Farmworker Voices: Contesting & Renegotiating Essential Status During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Farmworker Voices: Contesting & Renegotiating Essential Status During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Photo Courtesy of Hector Amezcua, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, UC Davis and Author
Overview

- Background
- Research Questions
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
Background

- Labeled Essential Workers March '20
- Workplace Outbreaks May '20
- Cascading Effects of Lost Wages
- Exclusionary Labor & Immigration Policy
- Wildfire & Extreme Weather Events
Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do farmworkers assign meaning to the label essential worker?

Research Question 2: What identities did farmworkers claim?

Research Question 3: What grievances, if any, emerged based on essential worker designation?
The Oregon COFS Model

**Aug 2020 - Sept 2020**
N = 300

- PHASE 1: SURVEYS
  - DESIGN: OR COFS/CBOs
  - DATA COLLECTION: CBOs

- Nov 2020
  - FOCUS GROUP 1:
    - Researchers host CBO Survey team, summarize survey findings

**Feb 2021-July 2021**
N = 48

- PHASE 2: In-Depth INTERVIEWS
  - DESIGN: OR COFS/CBOs
  - DATA COLLECTION: CBOs

- Sept 2021
  - FOCUS GROUP 2:
    - Researchers host CBO interviewers, summarize qualitative learnings

**Reporting Back/Storytelling**

**Phase 1: 300 August-October 2020**

**Phase 2: 48 February-July 2021**
Demographics of Qualitative Sub-Sample

- **Mexico**: 80%
- **Guatemala**: 17%
- **Honduras**: 3%

- **Indigeneity**: 30%
- **Gender**: Women 70%, Men 30%

- **Avg Age**: 44
**Coding Process**

**Building Tasks (Gee 2005)**

Iterative and inductive process around language signaling: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems, and knowledge.

**Patterns & Themes (Creswell 1997)**

Exploration included farmworkers’ description of the term essential worker, claims of identity, and grievances.

*All Farmworkers Given Pseudonyms*
Defining "Essential Worker"

“For me, essential worker means we have not stopped working, the people who work in agriculture, in the strawberry, in the harvests, in the dairies, and seafood. We are on the frontline of this country. Rain, shine, fire, or pandemic we continue working. We are essential in this country because if we sheltered at home, there would be no food on the table of each home” (Lorena, Blueberry Worker, Central Coast & Southwest Basin, 39W).

“At the nursery many times we have to carry out the orders stores requests because a lot of [farmers and growers] planted a lot of vegetables in that time...they take advantage of us because they tell us ‘You can do it. Do it.’ Then they give us more work and tell us ‘You have to get this out’” (Blanca, Nursery Worker, Central Coast & Southwest Basin, 38W).
“We as Mexican, as undocumented, Hispanic, come from Mexico, from pueblos where we work hard and strong and arrive here giving it the same effort. Our bosses take advantage of us...because we work so hard and then they give thanks to the Americans and it makes me feel bad...I have the necessity to continue working to support my children, family, I have to give it my all. There is no other option. Many employers abuse us as undocumented Latinos that work with grit” (Blanca Zapotec, Nursery Worker, Central Coast & Southwest Basin 38W).

“For me, it’s not about [immigration] status but for the people we are. We work in the fields. We are the ones who bring food to everyone’s table. Without our hands, our labor, we would not have anything. We are an important part of this country” (Armando, Purepecha, Nursery Worker, Central Coast & Southwest Basin, 47M).
Grievances Identified

"I was very afraid that the pandemic would kill me because my immunity is very low. My job was in the hemp and I think that sales fell and the merchandise was left there. And they no longer wanted to give work, they began to abuse the needs of the people ... The little money that I saved when I worked, well, I ran out. It's over now. When there was no work anywhere I had to use my savings, and well, they are over and, yes, I'm jumping from job to job. Like today I went to clean a yard. Whatever work exists, I'll take the job."

—(Flor, Hemp, Central Coast & Southwest Basin, W).

“There is nothing. We have to value ourselves...I feel that the government doesn’t support us, workers. Do you know why? Because I applied for a work permit and they didn’t respond. I wanted to work legally, but they didn’t give it to me, not even for my wife, or my children. I asked a lawyer, and well, no the government isn’t giving (Chucho, Mam, Central Coast & Southwest Basin, 35-44M).
Looking Forward

- Utilize this moment for further farmworker organizing and mobilization.
- Farmworkers’ own voices and lived experiences make them social actors best positioned to identify inconsistency between narratives of their value and on the ground treatment (COFS 2021).
- Examine how immigration and food labor policy reproduce the marginalization of farmworkers.
The COVID-19 Farmworker Study (COFS) is a model created with the intention of providing critical missing information on farmworkers’ abilities to protect themselves and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study brings together a collective of community-based organizations (CBOs), researchers, and advocates to reveal information that can only be gathered directly from farmworkers who have been working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration across Tri-State autonomous COFS studies in Oregon, California, and Washington are facilitated by the California Institute for Rural Studies with participation from a wide group of community-based organizations, researchers, and policy advocates. Visit www.covid19farmworkerstudy.org for a full list of project partners and supporters.