Furthermore, they observed that undocumented Latina women despite harsh conditions developed a strong sense of belonging to a community in the United States. Other scholars have examined the brutality and violence that undocumented female immigrants might be subjected to (e.g. Urquijo-Ruiz 2004)

There has been much work done in the area of anti-immigrant sentiments and the subsequent militarization of the border. Wilson (2000) explores the links between the growing militarization of the US-Mexico border and state legislations which deny undocumented workers and their non citizen wives state funded social services and recreating a separation between the processes of generational and daily reproduction of the labour force. While Wilson makes significant links between anti-immigrant sentiments, legislations, and reproduction, Mehan (1997) explores the discourse of the illegal immigration and illuminates the ways in which the State in alliance with business and other elite interests encourages citizens to treat the immigrant, the poor, and the unfortunate as the enemy.

Scholars have also discussed the ways in which undocumented immigrants develop a sense of belonging challenging traditional notions of citizenship. Chavez (1994) examines the ways in which Mexican and Central American undocumented immigrants come to feel part a community and a sense of belonging which impacts their length of stay in the United States. Flores (2003) explores how undocumented Latina/os in California forge community, space, and claim rights to belong.

Several studies (e.g. Heyman 1998; Aguilera 2003) have demonstrated that undocumented immigrants serve to fill competitive and poorly paid sectors of the U.S. economy and that undocumented immigrants from Mexico are more exploited than their legal immigrants working side by side. Josiah McC. Heyman (1998) demonstrates that in the case of undocumented immigrants who cross the United States-Mexico border to work, U.S. state actions add to exploitation. He calls this 'super exploitation' of workers. Scholars have also described the roles played by friends and family in helping undocumented immigrants with border crossing (Singer and Massey 1998). Other scholars have more specifically focused on the militarization of the border (e.g. Dunn; Nevis 2002; and Massey, Durand & Malone 2002).

This paper contributes to the scholarly discussions of undocumented migrants focusing especially on the discursive practices of the migrant men as they relate their accounts and opinion of their work experiences on the border. In doing so, I argue that although the men have little recourse to formal organizations during their temporary stay, such as trade unions, they nevertheless express their entitlements to their rights through discursive markers such as evaluations, displays of moral stance, displays of knowledge, and resolutions (e.g. Ana de Fina 2003, Ochs 2001). Evaluations serve as an important linguistic feature that illustrates the teller his or her perspective, beliefs, opinions and varying view points. As Page (2002) points out that 'evaluation devices

provides a framework for exploring the ways in which different tellers give structure and meaning to their experience.’ Labov and Waletzki’s model (1972) of narrative structure including abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda well illustrates the significance of evaluations and resolutions as departure points within a narrative which serves to provide relevance to a story. In the study of undocumented immigrants Anna de Fina (2002) illustrates the ways in which the participants use evaluations to display their ethnic identities in relation to various groups. In this paper, I will show how migrants use evaluations to show their understandings of their exploitative work conditions and in turn show that even though they are constructed as ‘undocumented’ they have an understanding of their basic rights. As they articulate their opinions, beliefs, judgements and feelings (see Schiffrin, 1994) they position themselves in positive ways challenging dominant ideologies of “illegal immigrants.”

2. Methodology

Data are based on an ethnographic methodology consisting of in depth qualitative interviews and participant observations of thirty undocumented men and women residing in two hospitality houses in the border towns of El Paso in Texas. The researchers also engaged in some volunteer work in the shelters which further facilitated in gaining an understanding of the border and migration experience of the migrants. The interviews were conducted by a colleague, whose research expertise was in the area of women and immigration, and by myself. I had made some initial contacts at both these shelters since I had worked as a volunteer several times since 1992.

The shelters describe themselves as a house of hospitality for the undocumented and refugees who are in the process of making their way further into the United States. One of the shelters, which houses up to fifty people each night, has immigrants staying for a limited period of time whereas the second shelter serves people for a longer duration as they might be in the process of applying for political asylum or female migrants widows who needed to stay for a thirty day period in the U.S. in order to collect social security of their deceased husbands. Because they might stay for a longer period of time, they spent much time working or studying in the border area. Both shelters were located a few blocks from the border between the United States and Mexico. Moreover, the shelters have been serving undocumented immigrants since 1978 and have earned a reputation of serving poor undocumented immigrants arriving from the interiors of Mexico and Central America. Many of the people who arrived into the U.S. side of the border find their way to it through word of mouth. Hence, because of its proximity to the Mexican border, the nature of its population, and easy access to these houses were ideal sites to conduct research in order to understand the experience of migrants on the border.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish as both my colleague and myself had working knowledge of the Spanish language. However, the interviews were transcribed in Spanish by a native speaker of Spanish.

3. Analysis

3.1 Evaluations of ‘Patrones’ and Pay Scales

In the following excerpt, Juan who lives on the border and works in a church, demonstrates much indignation about the minimum pay scale that workers receive. He was one of the few men that I interviewed who did not aspire to travel further into the United States but rather preferred to live in El Paso since he had a teenaged son who he saw frequently who lived on the border city of Juárez:

(1)

Juan: Llegan a personas y les dicen ‘vamos a trabajar’ ; ‘pues cuanto pagas?’; ‘35 te doy’; ‘pues vamos’...pero van a venir porque sin documentos les pagan poquito.

F:Entonces usted sabe hacer cosas pero no quiere trabajar en construccion porque pagan muy poquito aquí en esta frontera?

Juan:Si pagan hasta 3 dólares la hora...3 dolares por hora por hacer roofing en esta clima! Y no está bien...yo creo que dan 7 dólares pa arriba. Trabajé un tiempo en la construcción aquí y me dieron 100 dólares por 4 días y sin comida, sin tomar agua. No me dieron de comer y yo no tenia dinero para pagar mi comida.

F:Qué bueno que usted encontró trabajo en la iglesia entonces!

Mi patron es buen hombre. Tiene sentimientos y tiene Corazon.

In this extract Juan through use of evaluative markers and through his knowledge of basic standard pay within the U.S. exhibits his stance towards his working conditions. At the outset, Juan shows his knowledge of the vulnerable conditions of migrants as he points out that the very reason that employers look for workers in the border area is because they can pay very little money to people without documents. He establishes a causal relationship between the demand for migrant workers and their undocumented status. (*pero van a venir porque sin documentos les pagan poquito*). This statement can be understood as a negative evaluation of the employers since he points out that the only reason that the employers seek out migrant workers on the border is to exploit their vulnerable position rather than offering them competitive pay scales. Juan further evaluates the working conditions pointing out that a skill such as roofing pays very little money -temperatures in the summer can range from 30-40 C- (*3 dólares por hora por hacer roofing en esta clima*)! Juan displays his negative stance towards his working conditions by demonstrating his knowledge of how much he should actually be getting paid; i.e. \$7 per hour if he were working outside the border area. (*Y no está bien...yo creo que dan 7 dólares pa' arriba*). In doing so, Juan demonstrates that he has an understanding of basic working conditions in the U.S. This perspective is further intensified when he evaluates his past conditions when he himself was actually working as a construction worker but without basic necessities such as food and water (*Trabajé un tiempo en la construcción aquí y me dieron 100 dólares por 4 días y sin comida, sin tomar agua*). Hence, he starts out by displaying a negative stance towards the employers in a general manner to a more specific way when he invokes his personal experience. He ultimately resolves his situation by finding constant work in a church and evaluates

his current employer by employing positive descriptors (*Mi patron es buen hombre. Tiene sentimientos y tiene corazon*).

Similarly, Mario points out using evaluative devices that he has an understanding of the extent to which he is economically exploited on the border:

(2)

Mario: Pero aquí, lo que es la frontera, la gente le tratan mal. Te tratan de buscar un poquito más porque como uno viene a este tipo de casas, de refugio o de misiones, la gente viene aquí con el propósito de explotar la gente que viene de Mexico. Quieren pagarnos lo injusto, lo que no es... Hay veces que trabajamos 8 horas. Nos quieren pagar a 15 dolares y de eso el sueldo es de 40 a 50 dolares te pagan 50 or 60 dolares, pienso cuando es que sabes muchas cosas, 80, 90 dólares. , te pagan barato porque saben que estás en una unison aquí y la gente piensa que nosotros nos conformamos, los empleadores nos quieren explotar y eso no está bien.

He points out through use of cause and effect reasoning that it is because this is the border that the people get treated badly (*pero aquí, lo que es la frontera, la gente le tratan mal*). He elaborates his point of view displaying his understanding of the fact that potential employers come looking for the most vulnerable in shelters. Throughout his account Mario uses negative descriptors which show that he and others like him in similar positions are working under unjust conditions (*e.g. injusto, no está bien, explota la gente*). Much like Juan, Mario is aware of the below minimum wages that construction workers receive (*Nos quieren pagar a 15 dólares*). Such assertions and demonstrations of specific knowledge about pay scales challenge employers' hegemony on the border area even though in actual practice migrants who are in this transitory phase of their lives have little formal recourse.

3.2 Evaluations of the Other Side

In some cases, the pay scale and work conditions are viewed to be so very oppressive that some of the migrants construct and evaluate El Paso simply as an extension of Mexico. Consider the following:

(3)

F: Y usted va a ir más arriba o a quedar en El Paso?

Fernando: Más arriba.

F: Porque?

Fernando: Porque allí trabajo más y hay más dinero. Aquí trabajo mucho y poco dinero. Y allí se trabajo muchas horas pero es 'overtime' y aquí no.

Fernando: **Aquí pagan menos que en otro lado**, en Los Angeles cuánto pagan la hora?

-8?

Aquí pagan cinco y en otro lados, más pa'arriba, pa'dentro, ya unos 8 dólares, 10 dólares la hora y aquí no; aquí son 5.la hora.

Fernando thus evaluates his work conditions in a comparative framework. He employs oppositional diectics such as 'here' (aquí) vs 'there' (allí). He also evaluates

his current conditions within a binary framework where one works more and receives less money compared to where one works more and receives more money as well as 'overtime' (*allí trabajo más y hay más dinero. Aquí trabajo mucho y poco dinero. Y allí se trabaja muchas horas pero es 'overtime' y aquí no*). It is also interesting that although he is on the 'other side of Mexico' he views cities and towns in the U.S. as the 'other side.' Thus he perceives the border town as an extension of Mexico where he continues to receive very little wages as he would perhaps do in Mexico. It is only when he starts to receive the basic minimum wage of \$8 to \$10 per hour that Fernando could position himself as being part of the U.S.

3.3 Evaluations of Mexican-American Employers vs American Workers

In several instances, the Mexican migrants criticized Mexican-American employers for mistreating them as in the following excerpt

(4)

Alfredo: Y nos liquida el salario supuesto que 'él siente que está pagandoles bien... pues no, no es cierto. El agarra mucho dinero de uno y cuando le están pagando a uno, el siente que lo roban. Y no es justo. Y él también lleva sangre Mexicana y actúa muy feo... Y se portan mucho más feo que algunos Americanos. Cuando uno Americano lo contrata a uno le paga a uno bien y el que es Latino no.

Alfredo in his evaluation of his work experience on the border points out that the employers believe that they pay their employees well but in fact that is not correct. Alfredo articulates his stance explicitly by using declarative statement and negation: 'And that is not just (*y no es justo*).' He uses the conjunction 'And' which serves to contradict everything what employers may believe to be. Alfredo then makes an explicit reference to the ethnic identity of the employer stating that they carry Mexican blood (*Y él también lleva sangre Mexicana y actúa muy feo*). In describing the Mexican employers, Alfredo uses intensifiers: 'very' (*muy*) and adjectives such as ugly (*feo*). Furthermore, he describes his experience with Mexican workers in a comparative framework.

Similarly, Mario describes his experience with Mexican employers portraying them to be much more exploitative than American employers.

(5)

Mario: Aquí hay mucha gente diferente. Y hay veces que te pagan bien, hay veces que no te pagan... depende de la gente, de la raza. Tiene que ver mucho la raza... y la misma gente de aquí de México, explotan más al Mexicano, a la gente de uno. Y otra gente de otro país como que se siente un poquito más agradecido... cuando uno viene a trabajar a otro país. Y la gente de uno trata de **pisotearlo** a uno... eso es lo malo. Sí está difícil.

It is significant that both Mario and Alfredo self identify with Mexicans using affiliative terms such as 'Mexican blood' 'One of us' versus 'the other people' 'people from other countries.' In doing so, the sense that the migrants are exploited by

their own people is intensified. Furthermore, the migrants convey a sense of betrayal that perhaps it is one thing to be oppressed by white employers but quite another matter to be treated badly by one of their own.

3.4 Evaluation of the Exploitation of Central American Workers

The migrants were also well aware of the fact that Central Americans having travelled further were in a much more vulnerable position. In several situations Central Americans tended to self identify as Mexicans. However, the employers were also conscious of the fact that Central Americans would be willing to work for less. Such degrees of exploitation did not go unnoticed by Mexican migrants in search of work. As Juan pointed out to me:

(6)

No, no puede pues así tratan al Mexicano, al indocumentados-por eso viene uno a casa y pregunta hay gente pa trabajar? Si hay...pero gente de Honduras porque esa gente trabajaba, es bien trabajadora pero no...es que les pagan muy poquito a los de Honduras. Hasta 40 dólares les dan. ...Menos dinero y trabajan todo el día porque dicen que esa gente es trabajadora, pero no, está necesitada...Porque 5 dolares le rinde 100 pesos en su pais. Mientras que para México 5 dolares rinden 50 pesos.

In this account, Juan points out that when the employers look for migrant workers they show a preference in hiring people from Honduras because they have to pay them less than they have to Mexicans (*es que les pagan muy poquito a los de Honduras. Hasta 40 dólares les dan*). Rather than viewing this statement as a construction of Mexican identity in relation to a Honduran identity (see Anna de Fina 2001) it can be understood as a strong criticism of the employers by Juan. He further displays his knowledge by stating the worth of 5 dollars in Mexican currency versus Honduran currency. Furthermore, he points out the exact amount that Honduran workers are paid which is no more than \$40.00 per day. Hence, the possible tensions between Mexicans and Central Americans as they compete for limited resources in this account is mitigated as Juan blames the employers for capitalizing on the weaker Central American economy.

4. Concluding Comments

This paper examined the ways in which Mexican and Central American migrants seeking temporary work on the U.S. Texas/Mexican border evaluate their work experience. They challenge their conditions discursively using evaluative devices such as intensifiers, negative descriptors, and comparatives. They employ the language of experts displaying their knowledge of standard minimum wages in the rest of the country versus the border town. They also know that Central Americans are exploited to a greater extent than Mexicans. In doing so, they articulate much knowledge of the rights that they are denied. In doing so, they also in certain instances come to view the border as perhaps an extension of Mexico rather than as part of the U.S. They feel further betrayed when they find out that Mexicans living in El Paso

tend to pay Mexican migrants even a lower rate than American employers. In expressing such judgments and knowledges, the migrants convey their sense of rights that they are entitled to and contest the border towns' oppressive conditions by either finding alternative jobs or making plans to move further into the United States.

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