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Structural Vulnerability and Hierarchies of Ethnicity and Citizenship on the Farm

Seth M. Holmes

Every year, the United States employs nearly two million seasonal farm laborers, approximately half of whom are migrants (Rothenberg 1998). This article utilizes one year of participant observation on a berry farm in Washington State to analyze hierarchies of ethnicity and citizenship, structural vulnerability, and health disparities in agriculture in the United States. The farm labor structure is organized along a segregated continuum from US citizen Anglo-American to US citizen Latino, undocumented *mestizo* Mexican to undocumented indigenous Mexican. The ethnography shows how this structure symbolically reinforces connotations of race with perceptions of civilized and modern subjects. These hierarchies produce what is now understood in medical anthropology as structural vulnerability among those with poor living and housing conditions, producing social disparities in health. The ethnographic data argue against the common presumption that social hierarchies are willed by powerful individuals by showing the structural production of these social inequalities and their concomitant health disparities.

Key Words: health disparities; indigenous Mexican migrants; farm workers; unauthorized immigration; US-Mexico migration

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BEYOND RISK BEHAVIOR

During my first summer on the Tanaka Farm in western Washington State, I accompanied an indigenous Mexican picker, Abelino, to see a physician (Holmes 2006a). His knee was injured while picking strawberries two days prior. It was Saturday and the only clinic open was a private urgent care clinic. After the initial physical examination, brief history-taking, and knee X-ray, the physician matter-of-factly suggested my friend do lighter work on the farm, “something sitting down, maybe at a desk.” Abelino responded with a quiet, respectful laugh. On Monday the next week, Abelino asked for lighter work at the farm office. The bilingual receptionist told him in a frustrated tone, “*No, porque no*” (“No, because no”).

Later that month, I accompanied Abelino to the busy clinic of a rehabilitation medicine physician for follow-up. This physician asked me to translate that Abelino “hurt his knee” because he had been “picking incorrectly” and did “not know how to bend over correctly.” Notably, in her rush, she had not asked Abelino any details about his work, including how he bent over. Years later, Abelino still tells me he has occasional knee pain and that “*los medicos no saben nada*” (“the doctors don’t know anything”).

This brief vignette focuses on what physicians and public health practitioners often characterize as risk behaviors—choice of job or poor body posture. The physicians involved in Abelino’s care consider these risk behaviors to be the genesis of his suffering. This focus keeps them inadvertently unaware of the macro-social structures that produce suffering. In this article, I propose the concept of structural vulnerability as an important counterpoint to the common individualistic focus on risk behavior in medicine and public health. This concept trains the gaze onto the social structures that produce and organize suffering into what public health denotes as health disparities.

I flesh out the concept of structural vulnerability through a thick description of the complex hierarchy at work on the Tanaka berry farm in Washington State (Holmes 2006a, 2006b, 2007). This hierarchy produces vulnerability to suffering through differential demands, pressures, and bodily practices in work. I avoid the pitfalls of a simplistic, unidirectional understanding of structural violence (Wacquant 2004) by illustrating the ways in which macrostructures produce vulnerability on every level of the farm hierarchy. The concept of structural vulnerability directs blame and interventional attention away from the victims of suffering and toward the social structures producing and organizing their suffering.

THE TANAKA FARM

The Tanaka Farm is located in Skagit County, Washington, employing approximately 500 people during the picking season, May through November. During the winter and early spring, the farm employs approximately 80 workers. The farm is well known for strawberries, many from the “Northwest variety” cultivated by the founder of the family farm. The business is vertically integrated, from seed nursery to berry fields to processing plant, with almost all berries produced on the farm sold under larger labels. The farm consists of several thousand acres, much of the land visible west of Interstate-5. Most of the land consists of long rows of strawberry plants, although several fields are dedicated to raspberries, apples, and organic or “traditional” blueberries.

At the base of a forested hill on the edge of the farm lies the largest migrant labor camp on the farm, housing approximately 250 workers and their families during the harvest (Figure 1).

Immediately above this camp are five large houses partially hidden by trees with floor-to-ceiling views of the valley. Two other labor camps are partially hidden behind the large, concrete processing plant and the farm



FIGURE 1 Labor camp on the Tanaka Farm (color figure available online).

headquarters. The camp closest to the road houses 50 year-round employees and the other, a few hundred yards away, holds almost 100 workers and their families during the harvest. Diagonally across from these two labor camps and the processing plant are the houses of some of the Tanaka family. The one most visible from the main road is a semi-Jeffersonian, one-story, brick house with white pillars behind a white, wooden fence. The Tanaka Farm advertises itself as “a family business spanning four generations with over 85 years experience in the small fruit industry.”

On a more subtle level, farm work is produced by a complex segregation, a conjugated oppression (Bourgois 1988, 1995; Holmes 2006a, 2006b, 2007). In Bourgois’s analysis of a Central American banana plantation, ethnicity and class together produce an oppression phenomenologically and materially different than that produced by either alone. In contemporary US agriculture, the primary lines of power fall along categories of race, class, and citizenship. The complex of labor on the Tanaka Farm involves several hundred workers occupying distinct positions from owner to receptionist, crop manager to tractor driver, berry checker to berry picker (see Figure 2). People on the farm often describe the hierarchy with vertical metaphors, speaking of those “above” or “below” them or of “overseeing.” Responsibilities, anxieties, privileges, and structural vulnerability differ from the top to the bottom of this hierarchy (Holmes 2007). In congruence with the vertical metaphors utilized by those on the farm, the remainder of this article will move ethnographically from those considered at the top to those considered at the bottom.

FARM EXECUTIVES

This farm is owned and run by third-generation Japanese-Americans whose parents’ generation lost half their land during the internment in the 1940s. Their relatives, with hundreds of acres on Bainbridge Island, Washington, were interned suddenly and the government sold their land out from under them. Those in the Skagit Valley had time to entrust their farm to a white family, and thereby avoided the same fate.

Today, the third generation of Tanaka brothers makes up the majority of farm executives. The others are Anglo-American professionals brought in from other agricultural companies. The following are abbreviated profiles of key farm executives, focusing on their anxieties. In these profiles, we see that the growers’ worries are focused on farm survival in a bleak landscape of competition with increasing corporate agribusiness, expanding urban boundaries, and economic globalization. These anxieties are founded in the reality of ongoing farm closures throughout the region.

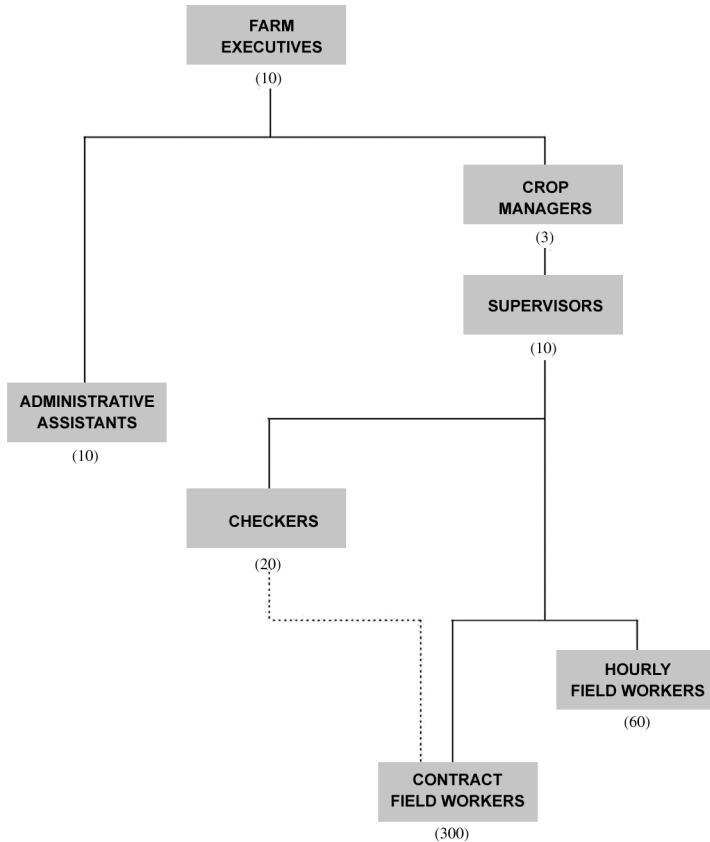


FIGURE 2 Labor hierarchy on the Tanaka Farm. *Note.* Solid lines denote direct oversight. Dotted lines denote less formal oversight.

Over the course of this research, many of my friends and family who visited automatically blamed the pickers' poor living and working conditions on the growers and assumed that these growers could easily rectify the situation. This supposition is supported by other writings on farm workers, most of which describe the details of pickers' lives but leave out the experiences of the growers (see Rothenberg 1998 for a good example of an author considering the perspectives of growers). The fact that the perspectives of farm management are generally overlooked encourages readers' assumptions that growers are wealthy, selfish, or unconcerned.

The stark reality and precarious future of the farm described next remind us that the situation is more complex. The corporatization of US agriculture and the growth of global free markets squeeze growers such that they cannot

imagine increasing the pay of the pickers or improving the labor camps without bankrupting the farm. Thus, many of the most powerful inputs into the suffering of farm workers are structural, not willed by individual agents. In this case, structural violence is enacted by market rule and later channeled by international and domestic racism, classism, sexism, and anti-immigrant prejudice (Bourgeois 2001; Farmer 1992, 1997, 1999).

The structural nature of the labor hierarchy comes into further relief when the hopes and values of the growers are considered. The Tanaka Farm executives are ethical, good people who want the best for their workers and their local community. They have a vision of a good society that includes family farming and opportunities for social advancement for all people. They want to treat their workers well and leave a legacy for their children. They participate in churches and non-profit organizations working toward such hopes in society. They asked for my opinions on how the labor camps could be improved for the workers. After a picker strike in which explicit racist treatment of the pickers in the fields was brought to light, the growers were visibly surprised and upset. They promptly instructed all crop managers to treat all workers with respect. Perhaps instead of blaming the growers, it is more appropriate to understand them as human beings doing the best they can in the midst of an unequal and harsh system.

Rob Tanaka is a tall, bearded man with a kind, gentle personality. He is in charge of agricultural production of the farm, planning everything from planting to harvest and overseeing those in charge of each crop. His office is located in a small house in the middle of the berry fields, several miles from the main offices. He spends most of his time in this office, although he also works via laptop in the small lounge of the main office building and visits the fields often. His primary concerns relate directly to farming—weather, insects and birds, soil quality, and labor—although he is also concerned by the survival of the farm. Over several conversations in the small lounge in the main office building, Rob described to me his anxieties related to his work and the farm's techniques to buffer their vulnerability.

Seth: What things could cause the most problems?

Rob: For us, it's labor. We can grow the best crop there is, but if we don't have the people to harvest, we're pretty well sunk. Also weather. There's flooding, freezing. A frost kills the growing tips for your buds, so you can lose anywhere from 5 to 40 percent of your crop. And regulations somewhat. Regulatory issues which change your practice usually pick the edge off and it goes to someone else.

It's also urban growth. There will be battles for preserving farming if that's what one wants. If we plan on trying to farm and hand it down, and all of a sudden there's all these buildings being built, we'd go, "Oh, wait a minute, I thought we were going to continue

farming for another hundred years in the valley.” Wherever the border of growth is, the guy on the other side of the fence is just waiting to sell because it’s all economics. I understand that. Would you rather have two hundred bucks or two hundred thousand? How can farming compete with that? Especially now, as processors move out and production is going offshore where it’s cheaper.

Costs are up on everything, and pricing’s stayed the same.

Also, there are a lot of worries that I have about expanding. Any time we decide to do something bigger, it’s like “Wow, you want to take this headache and make it bigger? Are you sure?” And we’re trying to look to the future for our kids, the next generation, and the future of the community.

Right now, the growing crop is blueberries which gained popularity. Health benefits of blueberries have really taken off in the last 10 years. If it wasn’t for that, I think we’d be hurting.

Seth: Some of your blueberries are organic, right?

Rob: Yeah. That’s just to spread the risks out. We lowered our risk for debt, but the return isn’t as great either. Hopefully it will be stable instead of doing this [moves his hands up and down]. And if we dump everything else, it would provide steady income, just like buying a pretty conservative mutual fund versus speculating on a tech stock. Look at it like we’re creating a portfolio of crops. Some have more risk than others; it’s the same thing. For example, apples—we were planning on taking 20 acres out this year, but it looks like we’re going to make some money on it, so . . .

Seth: Probably not [chuckle].

Rob: Yeah.

In this conversation, Rob indicates his primary worries regarding the most important variables affecting not only his job but the feasibility of the farm business as a whole—labor, weather, urban growth, regulations, and the market. He explains that this family farm has developed a “portfolio of crops” in order to buffer their vulnerability to the market.

In another conversation, Rob told me about a recent meeting of the farm executives about being a “great company.” He explained that every time he heard the word “great” all he could see in the discussion was profitability to shareholders. This made him angry and he said, “We already are a great company, and if this is what being a great company means, then I want to be a good company.” He described his frustration with the farm becoming more corporate and bureaucratic. He liked it more when it was a small family business and he “didn’t have to go through all these hoops to write a check.” These excerpts show Rob Tanaka concerned with the farm’s survival for future generations in the midst of a difficult market while resisting becoming another corporate agribusiness.

Another of the executives is Tom, a lean white man in his late 40s brought in by the Tanaka family to help the farm compete on the international small fruit market. Tom has an office in the trailer with the other main executive offices, although he has taken more care to decorate it than most, proudly displaying a colorful painting of workers picking strawberries in China—one of the very places against which he is competing. Previously, Tom was in charge of processing and marketing for a large Mexican strawberry producer. At the Tanaka Farm, his job starts before sunrise, when he calls his competitors and potential buyers in Poland, China, and then Chile. Later in the day, he can take breaks to meet friends or eat out. He daily attempts to find a competitive advantage by changing the fruit grown in various fields or by buying fruit from other farms to process and then sell. Over the course of several months, Tom describes the stark competitive disadvantages of the farm in domestic and global terms.

Tom: In Oregon and Washington, you have the Totem variety [of strawberry]. Let's call it the Northwest variety. In California, the big variety is the Camerosa. California is for the preserve and the fresh market, of course. That's where they make the big bucks. It's for preserves, fillings, juice concentrates, like pop tarts, jellies, anytime you get strawberry as a sweetener, food science related stuff. This is my enemy over here, food science. They're taking not a very flavorful strawberry—you have tasted the Camerosa. It's not very flavorful. It's white in the center. It dissolves pretty easily if you cook it down. What they do is add sugar, sweeteners, and coloring agents to stretch that strawberry out. So you're taking a very cheap strawberry, adding things to it and stretching it out. So, when you taste a pop tart, you're tasting something sweet that might be reminiscent of a strawberry. Northwest is for dairy. The primary market I go after is yogurt and ice cream because the strawberry itself in its natural form has to carry the product. Northwest is red throughout. So, Haagen Dazs for example, if you look at the ice cream, you're going to see vanilla, cream, sugar, strawberry. If you buy one from California, you're going to find emulsifiers; there could be 20 of them.

Seth: Why isn't Northwest more fresh market?

Tom: Because you cannot ship them across the street; you can hardly get them to Seattle. You see how they arrive at our own plant here, juice dripping off. California, I ship them from Oxnard and that's 40 hours and they arrive in better condition than when we see our own fruit in the plant. Camerosa is a dream to run; they're like potatoes; they're rock hard. I compete primarily with Poland because their variety is closest to what we're doing up here. If Poland has a short crop, I've moved products to France

for Haagen Dazs Europe. Chile and China, they have more a California type. In the last year, they introduced Totem into China, so that's our next major threat.

I think that the competitive disadvantages that we have aren't just Northwest versus California. I think the US strawberry industry as a whole has problems. We're forced to do total traceability back to the farm to make sure that we're not overspraying. Whereas in China, they don't do that.

I'm not an optimist on the future of the Northwest strawberry. It's expensive. For example, if you talk to a grower here, they're gonna tell you they want 50 cents a pound in the field. I can buy finished product landed here from China, grade A frozen Camerosa for probably 40 cents a pound. That's why they're paying R and D [research and development] people eighty thousand bucks a year to make it stretch. It comes down to economics. So, I'm just hanging on to a totally shrinking customer base. A half a million pound buyer walked away earlier this year. They went to Chile. I can't blame them; it's just the way it is. I just hope that Haagen Dazs keeps buying.

Tom paints a stark picture of the effects of global free markets in the context of large economic inequalities. He worries daily about competition with the California variety of berries along with the stretching of its flavor via food science. Although Tom is dedicated to his job, starting work before the sun rises, he does not have much hope for the future of berry farms in the Pacific Northwest nor in the United States in general.

The farm executives are anxious to ensure the survival of the farm for future generations in the midst of bleak economic trends. They work long days, worrying about many variables only partially within their control and doing their best to run a family farm that treats its workers well. They are very aware of their own structural vulnerability. They also have some control over their own schedules. They take breaks when they choose to eat or work out, talk on the phone or meet with a friend. They have comfortable houses, private and clean indoor bathrooms and kitchens, insulation and heating, and quiet. They have private indoor offices with phones and computers as well as employees "under" them (as they state).

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS

Most of the administrative assistants are white, along with a few Latino US citizens. All are female. They work seated at desks in open spaces without

privacy. They are in charge of reception, interacting with white local residents and businesspeople as well as with Mexican farm workers.

Sally is the year-round front desk receptionist. She is a lean, white woman, approximately 40 years old, often smiling. She grew up in the same town in which the farm is located and lives with her husband and children in a relatively small house. The reception desk used to face away from the front counter such that anyone entering approached the receptionist's back. Sally tries to treat the workers well and turning around the desk when she first arrived was one step in this direction. She helped arrange loans for the Mexican farm workers one year when the picking date was moved back and the workers were living out of their cars, waiting without money or food. Crew bosses and farm executives regularly reprimand her for being too nice to the workers. She has been told to be "more quick," "less friendly." In addition, she feels disrespected by the people "above her" (as she states), treated like a "peon." They sometimes give her advice on her work or give her jobs to do without the common courtesies of "please" or "thank you."

Maria is 30, a bilingual Latina from Texas. Her great grandparents moved to the United States from Mexico. She lives in the nearest labor camp with heat and insulation. She works several positions May through November, sometimes at the front desk with Sally, sometimes in the portable unit where pickers can ask questions and pick up mail in the afternoon. On Fridays, she works in the wooden shed where paychecks are passed out to workers in a long line. Her first summers on the farm, including the summer she was pregnant, she picked berries and worked with a hoe. After four years with the hoe, she was moved up to deskwork due largely to her ability to speak English fluently. Like many other workers on the farm, she first heard of indigenous Mexicans while working on the farm. She explained her work to me while we sat in the portable, occasionally interrupted by a picker seeking their mail.

I'm pretty easy to get along with. I guess that's why I've been in the office for five years. I try to help these people—like a guy just came about his tickets [papers marking how much he picked]. I can get in trouble if I do anything with those tickets, because it's not my job. But, I tend to do it because I understand them. I started out like they did; I started out at the bottom.

This season was wild and busy. Last week I worked 108 hours. Then trying to get answers to [the pickers]; sometimes you ask for answers and get all this run-around. One of the Tanakas is really helpful. If I have a problem, I go to him right away. He listens and he's pretty understanding.

The administrative assistants are responsible for completing tasks for the farm executives, providing a cheerful face to those outside the farm, and managing sternly those within. They work six or seven days a week indoors

at desks without privacy and frequently answer phone calls that distract them from their other tasks. They worry about the moods and opinions of their bosses. They are paid minimum wage without overtime since agriculture falls outside US overtime labor laws (Sakala 1987). They have lunch breaks and can take breaks to use the bathroom as long as there is no one from outside the farm needing direct help at that moment.

CROP MANAGERS

The crop managers are in charge of all details involved in the efficient production of a specific crop, from plowing to planting, pruning to spraying, picking to delivery, and finally to processing. They have private offices in the field house amidst the berry fields nearby the largest labor camp, although they also spend a fair amount of time walking through the fields overseeing. During harvest, they begin by 5 a.m. seven days a week and finish in the early evening. They can take a break when they choose to eat, run errands, or go quickly home. The crop managers worry about the availability of machinery, the effects of weather on the crops, and the docility of their labor force. They have some control over how much the pickers are paid, and they have several field bosses below them enforcing their instructions.

Jeff is a 30-year-old white man who recently finished a degree in agricultural marketing at a university in California. He manages blueberries and raspberries. Jeff told me about his job as he drove his large white pick-up with two large dogs in back. We drove to an agriculture store to buy large concrete drains for the blueberry fields and to Costco to buy tri-tip steaks for a potluck at his church. He explained several simultaneous tasks in the raspberry fields to illustrate the many things a crop manager has to oversee. The thing that causes him the most anxiety is having multiple bosses on a family farm without a strict chain of command. He also worries about weather, and about harvest crews: "It is what it is, you know. Sometimes people walk out and sometimes people pick. It's kind of like the weather, you can't really predict it and you don't really have control over it, but usually it ends up working out all right." He went on, "We make the prices fair, so if the crew walks out [on strike], we just say 'hey, we'll be here tomorrow' and that's the way it is. They can come back if they want." He told me that all the people on raspberry machines are Latinos from Texas whereas those picking blueberries are "O-hacan" (Oaxacan), although he also told me that he cannot really tell the difference. That week, Jeff was in the midst of budgeting for next year, trying to predict the crop yield. He predicts based on bud count: for each fruit bud in the fall, he expects seven berries the following summer, although a freeze could make the fruit smaller or kill the buds altogether.

Scott is a tall, thin, middle-aged white man who came to the Tanaka Farm from a large apple orchard in eastern Washington. He is in charge of the strawberries and apples. He spoke with me in his private office in the field house as well as in the fields as I picked strawberries and he walked around talking with people and eating berries. He explained to me the number of workers on the farm—approximately 500 in summer and 80 in winter—and what is done in the different seasons. His primary worries relate to managing the labor force, “which is sometimes pretty overwhelming,” he told me. The following conversation took place after a brief strawberry picker strike late one summer.

Seth: What things worry you as crop manager?

Scott: Numerous [laughing]. Damn near changes daily. Once we get closer to strawberry harvest, the big push is to see, “am I going to get enough pickers?” The concern’s not really that I have too many, it’s always “will I get enough?” Once I see that we have 300 guys living in the camps, then that starts to ease down a bit. I can pick strawberries with 300 guys, but 350’s a lot nicer. You get up to 400, then you’re concerned about getting too many guys. Now, they’re only getting to come out and work four hours a day. You get 400 guys and you go through the field pretty quick. So, we try to keep it between 350 and 400, which gives everybody a good day’s work. Not too long, not too short. They can go out and make decent enough money and feel they got a good day’s work. They’ve made their wages and get plenty of rest for the next day. If strawberries goes well, the other crops just kind of fall into place.

But, we couldn’t do it without the people that come and do it for us. The [strike] we had this year was a big deal. It was a worry. Since I’ve worked here, I’ve gotten to know some of the Tanakas. They want to treat everybody right. That’s a big push for them. So when that kind of thing happens, they’ve really stepped back to take a look at exactly what’s going on. You’ll almost always find a Tanaka out in the field. They’re still real hands-on.

Seth: That’s different from other farms?

Scott: Oh yeah. The farm I ran in eastern Washington had 150 acres. I’d only see the guy who owned it twice a year. It was a big change to come over here and the guy that owns the farm is out there working on the site. I think it’s good for morale all the way around. That’s just Tanaka’s work ethic. If you’re out there working 14 hours, 7 days a week, so are they and usually they’re working more than anybody else . . . Daylight to dark, it’s just the nature of farming.

There is a lot of talk today about immigration and the border and stuff like that. They end up spending a whole lot of money to get up here to work. I think we should tell the politicians, even if it’s not popular, there’s a lot of need that they have to work here. That’s a given.

After I turned off my tape recorder, Scott wanted to hear more about my interest in crossing the border with some of the Triqui indigenous Oaxacan workers. First, he told me I should get permission from the federal government. Later, he changed his mind and said the problem with that would be that they would ask for all my information about where I crossed. He was afraid the government would then shut down that route “and we wouldn’t have any workers anymore.” He explained that almost 90 percent of the pickers are undocumented.

The profiles of the crop managers bring into focus the practical attempts from the management to run a good, ethical farm in the midst of difficult conditions. In addition, Scott is clearly concerned about the direct effects of immigration and border policies on his labor force. Like many farmers I interviewed, he knows that current US farming practices would be impossible without undocumented Latin American migrant workers.

SUPERVISORS

Several supervisors, often called “crew bosses,” work under each crop manager. Each directs a crew of 10 to 20 pickers. They walk through the fields, inspecting and telling workers to pick more quickly and carefully. The crew bosses are under constant supervision from the crop managers, although they can take short bathroom breaks and they often carry on light-hearted conversations with coworkers. Most crew bosses are US Latinos, with a few mestizo Mexicans and one Mixteco indigenous Oaxacan. They live in the insulated, year-round labor camp. Some of the crew bosses call the Oaxacan workers derogatory names. The crew boss most often accused by pickers of such racist treatment has a daughter, Barbara, who is also a crew boss.

Barbara is a bilingual Latina from Texas in her early twenties who has worked the harvest at the farm for 11 years. She attends a community college in Texas every spring and hopes to become a history teacher. She is upset that other crew bosses call Oaxacan people *pinche Oaxaco* (“damn Oaxacan,” using a derogatory mispronunciation of the word Oaxacan) or *Indio estúpido* (“stupid Indian”). She explains to me that Oaxacans are afraid to complain or demand better working conditions because they do not want to lose their jobs. She describes a farm policy stating that if a crew boss fires a picker, they can never be hired by anyone else on the farm. She explains, “It’s unfair. I think there should be checks and balances.” Her family learned English in Texas as well as in the farm-sponsored English classes each night after work. The farm executives intend for these classes to be open to anyone on the farm. Others on the farm believe that the courses are open to all workers except pickers. This unofficial, yet effective exclusion of pickers from the English classes inadvertently shores up segregation on the farm.

Mateo is 29 years old, a Mixteco father of two young children. He has worked on the farm for 12 years and has taken English classes for 5 years. His family had enough money to allow him to finish high school in Oaxaca before emigrating. He is fluent in his native language, Mixteco Alto, and Spanish, and is the only Oaxacan person on the farm who speaks English. He is also the only Oaxacan with a job other than picker. He oversees pickers in the strawberry and blueberry harvests. He hopes to continue studying English and be promoted on the farm until he can “work with his mind instead of his body” (*trabajar con la mente en vez del cuerpo*). Mateo worries about the pregnant women in his crew picking long days in pesticide-covered plants. He explains that many give birth prematurely due to the difficulty of their work. He also worries about the low pay of the pickers. The pay for strawberries has gone up only a few cents per pound in a decade and the pay for blueberries has gone down in the past several years.

Barbara and Mateo manifest the common desire to treat workers well even though the structures within which they all work are “unfair” (as they say). Mateo’s position as the only Oaxacan crew boss shows the importance of the ability to study English in order to be promoted and helps illuminate the contours of the structures leading to vulnerability.

CHECKERS

Local white teenagers punch the beginning and ending times as well as the weights of each bucket of berries brought in on each picker’s work cards. They check to make sure the berries brought in are ripe enough without being rotten or having leaves attached. They sit or stand in the shade of overhead umbrellas or in the sunshine as they talk and laugh with each other. They speak English with an occasional Spanish word to the pickers. Some occasionally hurl English expletives—and rarely even a berry—at pickers often old enough to be their parents. Some speak of the Mexican pickers as “grease heads” and joke about them driving low-riders, although there were no low-riders in the labor camp or the strawberry field parking lots. The following tape-recorded field note excerpt describes the checking stations during my first week picking.

There were different stations where you could have your berries weighed. The first station I went to had three people, and they were slow. They weren’t mean and they weren’t really nice, just kind-of slow and disorganized, which was frustrating because they were taking away my time to get pounds. And I might not get the minimum weight for the day because they were slow. On top of that, even though my berries weighed 28 pounds, I was

marked for 26. The next place I went to weigh my berries, there was somebody teaching someone else how to do it, “if you see more than ten green stems when you look at the berries, take them out. Throw out the bad berries. You’ve got to look through the berries that are underneath, too, because sometimes they try to hide the bad berries.” I was thinking to myself, “You don’t have time to try to hide anything. You just go; you do it as fast as you can!” The next place I went, there was a girl and the one Chicano guy. The Chicano guy didn’t talk. He just moved berries back and forth and the girl was weighing and I liked how fast they were. The next place I went, they seemed kind-of rude—throwing berries out in a disrespectful way. They were throwing berries out, looking at people and telling them “no!” without speaking Spanish enough to explain what they meant by “no,” and simply refusing to weigh the bucket of berries.

During my second summer on the farm, a white, female college student came up to me and said, “So, I hear you’re writing a book.” Laura grew up in the area and worked assigning pickers to rows and checking ID badges. She is studying Spanish in college in Seattle and enjoys talking with and learning about the pickers. She has been frustrated with the way one supervisor, Shelly, sees the Mexican pickers. She explained, “One day we were walking back to the cars, one girl was talking to one of the pickers, practicing her Spanish. I don’t know if they were even talking to each other but Shelly said something to her, she didn’t want her to talk to pickers. It’s like she doesn’t trust them. She gets frazzled a lot. I was surprised, like, ‘why didn’t she want you to talk to them?’”

Although the higher farm management sees the employment of white teenager checkers to be developing positive values toward agriculture and diversity in the valley, checkers also learn that they deserve to have power over Mexicans, even those old enough to be their parents or grandparents. The teenagers are paid minimum wage while being allowed to talk and sit most of the time, while the pickers have to kneel constantly and work as fast as possible in order to keep their jobs. The checkers are given power over the number of pounds marked for pickers. They are allowed to treat the pickers as people who do not deserve equal respect. This experience serves to develop the lenses through which symbolic violence, the naturalization of inequality, is affected (Holmes 2007). In addition, Laura points out that the farm management sometimes works directly to keep labor positions and ethnicities segregated.

FIELD WORKERS PAID PER HOUR

Several small groups of field workers are paid per hour. All live in labor camps and work seven days a week from approximately five in the morning

until the early evening. Approximately a dozen men, mostly mestizo Mexicans along with a few Mixteco Oaxacans, drive tractors between the fields and the processing plant. The tractors carry stacks of berry containers several feet high, and the drivers are exposed to direct sun or rain all day. In addition, small groups of mostly mestizo Mexican men and women, and a handful of Mixtecos, work in other capacities, from tying off the new raspberry growth to covering blueberry bushes with plastic, from spraying chemical or concentrated vinegar (for organic fields) pesticides to using hoes between rows of plants.

Thirty-some raspberry pickers work 12 to 18 hours a day, 7 days a week for approximately 1 month. Two or three people work on each raspberry harvester, which is approximately one-story tall, bright yellow, and shaped like an upside down “U” tall enough for the row of raspberry bushes to pass beneath its middle. The machine shakes the bushes such that the ripe berries fall onto a conveyor belt and then onto a crate. One worker drives the machine; the others move the full berry crates and remove bad berries and leaves. They are all seated and have minimal shade from umbrellas attached to the machine. All the raspberry pickers are US Citizen Latinos from Texas; most are relatives of the raspberry crop manager.

FIELD WORKERS PAID BY WEIGHT

Pickers are the only group not paid by the hour. Instead, they are considered “contract workers” and are paid a certain amount per pound of fruit harvested. Most live in the camp furthest from farm headquarters and some live in the next furthest camp. Each day, they are told a minimum amount of fruit to pick. If they pick less, they are fired and kicked out of the camp. The first contract picker I met, a Triqui man named Abelino, explained, “The hourly jobs, the salaried jobs are better because you can count on how much you will make. But, they don’t give those jobs to us.”

Approximately 25 people, mostly mestizo Mexican with a few Mixteco and Triqui people, pick apples. The field boss, Abby, explained to me that picking apples is the hardest job on the farm. Apple pickers work 5 to 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, carrying a heavy bag of apples over their shoulders. They repeatedly climb up and down ladders to reach the apples. This job is sought after because it is known to be the highest paid picking position.

However, the majority—350 to 400—of pickers, often called simply “farm workers,” work in the strawberry fields for one month, followed by three months in the blueberry fields. Other than a few Mixtecos, they are almost all Triqui men, women, and children; agricultural workers can legally

be 14 years or older. Most pickers come with other family members. The official contract for strawberry pickers is 14 cents per pound of strawberries. This means that pickers must bring in 50 pounds of de-leafed strawberries every hour because the farm is required to pay Washington State minimum wage (\$7.16 at the time). In order to meet this minimum, pickers take few or no breaks from 5 a.m. until the afternoon when that field is completed. Nonetheless, they are often reprimanded and called *perros* (“dogs”), *burros*, *Oaxacos*, or *indios estupidos*. Many do not eat or drink before work so they do not have to take time to use the bathroom. They work as hard and fast as they can, arms flying in the air as they kneel in the dirt, picking and running with their buckets of berries to the checkers. Although they are referred to as “contract workers,” this is misleading. The pay per unit may be changed by the crop managers without warning or opportunity for negotiation.

Strawberry pickers work simultaneously with both hands in order to make the minimum. They pop off the green stem and leaves from each strawberry and avoid the green and the rotten berries. During my fieldwork, I picked once or twice a week and experienced gastritis, headaches, and knee, back, and hip pain for days afterward. I wrote in a field note after picking, “It honestly felt like pure torture.” Triqui pickers work seven days a week, rain or shine, without a day off until the last strawberry is processed. Occupying the bottom of the ethnic-labor hierarchy, Triqui pickers bear an unequal share of health problems, from idiopathic musculoskeletal pains to slipped vertebral disks, from type 2 diabetes to premature births and developmental malformations (Holmes 2006a; Kandula, Kersey, and Lurie 2004; McGuire and Georges 2003; Migration News 2004; Mobed, Gold, and Schenker 1992; Rural Migration News 2005; Rust 1990; Sakala 1987; Slesinger 1992; Villarejo 2003).

Most Triqui workers on this farm are from one village, San Miguel, located in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. Next, I highlight the economic and physical hardships of the pickers on the farm and on the US-Mexico border, touching on the importance of language, ethnicity, and education in the organization of the farm labor hierarchy. I also indicate the importance of immigration and border policies in determining the structural vulnerability of farm workers.

Marcelina is a 28-year-old Triqui mother of two. A local non-profit organized a seminar on farm labor for which I invited Marcelina to speak about her experiences migrating and picking. Shyly, she approached the translator, holding her one year-old daughter, speaking in Spanish, her second language.

I come to the United States to work. A man left me with two children. I wanted to come here to make money, but no. I don't even make enough to

send to Oaxaca to my Mom who is taking care of my son. Sometimes the strawberry goes poorly, your back hurts, and you don't make anything.

It's very difficult here. The farm camp manager doesn't want to give a room to a single woman. So, I'm living with this family over here [pointing to a Triqui family of five in the audience]. One gains nothing here, nothing to survive. Besides that, I have a daughter here with me and I don't make anything to give her. Working and working. Nothing. I've been here four years and nothing.

It's very difficult for a person here. I came to make money, like I thought, "here on the other side [of the border] there is money and good money," but no. We're not able to make enough to survive.

And then sometimes [the checkers] steal pounds. Sometimes rotten berries make it into the bucket—"Eat that one!" they say, throwing it into your face. They don't work well.

This is not good. You don't make enough even to eat. I have two children and it is very ugly here, very ugly to work in the field. That's how it is. Sometimes you want to speak up, but no. You can't speak to them.

After speaking about the difficulties of farm work in Washington, Marcelina illustrates the difficulties for Triqui people in Oaxaca and California. She describes giving up school to support her children and her sisters.

There in Oaxaca, we don't have work. There are no jobs. Only the men work sometimes, but since there are many children in my family, the men don't make money for me and my son. That's why I wanted to come here, to make money, but no—no—no. You don't make anything here. You don't have anything to survive. I wanted to work, to move ahead [*salir adelante*] with my children, to take them ahead [*salir adelante*].

I've been here four years without seeing my son.

In California, there's no work, just pruning and you don't make any money because of the same thing, we don't know Spanish, and that is because we don't have enough money to study. Parents have to suffer in order to send their children to school, buy food and school uniforms. I have lots of sisters back there, studying, but I couldn't study. There are many children who don't go to school because they lack money. I had to leave Oaxaca so I wouldn't suffer from hunger. I hoped I would make enough to send back to support my sisters in school. I had to give up school.

In Madera, CA, I shared a three-bedroom, one bath slum apartment with Marcelina and her daughter; Samuel, his wife and son; Samuel's sister and her son; Samuel's brother, his wife and daughter; and two other families of three. One of the Triqui families who welcomed me most into their lives was Samuel, his wife Leticia, and their four-year-old son. One night, while we watched a Jet Li action movie with the sound turned down and drank blue

Kool-Aid, Samuel described in Spanish “how the poor suffer” (*como sufren los pobres*).

Samuel: Here with Tanaka, we don’t have to pay rent, but they don’t pay us much. They pay 14 cents a pound. And they take out taxes, federal taxes, social security. They pay 20 dollars a day.

They don’t pay fairly. If a person has 34 pounds of strawberries, 4 pounds are stolen because the checker marks only 30. It is not just. That is what bothers people most. People work a lot. They suffer. Humans suffer.

It’s easy for them, but for us it’s not.

The people don’t say anything. They’re afraid of speaking because the farm will fire them. We want to say things to them, but can’t because we don’t have papers. Sometimes the bosses are really mean and they’ll deport you. That’s why people are silent.

One person makes \$3000 to \$5000 a year. We are not asking to be rich. We don’t come here to be rich. We come here to be a little more stable.

Yes, it’s very little. They say the boss doesn’t want us to earn money and I ask myself, “why.”

Some supervisors explain how we should pick or what we’re supposed to do, but other supervisors are bad people or have bad tempers and don’t explain well what we do or what we pick. They even scream at us, using words you should not say. If you treat people badly, they’re not going to work calmly or happily. But they scream at people. And the boss doesn’t know. And if we tell the boss, he might not believe us. They scream at us and call us “dumb donkeys” or “dogs.” It’s very ugly how they treat us.

Above, Samuel explains how little money the pickers make, why they do not stand up against mistreatment, and how poorly they are treated by their supervisors.

One of Marcelina’s cousins, Joaquin, nicknamed “Gordo,” elaborates on the stresses and contradictions of picking:

The supervisors say they’ll take away our IDs if we don’t pick the minimum. They tell us we’re dropping too many berries, we have to go slow so we don’t drop so much and when we go slowly, we don’t reach the minimum and, “go faster!” They tell us, “You don’t know how to work,” “Indian, you don’t know!” We already know how to work and why the berries drop. If we go slowly, we can’t make any money. If we hurry, we drop berries and they come and castigate us. “Dumb donkey!” “Dog!” We are afraid.

My first day picking, the only people who picked as slowly as I did were two Latina US citizen girls from California and one Latino US citizen man

who commuted from Seattle. After the first week, the two Latina girls began picking into the same bucket in order to make the minimum and keep one paycheck. The second week, I no longer saw the man from Seattle. I asked a supervisor where he had gone, assuming he had decided the work was too difficult and given up. She told me the farm made a deal with him that if he could make it through a week picking, they would give him a job paid hourly in the processing plant. He has been “one of the hardest workers” in the plant since then. I inquired as to why indigenous Mexicans could not get processing plant jobs. The supervisor replied, “People who live in migrant camps cannot have those jobs, they can only pick.” She considered it farm policy without any need for explanation.

Thus, marginalization begets marginalization. Structural vulnerability increases along the labor hierarchy and is reinforced by official and unofficial policies, practices, and prejudices (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011). The indigenous Mexicans live in the migrant camps because they do not have the resources to rent apartments in town. Because they live in the camps, they are given only the worst jobs on the farm. Unofficial farm policies subtly reinforce labor and ethnic hierarchies. These profiles show that the position of the Triqui workers at the bottom of the hierarchy is multiply determined by poverty, education level, language, citizenship status, and ethnicity. In addition, these factors produce each other. For example, a family’s poverty cuts short an individual’s education, which limits one’s ability to learn Spanish (much less English), which limits one’s ability to leave the bottom rung of labor and housing. Poverty, at the same time, is determined in large part by the institutional racism at work against Triqui people in the first place. Segregation on the farm is the result of a complex system of feedback and feedforward loops organized around these multiple nodes.

Late in my second summer on the farm, the pickers walked out of the field just after the pay per weight was lowered. The pickers listed over 20 grievances about the working conditions, from low pay to racist statements from supervisors, lack of lunch breaks to unfair promotions of mestizo and Latino workers over indigenous pickers. Over the next week, several executives and a dozen pickers held meetings to discuss the grievances. The executives were visibly surprised and upset at the explicit racist treatment and differential promotions on the farm. They promptly instructed the crop managers to pass along the message to treat all workers respectfully. Lunch breaks and higher pay were instituted, but were silently rescinded the following summer. The pickers called the document a “contract” (*contrato*) and requested signatures from the executives. The farm president filed it as a “memo.”

This strike, the temporary nature of its results, and the conversion of the contract into a memo highlight the differential demands and pressures at all levels of the farm hierarchy. The executives demand that all workers are

treated with respect at the same time that their real anxieties over farm survival prohibit them from effectively addressing the primary, economic concerns of the pickers. Although everyone on the farm works for and is paid by the same business, they do not share vulnerability evenly. The pay and working conditions of the pickers function as variables semicontrollable by the farm executives as partial buffers between market changes and the viability of the rest of the farm.

CONFLATIONS OF RACE, CITIZENSHIP, AND MODERNITY

The ethnic-labor hierarchy seen here—white and Asian American US citizen, Latino US citizen or resident, undocumented mestizo Mexican, undocumented indigenous Mexican—is common in North American farming. The relative status of Triqui people below Mixtecos can be understood via a pecking order of perceived indigeneity. For example, many farm workers and managers told me the Triqui are more “purely indigenous” than other groups, Triqui is still their primary language, and “they are more simple.” Ethnicity functions as a camouflage for perceived indigeneity versus civilization. The Anglo and Japanese Americans inhabit the pole of civilization, modernity. The Triqui are positioned as the opposite, indigenous peasants, savages, simpletons. The more modern one is perceived to be, the better one’s job. As illustrated in Figure 3, this hierarchy of modernity also correlates roughly with citizenship from US citizen to US resident/Mexican citizen to undocumented immigrant/Mexican citizen (Holmes 2007; cf. Willen 2007). Yet, this diagram shows only a small piece of the global hierarchy. The continuum of structural vulnerability can be understood as a zoom lens, moving through many such diagrams. When the continuum is seen from furthest away, it becomes clear that the farm owners are near the bottom of the global corporate agribusiness hierarchy. When looked at more closely, we see the hierarchy on this particular farm.

THE CONTINUUM OF STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY

Responsibilities, stressors, and privileges differ from the top to the bottom of this hierarchy. The workers on every level of the ladder worry about factors over which they lack control. Everyone on the farm is structurally vulnerable, although the characteristics and depth of vulnerability change depending on one’s position within the labor structure. Control decreases and anxieties accumulate as one moves down the pecking order. Those at the top worry about market competition and the weather. The middle

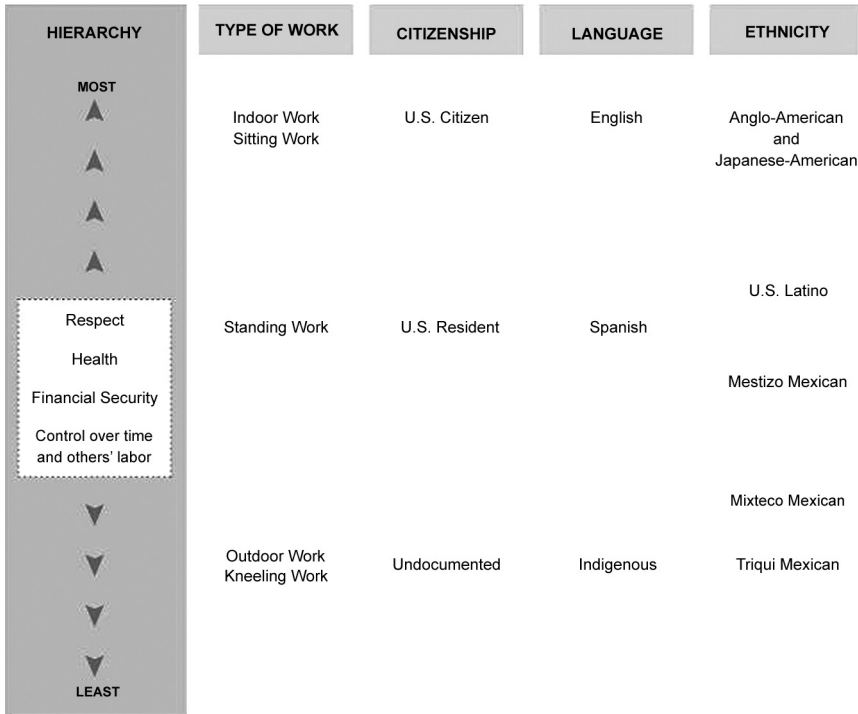


FIGURE 3 Conceptual diagram of hierarchies on the farm. *Note.* The x-axis represents several factors, each along a continuum with MOST at the top and LEAST at the bottom.

managers worry about these factors as well as about how they are treated by their bosses. The pickers also worry about picking the minimum weight in order to avoid losing their job and their housing. The higher one is positioned in the structure, the more control over time one has (cf. Rothenberg 1998). The executives and managers can take breaks as their workload and discretion dictate. The administrative assistants and checkers can take short breaks, given their supervisor's consent or absence. The field workers can take infrequent breaks if they are willing to sacrifice pay, and even then they may be reprimanded.

The higher one is located in the hierarchy, the more one is paid. The executives and managers are financially secure with comfortable homes. The administrative staff and checkers are paid minimum wage and live as members of the rural working class in relatively comfortable housing. The pickers are paid piecemeal and live in labor camp shacks. They are constantly aware of the risk of losing even this poor housing. Among pickers, those in strawberries make less money and are more likely to

miss the minimum and be fired than those in apples. This segregation is not conscious or willed on the part of the executives or managers. Rather, inequalities and the anxieties they produce are driven by larger structural forces. While farm executives are vulnerable to macro-social structures, vulnerability is further conjugated through ethnicity and citizenship, changing character from the top to the bottom of the labor hierarchy (Bourgois 1988; Quesada et al. 2011). Bodies are organized according to the social categories of ethnicity and citizenship into superimposed hierarchies of labor possibilities and housing conditions. The overdetermination of the adverse lot of indigenous Mexican migrant berry pickers tracks along the health disparities seen throughout the public health literature on migrant workers (Holmes 2006a; Kandula et al. 2004; McGuire and Georges 2003; Migration News 2004; Mobed et al. 1992; Rural Migration News 2005; Rust 1990; Sakala 1987; Villarejo 2003).

The focus on risk and risk behaviors in public health and medicine carries with it a subtle assumption that the genesis of vulnerability and suffering is the individual and his or her choices (see also Lakoff and Klinenberg 2010; Lakoff and Collier 2010). This focus often leads to blaming inadvertently the individual victim or their “culture” for their structurally produced suffering (Holmes 2006a; Quesada et al. 2011). Public health and medical interventions are planned with the goal of changing individual choices, behaviors, and values. The concept of structural vulnerability, on the other hand, refocuses our analysis onto the social structure as the locus of danger, damage, and suffering. Without such a concept, diagnoses and interventions rarely correspond with the context of suffering and may instead comply with the very structures of inequality producing the suffering in the first place (Holmes 2006a). The concept of structural vulnerability is crucial not only to refine anthropological analyses of the social production of suffering but also to reorient medical and public health attention away from individual behaviors and toward social structures.

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