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“Aguantamos”: Limits to Latino Migrant Farmworker Agency in North Carolina Labor Camps

Bennett Heine, Sara A. Quandt, Thomas A. Arcury

Abstract

Each year, tens of thousands of Latino migrant farmworkers return to the hills and fields of North Carolina to live in employer-provided labor camps that often fail to meet regulatory and ethical standards. Little attention has been paid to how these workers and their families perceive and respond to substandard housing conditions. This paper analyzes how far and in what ways Latino migrant farmworkers living in eastern North Carolina labor camps feel their agency extends in responding to substandard housing and work conditions, while also considering who among them has the power to exercise this agency. Based on qualitative analysis of interviews with twenty-three migrant farmworkers or partners of farmworkers, our findings indicate that the limits of migrant farmworker agency are strongly dictated by the close relationship between migrant farmworker employment and housing; by the importance of remittance wages for dependents; and by individual immigration, gender, and education characteristics. In the current context, the informal and reparative nature of agentive acts in substandard labor camps creates real but minor improvements while also co-constructing the very structural neglect to which it responds. We conclude that current housing and labor policy frameworks do little to amplify and support differentially distributed migrant farmworker agency and its individualized successes.

Keywords

migrant farmworkers; agency; structure; housing; resistance; labor

Introduction

When we go back there, our children don't love us and don't obey us and don't treat us like we were their parents. They have other ways of thinking. So, those are the things that are truly harming families. In Guatemala, there are people, who are a little better off, who are teaching our children to misbehave and do things that are not good. That's how our lives are, but we put up with it to stay here. Since we're so far away, if a family member dies, we can't go there. So, we have to put up with it. Here in the United States, we feel good because we have food and jobs. We can find money and a job. For that reason, we like to be here in the United States.

(ID-14)

One central problem in studying labor migration—and in understanding capitalist market economies in general—is how to evaluate decisions made in the face of both wages and

well-being, economic necessity and human dignity. In the excerpt above, one migrant farmworker offered to us this apparent contradiction between valued remuneration and social woes, illustrating that his ability to favorably construct his life circumstances was limited, and in specific ways.

In order to understand migrant farmworkers' housing, employment, and migration decisions better, the purpose of this research is to determine how far and in what ways Latino migrant farmworkers living in eastern North Carolina labor camps feel their agency extends in responding to substandard housing and work conditions, while also considering who among them has the power to exercise this agency. Such an understanding is critical for developing high-impact policies and interventions that address the lived realities of migrant farmworkers and families in the United States. Accordingly, we propose two specific aims: (1) to describe why, in what ways, and by whom housing conditions are accepted, contested, and resisted by migrant farmworkers and their families; and (2) to delineate the self-perceived limits of farmworker agency at the intersections of their employment, housing, and immigration status. This analysis builds on that of Keim-Malpass et al. (2015), which provides specific descriptions of housing conditions.

Prior research on farmworker perceptions of their housing environment is scarce (Keim-Malpass et al. 2015; Rao et al. 2007), even more so when analyzed in terms of agency. It is important to remedy this dearth of research because housing serves as a valuable lens through which one can survey many aspects of farmworkers' and their families' lives, given housing's role as a major social determinant of health (Quandt et al. 2015; Shaw 2004)—from stress levels to respiratory disease—and its linkages to employment and legal status for so many migrant workers. Therefore, if housing is so fundamentally entangled with critical domains like health, employment, and legal status, it is crucial to know how individual farmworkers and communities perceive their housing conditions, how they do and do not act to improve those conditions, and the material and subjective contexts of those agentic practices.

Dark Anthropology and Agency

Moving away from the 1970s' and 1980s' celebratory, resistance-based conceptions of the agency of marginalized groups (see Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* [2008]), much of anthropological theory now “emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience and the structural and historical conditions that produce them,” a new iteration of the field that Ortner (2016:50) terms “dark anthropology.” Oftentimes combining—whether coherently or haphazardly—a Marxian focus on expanding material inequality and class-based, capitalist exploitation with a Foucauldian conception of ubiquitous and subjectifying power, scholarship within this paradigm presents a world system and the lives that populate it as determined by the structures of neoliberal capitalism and its totalizing rationalities (Ortner 2016).

With so much of contemporary theorization of agency emanating from this scholarly response to contemporary dislocation and domination, it is no wonder that labor figures prominently among leading empirical contexts for the study of agency. In this vein, we define agency as “both the intention and the practice of taking action for one's own self-

interest or the interest of others” (Rogaly 2009:1975). Conceptually, we rely heavily on the work of Rogaly (2009) and Carswell and De Neve (2012) to construct a theoretical framework of agency that spans multiple analytical, spatial, and temporal domains, allowing us to consider migrant farmworkers’ agency as a force and set of practices not limited to their workplace or housing, to their sending or receiving countries.

In this conceptual framework, we aim to analyze agency by considering both the effects and intentions of farmworkers’ and their families’ agentive acts. In some political economic contexts, agency has been found to have a structurally transformative potential: researchers studying South Indian garment workers argue that agency and structure (in the form of labor processes) are mutually conditioning to such an extent that their relationship is a “two-way, iterative interaction in which capital responds to labour’s agency and labour to capital’s strategies” (Carswell and De Neve 2012:68). On the other hand, Rogaly (2009:1976) concludes that unorganized migrant garment workers in India are only able to achieve “incremental changes in conditions at micro-scales” through their agentive practices. These two, contrasting summations of the effects of agency lead us to believe that only through a study of the specific social, political, and economic circumstances of North Carolina migrant farmworkers can we reach any conclusions about their capacity or lack thereof to transform their living conditions. Furthermore, by describing the intentions that motivate their actions, we will consider whether the structures shaping migrant farmworker agency are merely materially restrictive or are more totalizing in their colonization of farmworker subjectivities, as darker anthropologies of hegemony may have us believe.

Scholars working in California’s agricultural industry, in particular, have explored the relationships between migrant farmworker agency, on the one hand, and the organization of contemporary agribusiness production, on the other. This area of research has produced two main lines of inquiry that guide our analysis: (1) the transformative capacities of migrant farmworker communities and (2) the influence of farm production on the organization of non-wage migrant labor. In reference to the former theme, researchers have marshalled diachronic ethnographic evidence and historical accounts of regional political economies to counter popular narratives surrounding farm communities of migrant and non-migrant laborers and the capacity they may have to transform those places (Du Bry 2007, 2015; Santos Gomez 2010). Du Bry’s (2007) case study of rural Mecca, California, describes how communities of (originally) migrant farm laborers can change over time in the context of local labor market restructuring, leading to signs of socioeconomic mobility, increasing complexity of community life, and budding possibilities for community building. We aim to extend this line of research to North Carolina agricultural sectors structurally distinct from California’s and to ask how a predominance of one form of housing tenure—employer- or contractor-provided—influences the development of migrant farmworker agency.

In reference to the second theme, researchers have documented multiple ways in which informal labor practices subsidize capital and reproduce its position vis-à-vis labor in contemporary agribusiness (Hernández Romero 2012). One important object of study within this body of research is the influence of production schemes on non-wage labor within migrant laborer households (Figueroa Sánchez 2002, 2013). Figueroa Sánchez (2013:16) looks to the relationships between California family farmers and Mexican immigrant

sharecroppers to see how “capitalist agriculture requires the interlocking of strawberry arrangements with familial patriarchal relations.” We extend this line of research beyond Figueroa Sanchez’s California strawberry patches and into the domestic labor performed in maintaining and improving North Carolina labor camps, with similar concerns surrounding self-exploitation and the reproduction of exploitative conditions, albeit with the caveat that our limited sample size precludes a similarly “deep” analysis of gender relations in this dynamic.

Migrant Farmworkers: Representation and Identity

Migrant farmworkers’ extreme legal, economic, and social vulnerability belies their basic rights, human dignity, and valuable contributions to society. Migrant farmworkers, commonly defined as persons who “travel at least seventy-five miles during a twelve-month period to obtain a farm job,” form an integral part of United States agricultural production (Carroll et al. 2005:7). Although migration patterns vary greatly, many migrant farmworkers relocate in spring months from “home base” communities in Florida, Texas, southern California, Mexico, the Caribbean, or Central America to growing season employment opportunities farther north, only to return to their “home base” in the fall or winter (Holden 2000).

The farmworker population is predominantly male, foreign-born, Spanish-speaking, having dependents, and lacking authorization to be in the United States (Carroll et al. 2005). However, this characterization must be considered with caution because stereotypes of migrant farmworkers shape the interventions, policy, and discourse surrounding them. Specifically, this nationwide characterization does not include family members travelling with farmworkers, nor does it illustrate the high degree of regional variation in farmworker demographics.

Our analysis specifically addresses migrant farmworkers and their families living in employer-provided labor camps in North Carolina, the sixth largest farmworker population in the United States with around 100,000 individuals (Larson 2000; United Farm Workers 2011). One dated enumeration profile of the state (Larson 2000) suggests that it hosts a higher proportion (62.5%) of migrants than the national figure (38%), making analysis of the migrant—rather than seasonal—workers in the state especially important (Carroll et al. 2005; Kandel 2008). Keeping in mind the regional variations and diversity of individuals who accompany farmworkers, we consider who—based on life experiences, attributes, and identities—lives in these labor camps and how they respond differently to substandard conditions, showing how structure is differentially contested and agency dynamically constructed.

Agentive Acts in Institutional Isolation

Although patterns of housing acquisition vary regionally, migrant farmworkers often have unique housing arrangements that divest them of choice and control over their circumstances. Along the Atlantic Coast, the primary means of housing acquisition for migrant farmworkers entails employers providing housing at no cost (Arcury and Marín 2009). Studies have found that North Carolina farmworker families living in grower-

provided housing have the lowest quality housing, compared to housing acquired by other means (Gentry et al. 2007). This observation is even more troubling when one considers that this form of housing tenure is directly contingent upon maintaining that specific employment.

The institutionalized forms of agentive action for farmworkers are limited, complicated, and underused. Although states vary in their protections for migrant farmworkers,¹ United States farmworkers are almost entirely excluded from key labor protection laws on the federal level, including most of the *Fair Labor Standards Act's* (FLSA) minimum wage and hour guarantees, the *National Labor Relations Act's* (NRLA) collective bargaining protections, and many of the basic safety standards issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) (United Farm Workers 2011). The resulting legal exclusion and invisibility means that farmworkers are often left to individual acts of negotiation in securing adequate housing and employment.

The current system of statutes regulating migrant farmworker housing is notoriously complicated: standards vary by state, and the overarching OSHA regulations do not apply to farms with less than ten employees. In North Carolina, the law that regulates migrant farmworker housing is the *Migrant Housing Act* (MHA). It requires owners and operators of temporary housing for migrant workers to register with state authorities who will then perform preoccupancy inspections to enforce standards for heat, hot water, cooking facilities, fire prevention, and kitchen sanitation (Buhler et al. 2007). However, many aspects of farmworker housing are considered optional, such as having showers and toilets in separate rooms, and having privacy-dividers between individual toilets and showers (Arcury et al. 2012b). Standards that are mandatory, such as adequate storage for personal belongings, beds raised above the floor with clean mattresses, and laundry facilities, are not always well enforced, with one study documenting a mean of 11.4 total violations per camp among North Carolina labor camps (Arcury et al. 2012a).

Post-occupancy inspections—those when residents are present and generated in response to “complaints, referrals, a randomly generated assignment, or an accident or fatality report” (Buhler et al. 2007:197)—are very rare, with the Agricultural Safety and Health (ASH) Bureau conducting sixty-seven post-occupancy inspections and issuing only 116 violations in all of 2014 (NCDOL 2015). This, alongside the widespread violations found within regional studies, leads us to believe either that farmworkers rarely utilize the framework provided by the North Carolina Department of Labor (NCDOL) for addressing noncompliance or that those complaints do not always result in follow-up inspections, both of which prompt important questions concerning how labor camp residents act to improve substandard housing and the effects of those actions.

¹With the passage of the *Occupational Safety and Health Act* (OSHA) in 1970, states were able to assume responsibility for workplace safety and health regulations that would be equivalent to or even stricter than the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration's regulations, as administered by the United States Department of Labor (Buhler et al. 2007).

Methods

Data for this study came from twenty-three in-depth interviews conducted between August 2009 and October 2010 as part of a broader community-based participatory research project documenting North Carolina farmworker housing quality and health. For this research, collaborating partners included the North Carolina Farmworkers Project (Benson, NC), Student Action with Farmworkers (Durham, NC), Harvest Family Health Center (Elm City, NC), Piedmont Health Services (Prospect Hill, NC), and Wake Forest School of Medicine (Winston-Salem, NC). The research plan was reviewed and approved by the Wake Forest School of Medicine Institutional Review Board.

Interviewers spoke with thirty farmworkers and partners (whether spouses or otherwise) for the broader research project. Of the thirty farmworkers interviewed, twenty-three were migrant farmworkers or partners living in employer provided housing, or what we refer to as “labor camps.” This analysis is limited to these twenty-three migrant farmworkers and partners.

Inclusion criteria were being an adult farmworker or an adult partner living with a farmworker and the ability to speak Spanish or English fluently. Community partner organizations identified potential participants, who were then introduced to project interviewers. The sample was recruited to reflect a diverse set of housing situations and household compositions, including unaccompanied men (with and without H-2A visas²) and members of migrant families in small and large labor camps. Staff members screened potential participants relative to their informally gauged interest, making it impossible to provide the number of potential participants who refused to participate. Once introduced to potential participants, interviewers described the project, told them that the interview would take about ninety minutes to complete, that it would be recorded, and that they would receive \$30 as an incentive. The interviewer then answered any questions the participant had and obtained signed informed consent. All individuals who met with interviewers completed the interview process.

Interviewers conducted semi-structured interviews with migrant farmworkers or their spouses living in labor camps based on an interview guide (see Appendix 1) developed a priori by the research team and community partners. The topics addressed in the interview guide included descriptions (1) of the housing itself; (2) of household composition; (3) of knowledge of housing regulations, rights, and avenues for addressing grievances; (4) of experiences with landlords/growers; and (5) of knowledge, experience, and skills in repairing their housing. The interview guide was then translated into Spanish by a professional translator with experience among North Carolina farmworkers. Fluent Spanish speakers who work with farmworkers then reviewed the translated guide. Investigators trained three interviewers to conduct the interviews. All three spoke Spanish fluently; two

²The federal H-2A visa program is the primary legal means of bringing foreign agricultural workers into the United States. If certain criteria are met, the Department of Labor’s Office of Foreign Labor Certification allows employers to bring workers into the United States on temporary visas. Federal H-2A regulations stipulate a variety of employer obligations, including language-appropriate discussion of work contracts and protections, free housing, three daily meals or cooking facilities, and basic wage guarantees (US GAO 2015). However, the vast majority of migrant farmworkers in the United States and North Carolina are not participants in the H-2A visa program (Carroll et al. 2005).

were also fluent English speakers. Interviews were completed in participants' homes and were conducted in Spanish.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English.³ Using Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) techniques for directed content analysis, we analyzed textual data by reading and re-reading the transcripts line-by-line in order to develop codes and categories. ATLAS.ti v5.0 software was used for organizing and coding textual data into a preliminary coding dictionary. Codes and categories were then connected and themes formed by utilizing the concepts of structure and agency to chart the consistencies and contradictions among descriptions, evaluations, and actions across space and time in participants' lives, thereby plotting the basic contours and characteristics of migrant farmworkers' and their partners' agency. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged. Bias control was enacted by allowing members of the research team and community partners to review aspects of the study and by the lead author maintaining a field notebook during analysis to facilitate reflection on prior assumptions.

Once identified, salient codes and themes were evaluated, analyzed, and included in the results. Based on Arcury et al.'s (2001) analytical framework, a salient code or theme is a domain of belief, knowledge, or behavior that is widely shared within a group. Salience, therefore, relies upon a consideration of three factors: how widely among group members a domain is referenced, the affect with which it is described, and its explanatory capacity.

Results

Twelve participants lived in trailers, seven in barracks, and four in houses. About three-quarters of participants (17) were men, and six individuals were women. Nearly all participants (22) had dependents, but only nine individuals had any dependents living with them. The ages of the participants ranged from twenty-three to sixty years, with a mean of forty years. Eight participants had an H-2A visa at the time of the interviews, and only one participant had permanent resident status. Slightly over half of the participants (13) had spent less than a year at their labor camp at the time.

Farmworker Perceptions of Grower-provided Housing

Farmworkers reported ubiquitous and persistent deterioration in many labor camps. These statements highlighted housing unit structures, neighborhood features, and housing appliances that were broken or in disrepair. Instances of deterioration were common across almost every aspect of housing, from stove burners and roofs to door locks and shower floors. One woman said, "These trailers are in ruins, and sometimes we feel like we will fall through the floor, and sometimes we feel like the roof is falling down" (ID-01). Another man (ID-13) living in a trailer said, "The pipes that are underneath leak. And that's where animals such as snakes or caterpillars could get in." Fluctuations in crowding, nearby pesticide use, and structural integrity were reported among all types of housing structures. One woman living in a barracks demonstrated the fluid, unpredictable nature of her social housing environment and its close relationship to employment:

³Interview recordings were reviewed by multiple team members, and any contested translations were noted and discussed.

Right now, there are not many [other tenants] because they didn't like the job and left. They said it was too hard. They used to work in construction and they made a lot, so they didn't like the money they were making here. So, they left. Right now, I think, there are about 15 people. No, not even 15 because some went to a house that [NC contractor] has in Benson. (ID-09)

Putting Up with It

"Putting up with it" (from the Spanish "*aguantar*") was a highly salient theme among farmworkers when explaining their housing, employment, and health. One man described the suffering he put up with in his leaking and overheated house: "Sometimes, when it rains and there is a lot of water, we feel bad. We feel the same when it's hot inside here, but since we have a job, we put up with those conditions. We just suffer. When it's cold, we feel very cold" (ID-13). As this man pointed out, there were many aspects of housing with which participants put up, but housing itself often served as the reasoning by which the other domains of negative employment and health circumstances were tolerated. So, even when participants put up with non-housing related issues in the domains of employment and health, those instances of putting up with it were still grounded in the housing environment. One man simply stated, "We always have pains, but we put up with them" (ID-14). Putting up with it was what farmworkers did when confronted with the limits of their agency within their own lives; it was not an option of first-choice. When asked what he did when the stench from the nearby chicken houses became too strong, one man responded, "What can we do? We have to sit here and bear the smell" (ID-29).

Framing their actions as "putting up with it" was a way to label poor conditions as such and entailed a begrudging endurance of those conditions' worst manifestations as they arose. Rhetorically, it highlighted the structural constraints that impeded farmworkers' ability to avoid and substantially improve poor housing and working conditions. But materially, putting up with it functioned as a forbearance of those very conditions. One man articulated a sense of inevitability and acceptance inherent in putting up with it, initially with reference to his health, but pointing out its broader applicability: "Well, I don't have any worries because we have to accept anything that comes. Diabetes is what is attacking me, but I look at it like everything else. I take care of myself, but I don't worry about it" (ID-17). As this man demonstrated, participants often rationalized putting up with it as a form of selective self-care. By coming to a frank recognition of what was and was not in his control—and by putting up with the latter—he attempted to bypass the emotional toll of grappling with the aspects of his life he could not change and focused on the aspects of his life that he perceived he had the ability to control. The possible adverse effects of such a life management strategy were evident in the testimony of one fieldworker: "We're very strong. If something in our body hurts, we don't say anything. We put up with it until it goes away. We don't go to a clinic just because we get cut. We put up with it. It's the way we manage our lives" (ID-14).

Limits of Agency

The above quote from participant ID-14, a sixty-year-old man living in labor camp barracks, also shows how putting up with it was grounded in a sense of farmworker identity. Multiple

farmworkers made comments that rationalized hardship in housing, work, and health for Latinos, Mexicans, immigrants, the poor, or migrant farmworkers, in general, based on those identities or combinations of those identities. One man said that his boss and many others spray pesticides while workers are still in the fields, explaining, “We put up with it because we’re Mexicans. They say that Mexicans put up with more than anyone else”⁴ (ID-07). Here, common stereotypes about Latino, Mexican, and Central American workers were internalized by migrants and then used to partly rationalized their treatment. A forty-two-year-old participant with an H-2A visa living in a labor camp trailer highlighted how his internalized socioeconomic, nationality, and employment statuses informed his perceived imperative to put up with poor housing conditions: “We have to put up with [leaking pipes and pests] because we’re poor, and we’re not from here, and we want to work. For that reason, we put up with it and continue to be here. Even though we’re afraid of those things, we keep living here” (ID-13).

Putting up with it illustrated how farmworkers were sorting out in real time the conflicts and constraints they felt between their economic necessities and the unpleasant or harmful phenomena associated with their work and housing, from nearby farming operations to poor health. These real time considerations were evident in the occasional contradictions in workers’ evaluations. Upon being asked what health worries he had, one sixty-year-old migrant farmworker began his interview by describing how he put up with the diabetes that was “attacking” him (cited above), a moment that was followed a few minutes later by this contrasting exchange:

I: We were talking about your rooms. How do you feel living here in the United States?

R: Well, I feel great. I come here wanting to work. When you come willing to work, you feel good. (ID-17)

This shift of evaluative tone—between negative and positive evaluations—during the interview was not uncommon among participants and was closely related to the subject being discussed. This man considered his health and well-being to be negative aspects of his migrant experience in the United States, but that did not stop him from positively evaluating his overall experience when he considered it from an employment perspective. One man with a wife and three children in Mexico explicitly described the economic imperative that drove him and other migrant farmworkers to put up with poor housing conditions: “If we don’t want to do it like this [live in those housing conditions], we have to rent, and that’s expensive. For example, in Pennsylvania, we paid \$210 each for a month’s rent. Here, we don’t feel very comfortable, but at least we save that [\$210]” (ID-33).

Most of the behaviors connected to putting up with poor living and working conditions consisted of small adaptations that maximized benefits for farmworkers in the face of aspects of their work and housing that they could not change. Farmworkers described their attempts to appropriate what value they could out of their environments, actions that included decreasing perceived crowding by using living rooms and hallways as bedrooms

⁴“Uno aguanta pues. Al cabo dicen, ‘Son mexicanos y estos aguantan’” (ID-07).

(ID-17; ID-19); pooling resources for expenses within buildings and labor camps, especially to support new arrivals (ID-01; ID-11); building shelves on porches to create sufficient storage for all housemates when storage was not provided by employers (ID-03); and utilizing outdoor space for social events (ID-13). Labor camp residents oftentimes used materials and skills from their employment to repair their constantly deteriorating housing. But these frequent repairs were rarely effective in creating satisfactory living conditions: “If we fix the bathroom, the ceiling falls. If we fix the ceiling, the floor falls. Everything is falling apart” (ID-13). For the women who shouldered many cleaning responsibilities, their unpaid labor in maintaining dwelling structures was demanding and constant: “I struggle the whole day. I clean, and they make a mess. I spend the whole day cleaning. I never finish. You might think that I don’t do anything, but I’m always working” (ID-03). In sum, these actions were completed with little to no assistance from labor camp owners, non-uniformly among residents, and outside institutional avenues for redress.

In fact, only one participant described actions in which he formally (and then symbolically) resisted his employer’s mistreatment. At one point, he had physically resisted and afterwards formally reported his boss’ refusal to drive his housemates and him to the grocery:

So, we walked to Walmart, and we got a shopping cart. Then, I asked the manager if I could borrow it because I lived so far away, and I didn’t want to carry all those bags.... When we were almost home, someone who knew the patron saw us and beeped his horn and told us to get in the truck. I told him that I wasn’t going to. Some of the guys, who I came with, did get in the truck because they didn’t care about the point I was trying to make. My other coworkers did support me in what I was trying to do. He [the patron] asked me why we had [refused the ride from Walmart], and I told him that it was because we didn’t have food. (ID-36)

It is noteworthy that this man (ID-36) had a relatively high level of education (through ninth grade, compared to a mean highest level of education of seventh grade for the sample), had a driver’s license, had an H-2A visa, and spoke English. This man consequently occupied an elevated position in the farm’s labor hierarchy as an informal supervisor, with responsibilities including occasional transportation of other workers and communicating with the employer about housing. After publicly refusing the ride from Walmart and reporting that violation of transportation responsibilities, this man did find improvements in working and housing conditions but exclusively for himself: “He started to treat me well, but only me because he did whatever he wanted to with the rest of them. He yelled all sorts of things at them because the other guys didn’t know [they could report him]” (ID-36).

Nonetheless, other participants’ descriptions of putting up with poor housing hinted at future possibilities of no longer putting up with it. One man, age sixty-two and with a wife and three daughters in Mexico, had been coming to work for the same boss for fifteen years, but his seemingly consistent migrant round was marked yearly by moments when he considered ending it:

I tell my daughters to not ask me about [the living conditions in North Carolina] because I don’t want to remember anything about it. For that reason, they don’t ask me anymore, but I continue struggling. My daughters tell me not to come here

anymore, but I tell them that I'll only do it one more year. Every time I come, we argue about that because they don't want me to come and work here since I'm sick and the heat makes me sicker. (ID-07)

Another man emphatically demonstrated the limited extent to which he accepted the poor conditions of his trailer: "Sometimes, I tell my wife that I just want to take a match and burn it down" (ID-13).

Discussion

We argue that putting up with it was a way for those living in labor camps to delineate their agency and manage their resources, psychologically and materially. The limits of that agency were primarily dictated by the close relationship between migrant farmworker employment and housing, by the importance of remittance wages for dependents, and by the naturalization of poverty and suffering for poor Latino immigrants. Along with differences in individual characteristics, this constellation of factors formed a structural nexus that was pivotal in determining the form and extent—and, consequently, the effects—of agentive acts by migrant farmworkers and their families to improve their living conditions. Accordingly, labor camp residents exercised agency through the pursuit of minor material improvements and symbolic appropriations of identity-based dignity. These expressions of agency resulted in minor but real improvements in everyday conditions for farmworkers and their families but cumulatively served to perpetuate substandard conditions in the long term by maintaining living areas at little to no cost to employers and without the intervention of regulatory authorities.

Housing Maintenance, Life Management

When putting up with harmful and unpleasant conditions, participants conserved and maximized their resources, psychological and material. Poor conditions were not unnoticed nor condoned; they were consciously denounced to interviewers, and actions were constantly taken to ameliorate their immediate manifestations in housing. Rather than struggling against seemingly inalterable structural forces and the individual employers and contractors in their lives that produced and reproduced those forces, putting up with it allowed farmworkers to focus on the care, improvement, and coping mechanisms that were most feasible. Therefore, putting up with these conditions was an agentive act with defined, albeit fluid, limits.

Instances of putting up with it often began with participants weighing their health, comfort, dignity, and well-being against the usefulness of wages earned, the benefits of rent-free housing, and the possibility of dismissal from employment. This consideration reflected the fact that the domains of housing, work, and health overlapped and were mutually reinforcing for many participants: to work for a grower is to live in the housing the grower provides. Migrant farmworkers put up with instances of maltreatment, neglect, or substandard conditions in one domain because of a lack of agency in other domains. That is to say, some migrant farmworkers rationalized acceptance of poor housing because resistance could terminate their employment. Other participants put up with heat exhaustion and associated health issues (both acute and chronic) because those very problems originated in the housing

and work over which they had little control (Quandt et al. 2013). Therefore, a consideration of agency within substandard housing must necessarily include a horizontal consideration (Carswell and De Neve 2012) of the broader domains of employment, health, and legal status that are linked to it through various institutional, informal, and legal arrangements.

Oftentimes highlighting the value of remittances abroad, farmworkers presented the risks and hardships that accompanied their living and working conditions as trade-offs for their income. The preponderance of economic rationalizations for their suffering derives from poverty's and inequality's central, but not exclusive, roles in driving labor migration. Researchers highlight factors intimately related to employment, income, and purchasing power—namely “recurring Mexican economic crises, peso devaluations, and Mexican policies aimed at economic modernization”—when describing why supply-push factors became more important in Mexico-United States migration from the 1980s to the late 1990s (Latapí et al. 1998:166). International poverty and inequality thus support and reinforce acquiescence to substandard housing and employment conditions.

Scaling Agency

When putting up with substandard housing, farmworkers were creative in the actions and behaviors they utilized to develop comfort, safety, and well-being: organized cleaning schedules, do-it-yourself repairs, and repurposing rooms and hallways were common. And in the one instance of outright resistance (ID-36), his symbolic and physical refusal of insufficient and late transportation support from his employer did lead to better treatment for him. However, these actions—and other forms of resistance—were rarely organized past the household level and produced improved conditions (repairs, increased responsiveness, etc.) that were limited to the individuals who personally instigated the complaint or resistance. In this way, farmworker agency encompassed informal, non-institutionalized means of resistance, primarily minor material improvements and symbolic appropriations of dignity. Prior research highlighted the importance of scale in analyzing agency among such “agency poor” populations. For example, Rogaly (2009:1984) analyzed unorganized migrant farmworker agency in India and the United Kingdom and came to a similar characterization of their agency as the pursuit of “sometimes highly significant changes in the microspaces of work and living, albeit in a world dominated by capital.”

At a different analytical level, these agentive acts ended up as co-constitutive elements in some of the very structural inequalities to which they responded. By maintaining (barely) livable conditions without cost or legal penalty to the employer, residents' appropriations of marginal value in their living and working environments further incentivized that neglect and can thus contribute to the long-term, ongoing deterioration of those camps. In this way, the social, economic, and legal marginalization of migrant farmworkers shaped labor camp resident agency into forms that effectively undermined the long-term well-being of residents. Like the actions of “resilience” and “reworking” among the migrant garment workers of Carswell and De Neve's (2012:69) fieldwork, the agency of these workers and their adaptations in putting up with substandard conditions had no structurally transformative effect on their employment: “[such agency] does not challenge the basic status quo between capital and labor within the industry.”

The tendency of worker agency in highly-stratified employment contexts to have structurally-reinforcing effects is a well-documented (and contested) phenomenon in economic anthropology. This field of inquiry highlights not just the material effects of agency but also the intentions behind it (Carswell and De Neve 2012). There was one instance of explicitly articulated resistance, while the rest of the participants conceived of their actions simply as inevitable responses to obdurate, externally determined conditions: “What can we do?” (ID-29). Though common (Holmes 2006; Horner and Martinez 2015), the naturalization and internalization of this suffering and structural inequality was incomplete; denunciations of the poor quality housing were far more common and salient than occasional rationalizations based on identity, nationality, or socioeconomic status. Labor camp residents’ agency may reinforce its structural determinants, but these structures were not totalizing for these subjects. Farmworkers and their families articulated the shortcomings, hardship, and unfairness of these circumstances and even alluded to possible futures outside of these conditions, whether envisioned as a torched trailer, a refused ride from Walmart, or a decision not to commence another migrant round.

The scarcity of instances of formal resistance (i.e., filing a lawsuit under a private right to action, lodging a complaint to the NCDOL, or even simply threatening to do so) suggests that migrant farmworkers felt their agency did not extend into institutionalized mechanisms of resistance and redress. This conclusion is supported by the fact that only sixty-seven post-occupancy inspections (the outcomes of non-compliance complaints, among other prompts) were conducted in 2014 among North Carolina farms (NCDOL 2015), despite the presence of over 100,000 migrant farmworkers in the state and documentation of widespread housing violations throughout the state’s labor camps (Arcury et al. 2012a; Larson 2000).

We contend that agency is differentially distributed among migrant farmworkers and their families, often on the basis of gender, employment, legal status, and language ability. Our data suggest that some women in North Carolina labor camps lack a presence in the very field (wage labor) that dictates their housing, an invisibility that inhibits their agency in advocating directly to employers and contractors but centers them in the work of maintaining poor conditions through cleaning. It also seems that the additional protections of the H-2A visa program buttress and act in the stead of agentive acts to improve migrant farmworker housing. And finally, the inability to speak English and communicate directly with most employers critically shapes agency by precluding multiple forms of self-advocacy on farms and labor camps.

When put into conversation with prior ethnographic research on other migrant farmworker communities characterized by contrasting forms of housing tenure, by distinct histories of labor migration, and by differing production schemes and labor markets (Du Bry 2007, 2015; Figueroa Sánchez 2013; Santos Gomez 2010), our results contribute to a “dark anthropology” while also qualifying its more expansive claims. In true dark anthropological fashion, our findings do describe a migrant farmworker agency limited to “putting up with” poor, harmful, and unpleasant conditions, of individually mitigating their worst effects, and possibly reinforcing their everyday reproduction. Nonetheless, this limited agency’s roots in local labor markets (via precarious terms of employment) and housing tenure (via employer provision) suggest that the self-defeating or self-exploiting nature of this farmworker agency

is not inevitable nor coterminous with all of United States farm work. In contexts characterized by alternate labor market structures, social network formations, and longer histories of migrant settlement and community building, there is indeed evidence of immigrant farm laborer communities' exercising their agency to press new claims upon the public sphere (Santos Gomez 2010) and to "find more than just survival" (Du Bry 2015). That is to say, it is primarily a question of context, rather than of content, that renders North Carolina labor camp residents' agency so futile in transforming their living and working conditions.

Implications for Policy and Research

For those looking to improve labor camp conditions, *agency matters*. Its current forms and distribution are important in bringing a hard-fought measure of dignity and comfort to the lives of individual residents but are structurally ineffective or reinforcing in their articulation with current institutional frameworks. Even those with H-2A visas, which should provide some protection, find that they have little influence on their housing and work conditions (Arcury et al. 2015; Arcury et al. 2012a; Bauer 2007).

A policy that provides migrant farmworkers with the opportunity to address housing conditions by reporting poor housing conditions or housing regulation infractions with the support of a third party could help address the limits on their agency. Such a mechanism was provided to farmworkers through the 2016 revision of the United States Environmental Protection Agency Worker Protection Standard (www.epa.gov/pesticide-worker-safety/agricultural-worker-protection-standard-wps). The Worker Protection Standard is a set of pesticide safety procedures. However, the strength of establishment agriculture (Arcury 2017) has led to efforts through the legislative process to limit third party reporting (Farmworker Justice 2016).

The vulnerability of migrant farmworkers argues for policy that does not require farmworker-initiated actions with an employer. Several grand level policy initiatives are needed to improve housing, health, and justice among migrant farmworkers. These include immigration reform, as well as amending agricultural workers' exclusions from extant labor protections, including the *Occupational Safety Act of 1970*, *Fair Labor Standards Act*, the *National Labor Relations Act*, and the *Social Security Act*.

Several more specific, and potentially attainable, policy and research recommendations were presented in a recent multidisciplinary symposium on farmworker housing and health that included applied social scientists, public health scientists, health care providers, attorneys, architects, and advocates with expertise in farmworker housing issues (Arcury 2015). Their policy recommendations reflected needed enforcement, revision, and evaluation of housing regulations. Too often, current farmworker housing regulations are not adequately enforced (Arcury et al. 2012a; Moss-Joyner et al. 2015). Therefore, state and federal agencies responsible for enforcement of current housing regulations should provide adequate funding and staffing for enforcement; educate farmworkers and growers about housing requirements; and train agency personnel, health care providers, and enforcement officials in the health risks of substandard housing.

Farmworker housing regulations should be revised to require regular post-occupancy inspection and ensure anonymity of reporting through a third party. Revisions of the *Migrant Housing Act* are needed that are based on current empirical knowledge about the impact of housing characteristics on health. Definitions of adequate housing in these policies should take a more holistic view of housing needs to include social and community benefits in design decisions. Finally, these policy revisions should create positive incentives for local governments, agencies, and farmers to develop affordable, high-quality farmworker housing.

Farmworker housing regulations, whether current or revised, should be evaluated to ensure that they are achieving the desired results. Evaluation should be based on the regular collection of information about the conditions in existing farmworker housing, health implications of the conditions, health care needed and received, and the nature of the work performed by farmworkers residing there. This information should be updated regularly with data that include an assessment of future housing needs. Finally, evaluation should be based on common measures addressing housing and health disparities.

Research is needed to document farmworker housing characteristics. The last national survey of farmworker housing was conducted by the Housing Assistance Council in the late 1990s (Holden 2000); therefore, a new nationally valid survey of the current farmworker housing conditions is needed. A consortium of organizations to manage this effort and consult with local researchers addressing farmworker housing and health would enhance such a survey. New research should simultaneously assess housing conditions and the health status of resident farmworkers and their family members to inform farmworker housing policy. Researchers should develop a standard core instrument on housing issues to use in diverse studies conducted with farmworkers. This core instrument should include items on health outcomes directly affected by housing characteristics. Such core questionnaires have been developed for other health-related topics.

Conclusion

The pervasiveness of instances of putting up with substandard housing, employment, and health conditions among those living in migrant farmworker labor camps indicates that the structural barriers to agentive action are multiple and reinforcing. Future research would do well to analyze the specific ways in which agency in the domain of housing is undermined or weakened by other immigration and labor policies, making the structural nexus that migrant workers confront self-limiting and even self-defeating in improving their lives. Furthermore, based on limitations in our study sample, we suggest that future research should more deeply investigate how differences in gender and indigenous identity affect the development of migrant farmworker agency.

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Appendix I

Community-based Participatory Approach to Farmworker Housing, Exposures, and Health: In-depth Interview Guide (selected questions)

1. Can you tell me about the different kinds of farm work you do in this area / North Carolina?
2. Do you migrate to do farm work in other parts of North Carolina? Of the country?
3. Tell me about the house in which you live in North Carolina.
4. Tell me about the people who live with you in North Carolina.
5. What rent do you pay for your housing?
6. What are some of the positive features of your house?
7. What are some of the problems?
8. Have you made any changes in your house?
9. How does this house compare to your previous houses?
10. Do you have any problems in getting repairs when something in your house breaks?
11. If you had a problem with your boss or landlord with housing, what would you do?

Biography

Bennett Heine, B.A., received his bachelor's degree in anthropology from Wake Forest University in 2016. He is a graduate student in the University of Sussex's MA program in Social Anthropology of the Global Economy.

Sara A. Quandt, Ph.D., Wake Forest School of Medicine, is Professor in the Department of Epidemiology and Prevention, Division of Public Health Sciences, and Associate Director of the Center for Worker Health. She completed her doctoral degree in anthropology at Michigan State University in 1981.

Thomas A. Arcury, Ph.D., Wake Forest School of Medicine, is Professor and Vice Chair for Research in the Department of Family and Community Medicine and Director of the Center for Worker Health. He completed his doctoral degree in anthropology at the University of Kentucky in 1983.

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