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Developing Occupational and Family Resilience among US Migrant Farmworkers

ALTHOUGH MIGRANT FARMWORKERS ARE A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE US AND WORLD economies, they have been understudied and are not integrated into the business and work-family literature. Migrant farmworkers are at the core of the \$28 billion fruit and vegetable industry in the United States, 85 percent of which is hand harvested or cultivated. Migrant jobs often include both picking fruits and vegetables and their processing, grading, and packaging (National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc. 2012). A migrant farmworker is defined as an individual who spends at least half of his or her employment time working in agriculture on a seasonal basis, and who has been so employed within the last 24 months (Larson 2006).

The large-scale migration of workers with their families is a global phenomenon that has seen dramatic growth over recent decades. The migrant work force that comes to the United States from Mexico is equivalent to the size of one-eighth of the entire Mexican work force (Cuellar 2002). Although migrant jobs are highly undesirable and underpaid, their loss could result in a US farmworker shortage and hurt the world food supply as well as the Mexican economy (Martin and Martin 1994). This is a global issue: according to the Inter-

national Labor Organization (2014), there are currently approximately 175 million migrants around the world, roughly half of them workers.

The Geneseo Migrant Center (n.d.) provides a demographic snapshot of migrant farmworkers in the United States—81 percent of all farmworkers are foreign born, with 77 percent of all farmworkers having been born in Mexico and five out of six farmworkers being native Spanish speakers. The number of Mexican and other Latino farmworkers throughout the United States has grown in recent years, due in part to programs like the H-2A guest worker plan. The H-2A temporary agricultural program establishes a means for agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring nonimmigrant foreign workers to the United States to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature (Department of Labor). The average farmworker's age is only 31 years, since it is difficult for older workers to perform such physically demanding labor, and 80 percent of farmworkers are men, who often must leave their families behind while they seek work.

While many migrant workers are mothers and fathers with young children, the work-family literature in particular has underexamined these employees. An exception to this gap is a qualitative paper (Kossek, Meece, Barratt, and Prince 2005) on the work and family experiences of low-income Latino migrant farm-working mothers. Kossek and colleagues suggest that more research is needed to identify the resources, demands, opportunities, and constraints faced by this population, and to identify stress and resilience factors. More important, increasing understanding of migrant workers and more generally individuals operating in challenging work-family systems can help move work-family research from individual deficit to positive resource-based views of low-income workers (Kossek, Huber, and Lerner 2003). Further, reviews increasingly suggest that the work-family field has been constrained by having limited sample variance, and some of the constructs and concepts are not readily generalizable to more diverse work-family samples (Kossek, Baltes, and Mathews 2011).

We therefore seek to address these gaps by building on key themes identified in the 2005 qualitative study and conducting an updated literature review. In particular, our focus is on the notion and relevance of individual and family resilience, and acculturative stress concepts for the work-family field, with the goal of developing more broadly the need to reframe work-family studies in low-income systems involving resource based views as opposed to individual deficits.

The term “migrant workers” reflects a diverse work-family population. As Parra-Cardona, Bullock, Imig, Villarruel, and Gold (2006) argue, Latino culture is not monolithic and comprises multiple cultures. Thus, researchers should clearly identify the country of origin, the geographic pathway, and the occupational and demographic background of samples studied. As an illustration, in the Kossek and colleagues study, their results are specific to understanding of migrant farm working mothers in Michigan, part of the Midwestern corridor where Mexican American workers migrate from Texas or Florida to Michigan in the summer. Some migrant farmworkers establish a temporary home to harvest crops, while others follow the crops in a traditional migrant stream, moving from place to place. Thus, studies of migrant workers need to be contextualized and specified since there is diversity of families and workers.

Further, contextualizing suggests the importance in studies of measuring the degree of flux and mobility, as well as change in work-family environments and their cycles. As research by Roeder and Millard (2000) suggests, the cyclical mobility of migrant workers exacerbates their poverty, making migrants more susceptible to psychological problems. Migrants with higher cyclical mobility may have greater difficulty integrating into the community and establishing social ties, which in turn lead to challenges in education. These challenges result in greater difficulty assimilating into either Anglo or Latino communities.

Additionally, specifying migrant workers level of access to cultural support resources in their new communities may significantly

influence effectiveness in cultural adaptation.. For example, assimilation in Michigan may be more difficult than assimilation in California, where there is a larger Latino community. As Kossek et al. (2005) argued, migrant workers in communities where they are less well-represented may tend to be more dependent on their employer for social and community linkages than other low-income families. The employment situation for these workers is the truly larger context in which their family is embedded, as their child care and housing are all in camps often located at or near the employer. This may give the employers significant power over migrant workers and their families, since these employees are isolated from additional cultural support for family health, education, and social activities.

High mobility and transience are unique constraints emanating from migrant families' dual cultural ties. They serve as barriers to both accumulation of human and social capital and assimilation into either dominant or minority host country cultures. For example, using a national sample of Latino migrants of all different backgrounds, Lueck and Wilson (2010) found that acculturative stress was lower for individuals with higher social ties, greater English proficiency, and those who were US citizens versus noncitizens. It was also lower for immigrants who wanted to migrate to the United States versus refugees who had to leave their country of origin, as well as for later generation immigrants.

Rather than general stress measures, more specific forms of stress, such as forms of acculturative stress, might be important to include in work-family studies. Acculturative stress, a concept identified in the Kossek et al. 2005 study, might be incorporated into future studies. Berry and Sam (1997) define acculturative stress as "a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation, which is the process of cultural and psychological change as the result of cross-cultural contact." Kossek et al. (2005) identified three types of acculturative stress in migrant worker families: (1) *demand stresses* relate to perceived or real conflict with the cul-

tural values of the mainstream society of the culture; (2) *opportunity stresses* relate to the ability of immigrants to achieve at a higher level than possible in their home country; and (3) *constraint stresses* are those that constrain individuals from integrating in the mainstream. These three factors influence cognitive appraisal of how well individuals and their families are able to manage stress and assimilation.

Future studies should incorporate measures of these different types of stresses. These can then be integrated into examination of how work and job demands create demands for the family. For example, due to the work hours that interfere with family time, some migrant families spend little time together, which may be experienced as a cultural loss associated with migrant work. The structuring of the timing of work, where various family members might work shifts of differing hours or lengths, may also result in a loss of family time, an important family resource.

Child care, children's educational experiences, and separation have a critical impact on working parents' work-family well-being, yet are underexamined in work-family studies. The Kossek et al. 2005 study included data collected from interviews with 79 low-income Latina migrant farm-working mothers from five migrant work sites in the state of Michigan, each of whom had an infant in the migrant Head Start program. They found that the more positive a migrant mother felt about child care, the more favorable her ratings of job and family performance, and the less negative the ratings of overall demands and constraints. Migrant Head Start and its quality child care were "bright spots" in the migrant mothers' lives, and seemed to provide positive buffering social psychological effects that went beyond the provision of care services. Surprisingly, few management studies today examine the nature, quantity, quality and satisfaction with childcare arrangements.

Kossek and colleagues 2005 study found that children's education is often hindered and inconsistent due to family economic pressures and the demands of the migrant life. Children of migrant work-

ers usually start the school year in the farming location and then travel back to their home base to continue their school year for the winter months. Often these children are then taken out of school in early spring to travel back north so the family can work on the early crops. The struggle for economic family stability forces migrant lifestyles to revolve around working, moving on to find other work, and perhaps then migrating south at the end of the season. In the Michigan study sample (Kossek et al. 2005), 5 percent had moved four or more times within the past year, 48 percent had moved two to three times within the year, and 40 percent had moved once. Consequently, children find themselves enrolled in different schools each year.

Statistics report that only about half (50.7 percent) of migrant teenagers graduate (Genesco Migrant Center, n.d.). Frequent moves and the need to have them contribute to family income make school attendance difficult. At least one-third of migrant children work on farms to help their families; others may not be hired directly, but are in the fields helping their parents. When children are not doing well at school, parents experience spillover mental health stress and strain affecting their job well-being, performance, and engagement (Crouter, Bumpus, Maguire, and McHale, 1999). Despite all of this, very little research in the work-family field measures children's educational experiences as moderators of work-family conflict and well-being.

While Kossek et al. studied migrant mothers co-located with at least one young child, Rusch and Reyes (2013) focused on the population of farmworkers who are separated from their families when they migrate for work. Similar to Kossek et al., Rusch and Reyes (2013) looked at acculturative stress along with depression and family functioning. Their study examined the role of parent-child separations during serial migration to the United States in predicting individual- and family-level outcomes in Mexican immigrant families. They assessed parents' subjective appraisals of their family's separation and reunion experiences to explore associations with self-reported acculturative stress, depression, and family functioning. The study found that separated status parents reported significantly higher levels of accultura-

tive stress, but no significant differences were found between separated and nonseparated status parents on depression or family functioning. Four out of five farmworkers are men who often must leave their families behind while they seek work (Geneseo Migrant Center, n.d.), so the study of migrant farmworkers separated from their children is important to the work-family discussion. Rusch and Reyes (2013) indicated that “social support networks for parents and successful school transitions for children may emerge as powerful factors that help mitigate reunification stress” (152).

Resource deprivation increasingly may be the cause of work-family challenges. Migrant workers frequently live in temporary housing near where they work; consequently, the separation between “work” time and “nonwork” time is virtually nonexistent, as workers are often living with or near their coworkers, in housing of varying quality provided by their employer. Furthermore, during work hours there is a complicated separation (or lack thereof) between work and personal life in that often compensation is based on productivity, so farmworkers focus only on work during work hours, with little or no opportunity to integrate nonwork activities into their work day (that is, checking on a sick family member or attending a parent-teacher conference at school). In some cases, children are with their parents in the fields, as affordable child care is often not available.

Kossek et al. (2005) evaluated supervisor support and found that the more migrant workers perceived that their employers or supervisors were supportive of child care, such as providing child-care information, the higher the care quality was rated and the lower the workers’ turnover intentions. Despite this, social support for family from supervisors was not very prevalent, as two-thirds of the sample felt they could not share work and family concerns with their supervisors.

In a subsequent study, Kossek and Hammer (2008) evaluated the effects of supervisory support on another lower-wage employee group—supermarket employees and their managers. They found that teaching managers to be more supportive of the work-life issues of

those they supervise can be a simple and effective route to improving employee health and satisfaction. While the actual training of managers supervising migrant workers would differ somewhat from the supermarket population, the end result of improving employee motivation and decreasing the risk of costly health problems applies.

Further, perhaps the biggest constraint to cultural assimilation and the family's ability to manage stress and improve long-term overall social and economic well-being was extreme poverty. Migrant workers tend to be poorer than the typical poor in their host country, a tendency that holds true with the US migrant worker population. In addition, Latino immigrants have higher poverty rates than the overall US Latino population. In the Kossek study, every household in the sample had an income that was far below US federal poverty guidelines. Seventy percent made less than \$300 a week. This income is representative: 12 percent of all farmworkers earn less than the minimum wage; half of all farmworkers earn less than \$7,500 per year, and half of all farmworker families earn less than \$11,000 per year, far below the 2002 US poverty level of \$18,100 for a family of four (Geneseo Migrant Center, n.d.). Accounting for some of this is the reality that much farmwork is seasonal and workers cannot earn money while waiting for crops to ripen, nor in bad weather, when they are sick, or when traveling to their next job.

Hovey and Magana (2000) also studied immigrant farmworkers in the Midwest, with a focus on the relationship of acculturative stress, depression, and anxiety. They found that family dysfunction, ineffective social support, low self-esteem, lack of choice in the decision to immigrate and live a migrant farmworker lifestyle, high education levels, and low levels of religiosity were significantly associated with high levels of anxiety and depression. Their overall findings suggest that Mexican immigrant farmworkers who experience elevated levels of acculturative stress may be "at risk" for experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression. Thus the lack of resources from supervisors and lack of family income must be key in-

redients in work-family interventions to reduce work-family conflict for this population.

Individual and family resilience are seen within this population to a greater extent than might be expected considering the nature of migrant farm work. Employment and living conditions for migrant farmworkers are often difficult—long hours, physically difficult tasks, low pay, few benefits, separation from family in some cases, frequently undesirable housing, and little control over one’s work. According to the Geneseo Migrant Center (n.d.), hard physical labor, dangerous equipment, and pesticide exposure make agriculture one of the most hazardous occupations in the United States. Furthermore, migrant workers and their families have poorer physical health than the general population and shorter life expectancy than the national average.

However, Kossek et al. (2005) noted positive attitudes among the migrant farmworkers they studied. Despite challenges and hardships, many migrant farmworkers exhibit both individual and family resilience. Davydov et al. (2010) discuss the concept of resilience as it relates to mental health, and note the ambiguities in the definition and terminology around the concept. Their work is not specific to migrant farmworkers; rather, they more generally present resilience as a concept that can be viewed as a “defense mechanism, which enables people to thrive in the face of adversity.” They emphasize the importance of improving resilience as a target for treatment and prevention in the field of mental health.

Hawley and DeHann (1996) discuss *family resilience* as a construct that describes how families adapt to stress and bounce back from adversity. They define family resilience, a relatively new concept at the time of their article, as describing “the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time.” This definition suggests that resilience at the family level describes the “trajectory a family follows as it positively adapts to and bounces back from stressful circumstances” (Hawley and DeHann

1996), providing a longer-term perspective on resilience as it pertains to families who migrate for work and move frequently.

Walsh (2003) defines resilience as the “ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges,” and expands concepts of individual resilience to the family unit. The study by Parra-Cardona et al. (2006), seeking to better understand the life experiences of a group of migrant families who lived in Michigan during the harvesting season, included consideration of working conditions and safety issues as well as dissatisfaction with interactions with health care providers, social agencies, and schools that do not have bilingual service providers. Their research also provides detailed accounts of the “sense of resilience of migrant families, which seems to be associated with specific cultural values.” They note that the migrants’ resilience was supported by a sense of being inspired by their children and support from extended family, as well as a sense of the importance of supporting family members in need.

Parra-Cardona et al. (2006) also reported examples of the capacity of the migrant families to adapt their belief systems in order to make meaning of adversity, a concept used as well by Walsh (2003). This was demonstrated by participants’ high level of perceived life satisfaction despite the challenges of migrant life, and the association of these challenges with the opportunity to improve their quality of life as well as to financially secure the future of their children.

In summary, greater attention must be paid to migrant farmworkers and their families, and increased support is needed for programs to address the work-life issues of this under-studied and critical population. Migrant farmworkers are an integral part of how fruits and vegetables are grown, harvested, and distributed in the United States. As a population, migrant farmworkers could be considered vulnerable, as could their families. Future research in the work-family field pertaining to this population must focus on resilience and those policies and practices that promote resilience and build on strengths in order to address the issues associated with acculturative stress and provide greater support for the physical and mental health and well-

being of farmworkers. As Kossek et al. (2005) suggest, researchers and policy makers must shift away from individual deficit and toward positive resource views of low-income workers seeking to better their lives.

Research continues to be needed to assess possible stress buffers and identify resilience factors, and to follow migrant farmworkers and their families longitudinally in order to better understand long-term implications. Similar to other interventions, work-life programs with migrant farmworkers will need to be multifaceted, addressing the needs of individuals and their families, including strategies for lessening the spillover of job demands on workers and their families, and developing mainstream acculturation strategies that promote greater stability and social advancement. Additional research must also be conducted in the area of the young migrant children's social, emotional, and intellectual school readiness. And it is still true today, as it was in 2005 (Kossek et al.), that additional study is needed on interventions that promote earning wages and caregiving, and challenging migrant stereotypes that support discrimination and the inability to fully utilize social services and manage employer relations.

In order to address acculturative stress factors and resource deprivation, future studies and interventions should include support in the following areas:

- sources of resilience for migrant farmworkers and their families;
- social networks for individuals and families;
- children's education and development; and
- supervisory behaviors.

There is a clear need for work-life scholars and other scholars and advocates to conduct additional research on the issues affecting migrant farmworkers and their families. While their work and life circumstances are unique, validated approaches to supporting employees can be customized and applied to this population. There are multiple potential benefits—for migrant farmworkers, their families, their employers, and indirectly the agriculture sector of the US economy.

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