Developing Occupational and Family Resilience in U.S. Migrant Farm Workers: Future Research and Policy Themes

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Abstract:

Drawing on key themes emerging from an empirical study involving interviews with U.S. migrant farmworkers who were mothers of infants in a Migrant Head Start program, this paper presents a literature review identifying migrant workers’ work-family challenges and opportunities, and an agenda for future research. The themes discussed include acculturative stress; individual and family resilience; crossover effects of migrant work on children of farmworkers; and the importance of supportive supervisory behaviors. We discuss how these themes reflect demands and strengths related to the unique work and family experiences of migrant workers. We show that migrant workers are often quite resilient, despite difficult working conditions that may result in health problems, limited family time, disruptions in children’s education, separation from family, and less than satisfactory housing options. Future research is needed on how to develop resources to countervail acculturative stress, and support individual and family resilience. Such an approach will shift research and policy away from an individual deficit and toward a systems based resource policy perspective on migrant farmworkers and their families.
Although migrant farm workers are a significant part of the U.S. and world economy, they have been understudied and are a population that could be better integrated into the food, business and work-family literatures. Migrant farm workers are the core of the $28 billion fruit and vegetable industry in the U.S.; 85 percent of which is hand harvested and/or cultivated. Migrant jobs often include picking fruits and vegetables; and their processing, grading, and packaging (National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc. 2012). A migrant farm worker is defined as an individual whose spends at least half of their employment time working in agriculture on a seasonal basis, and who has been so employed within the last twenty-four months (Larsen 2006).

The large-scale migration of workers with their families is a global phenomenon that has seen dramatic growth over recent decades. The migrant work force that comes to the U. S. from Mexico is equivalent to the size of one-eighth of the entire Mexican workforce (Cuellar 2002). Although migrant jobs are highly undesirable and under-paid, their loss could result in a U.S. farm worker shortage, and hurt the world food supply as well as the Mexican economy (Martin and Martin 1994). This is a global issue, with over 150 million people living temporarily outside their country of origin. Of these, the International Labor Organization reports that 97 million are migrant workers (Robinson 2001).

The Geneseo Migrant Center provides a demographic snapshot of migrant farm workers in the U.S. – 81% of all farmworkers are foreign-born, with 77% of all farmworkers born in Mexico and five out of six farmworkers being native Spanish speakers (UNCTV.org, 2013). The number of Mexican and other Latino farmworkers throughout the United States has grown in recent years due, in part, to programs like the H-2A guest worker plan. The H-2A temporary agricultural program establishes a means for agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of
domestic workers to bring non-immigrant foreign workers to the U.S. to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature (U.S. Department of Labor). The average farmworker age is only 31 years since it is difficult for older workers to perform such physically demanding labor. Most (80%) of farmworkers are men who often must leave their families behind while they seek work.

While many migrant workers are mothers and fathers with young children, the international work-family and social science literatures in particular have under-examined these employees. An exception to this gap is a qualitative paper (Kossek, Meece, Barratt and Prince 2005) on the work and family experiences of low-income Latino migrant farm working mothers. Kossek and colleagues suggest that more research is needed to identify the resources, demands, opportunities and constraints faced by this population, and identify stress and resilience factors.

More importantly, we argue that a shift in framing of research strategies and policy focus is needed. Increasing understanding of migrant workers as specific population and more generally individuals operating in challenging work-family systems can help move work-family and social science research from individual deficit to positive resource based views of low-income workers (Kossek, Huber and Lerner 2003). Further, reviews increasingly suggest that the work-family research as a subset of social science fields has been constrained by having limited sample variance and some of the constructs and concepts are not readily generalizable to more diverse work-family samples (Kossek, Baltes and Mathews 2011).

In the rest of his paper, our goal is to address these gaps by building on key themes identified in the 2005 empirical qualitative study and identifying key themes for a research agenda. The Kossek et al. 2005 study included data collected from interviews with 79 low-income Latino migrant farm working mothers from five migrant work sites in the state of
Michigan, each of whom had an infant in the Migrant Head Start program. Building on this earlier work, in this paper, our main focus is on the notion and relevance of individual and family resilience, and acculturative stress concepts for the social science, food, and work-family fields, with the goal to more broadly develop the need to reframe studies in low-income systems involving resource based views as opposed to individual deficits. We include a brief overview of factors contributing to resource deprivation among the migrant farmworker population, and provide definitions of individual and family resilience, as well as acculturative stress, giving consideration to their relevance to current work-family research in the social sciences and migrant farmworker families more specifically. We identify themes for future policy and research.

Themes for Future Policy and Research

Theme 1: *The term “Migrant Workers” reflects a diverse work-family population.* As Parra-Cardona, Bulock, Imig, Villarruel & Gold (2006) argue, the Latino culture is not monolithic and comprises multiple cultures. Using the 2005 Kossek and colleagues study as an example, their focus was on migrant working mothers in Michigan, part of the Midwestern “corridor”, comprised primarily of workers who are Mexican-American. Some migrant farmworkers establish a temporary home to harvest crops, while others follow the crops in a traditional migrant stream, moving from place to place. Thus studies of migrant workers need to be socially contextualized and specified in terms of how the social environment shapes resources and stability for migrant employees and families.

Contextualizing involves not only the social environment in which the migrant worker family is embedded but suggests the importance in studies of measuring the degree of flux and mobility, as well as change in work-family environments and their cycles. As research by
Roeder and Millard (2000) suggests, the cyclical mobility of migrant workers exacerbates their poverty, making migrants more at risk for susceptibility to psychological problems stemming from isolation and the ability to access supportive community resources. Migrants with higher cyclical mobility may have greater difficulty integrating into the community and establishing social ties which in turn lead to challenges in education. These challenges lead to greater difficulty assimilating into either Anglo or Latino communities.

Additionally, different forms of cultural origin and their implications for various socio-cultural assumptions and experiences may also be moderators of interest across contexts. For example, assimilation in Michigan may be more difficult than assimilation in California where there is a larger Latino community. As Kossek and colleagues (2005) argued, migrant workers in communities where they are less well-represented may tend to be more dependent on their employer for social and community linkages than other low-income families. The employment situation for these workers is the truly larger context in which their family is embedded as their child care and housing are all in camps often located at or near the employer. This may give the employers more power over not over livelihood but social well-being of their families.

High mobility and transience are unique constraints emanating from migrant families’ dual cultural ties. They serve as barriers to accumulating human and social capital, and assimilating into either dominant or minority host country cultures. For example, using a national sample of Latino migrants, Lueck & Wilson (2010) found that stress was lower for individuals with higher social ties, greater English proficiency, and those who were U.S. citizens versus non-citizens. It was also lower for immigrants who wanted to migrate to the U.S. versus refugees who had to leave their country of origin, as well as for later generation immigrants.
Theme 2: Measures of social well-being and stress of migrant workers needs to include a bicultural stress component. For example, than general stress measures, specific forms of stress such as forms of acculturative stress might be important to include in studies. Acculturative stress, a concept identified in the Kossek and colleagues 2005 study, might be incorporated into future studies. Berry and Sam (1997) define acculturative stress as “a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation, which is the process of cultural and psychological change as the result of cross-cultural contact.” Kossek and colleagues (2005) identified three types of acculturative stress in migrant worker families: (1) Demand stresses relate to perceived or real conflict with the cultural values of the mainstream society of the culture; (2) Opportunity stresses relate to the ability of immigrants to achieve at a higher level than possible in their home country; and (3) Constraint stresses are those that constrain individuals from integrating in the mainstream. These three factors influence cognitive appraisal of how well individuals and their families are able to manage stress and assimilation.

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

Theme 3: Child care, children’s educational experiences, and separation have a critical impact on migrant families’ well-being, yet are under-examined in studies. The Kossek and colleagues migrant worker study (Kossek et al., 2005) found that the more positive a study
participant (a migrant mother) felt about child care, the better she felt about her job and family performance, and the less negative she was about demands and constraints, regardless of job demands. Migrant Head Start and its quality child care were “bright spots” in the migrant mothers’ lives and seemed to provide positive buffering social psychological effects that go beyond the provision of care services. The study sample generally felt very positive overall about juggling work and family as employees felt positive about their child care arrangements. Surprisingly, relatively few social science, business, and food research studies today examine the affect and specifics and satisfaction with child care arrangements as a social buffer for well-being.

Kossek and colleagues also found that children’s education is often neglected or unstable, due to family economic pressures and the demands of the migrant life. Children of migrant workers usually start the school year in the farming location and then travel back to their home base to continue their school year for the winter months. Often these children are then taken out of school in early spring to travel back north so the family can start to work on the early crops. The struggle for economic family stability forces the migrant lifestyles to revolve around working, moving on to find other work, and perhaps then migrating south at the end of the season. In the Michigan study sample (Kossek et al. 2005), 5% had moved four or more times within the last year, 48% had moved two to three times within the year, and 40% had moved once. Consequently, children find themselves enrolled in different schools each year. Often, if children are not doing well in school, the parents experience problems on the job. Thus, more research needs to look at parents’ employment effects on school and children’s school success on parents’ employment success and cultural and social integration as a cyclical and positive or negative spiraling social process.
According to the Geneseo Migrant Center (Fact sheet, 2013), there is only a 50.7% high school graduation rate among migrant teenagers. Frequent moves and the need to have them contribute to family income make school attendance difficult. At least one-third of migrant children work on farms to help their families; others may not be hired directly, but are in the fields helping their parents. Despite all of this, very little research in the work-family field measures children’s educational experiences as moderators of work-family conflict and well-being.

While Kossek et al. studied migrant mothers co-located with at least one young child, Rusch and Reyes (2013) focused on the population of farmworkers who are separated from their families when they migrate for work. Similar to Kossek and her colleagues, Rusch and Reyes (2013) looked at acculturative stress, along with depression and family functioning. Their study examined the role of parent-child separations during serial migration to the United States in predicting individual- and family-level outcomes in Mexican immigrant families. They assessed parents’ subjective appraisals of their family’s separation and reunion experiences to explore associations with self-reported acculturative stress, depression and family functioning. The study found that separated status parents reported significantly higher levels of acculturative stress, but no significant differences were found between separated and non-separated status parents on depression or family functioning. Four out of five farmworkers are men who often must leave their families behind while they seek work (Geneseo Migrant Center), so the study of fathers who farmworkers separated from their children is important to future studies. Rusch and Reyes (2013) indicated that “social support networks for parents and successful school transitions for children may emerge as powerful factors that help mitigate reunification stress.”
Theme 4: Resource deprivation of migrant workers may be increasingly the cause of social integration challenges related to work-family dynamics. Migrant workers frequently live in temporary housing near where they work; consequently, the separation between “work” time and “non-work” time is somewhat unique, as workers are often living with or near their coworkers, in housing provided by their employer, the quality of which varies. Furthermore, during work hours there is a complicated separation (or lack thereof) between work and personal life, in that often compensation is based on productivity so farmworkers focus only on work during work hours, with little or no opportunity to integrate non-work activities into their work day (i.e., checking on a sick family member or attending a parent-teacher conference at school). And in some cases, children are with their parents in the fields, as affordable child care is often not available.

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

In a subsequent study, Kossek and Hammer (2008) evaluated the effects of supervisory support on another lower-wage employee group – supermarket employees and their managers. They found that teaching managers to be more supportive of their direct reports’ work-life issues can be a simple and effective route to improving employee health and satisfaction. While the actual training of managers supervising migrant workers would differ somewhat from the
supermarket population, the end result of improving employee motivation and decreasing the risk of costly health problems applies.

Further, perhaps the biggest constraint to cultural assimilation and the family’s ability to manage stress and improve long term overall social and economic well-being was extreme poverty. The entire sample’s household incomes in the Kossek study were far below U.S. federal poverty guidelines. Seventy percent made less than $300 a week; migrant workers tend to be poorer than the typical poor in their host country. This holds true with this population, as Latino immigrants have higher poverty rates than the overall U.S. Latino population. Twelve percent of all farmworkers earn less than the minimum wage; half of all farmworkers earn less than $7,500 per year and half of all farmworker families earn less than $11,000 per year, far below the 2002 U.S. poverty level of $18,100 for a family of four (Geneseo Migrant Center). Much farm work is seasonal and workers cannot earn money in bad weather, while waiting for crops to ripen, when they are sick, or when traveling to their next job.

Hovey & Magana (2000) also studied immigrant farmworkers in the Midwest, with a focus on the relationship of acculturative stress, depression and anxiety. They found that family dysfunction, ineffective social support, low self-esteem, lack of choice in the decision to immigrate and live a migrant farmworker lifestyle, high education levels, and low levels of religiosity were significantly associated with high levels of anxiety and depression. Their overall findings suggest that Mexican immigrant farmworkers who experience elevated levels of acculturative stress may be "at risk" for experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression. Thus the lack of resources from supervisors and lack of family income must be key ingredients in work-family interventions to reduce work-family conflict for this population.
Theme 5: Positive individual and family resilience can be seen within a subset of high functioning migrant worker families, despite the high demands of migrant farm work.

Employment and living conditions for migrant farm workers are often difficult – long hours, physically difficult tasks, low pay, few benefits, separation from family, undesirable housing, and little control over one’s work. Hard physical labor, dangerous equipment, and pesticide exposure make agriculture one of the most hazardous occupations in the United States (Genesco Migrant Center Fact Sheet, 2013.) Furthermore, migrant workers and their families have poorer physical health than the general population and shorter life expectancy than the national average (Ibid, 2013).

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

Hawley and DeHann (1996) discuss family resilience as a construct that describes how families adapt to stress and bounce back from adversity. They define family resilience, a relatively new concept at the time of their article, as describing “the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time.” This definition suggests that resilience at the family level describes the “trajectory a family follows as it positively adapts to and bounces back from stressful circumstances” (Hawley and DeHann
1996). This suggests a longer-term perspective on resilience is useful to take as it pertains to families who migrate for work and move frequently.

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

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

Discussion and Summary

Overall, in this essay we have identified five themes suggesting that greater attention must be paid to the work-life and family and occupational resilience experiences of migrant farmworkers and their families. Increased attention is needed for action research and policy
initiatives to address the work-life issues to advance the well-being of this critical component of the nations’ food chain. Migrant farm workers are an integral part of how fruits and vegetables are grown, harvested and distributed in the U.S. As a population, migrant farm workers could be considered to be vulnerable, as could their families. Future research in the work-family field pertaining to this population must focus on resilience, and those policies and practices that promote resilience and build on strengths. Researchers and policy makers must shift away from individual deficit and toward positive resource views of low-income workers seeking to better their lives (Kossek, Huber and Lerner, 2003).

The issues associated with migrant farm workers’ acculturative stress will continue to exist unless more attention is paid to their work-family and other social needs identified in this essay. Addressing these needs is critical in supporting physical and mental health and well-being. Many farmworkers have limited education, limited ability to speak English and low wages, and some are separated from spouses and children as part of their migration. All of these factors affect migrant farmworkers and their families, particularly the children, whose education is often interrupted, adding to the challenges and increasing levels of acculturative stress. Educational integration strategies and interventions seem to be a key lever for change meriting future attention.

Research and policy initiatives also continues to be needed to assess possible stress buffers and identify resilience factors, and follow migrant farmworkers and their families longitudinally to better understand long-term implications of migration on social integration. Multi-faceted work-life support interventions and programs must be designed and customized to the needs of migrant farm workers. These initiatives should including strategies for lessening the spillover of job demands on workers and their families, and developing mainstream acculturation
strategies that promote greater stability and social advancement. Additional research-based policy initiatives must also be conducted in the area of the young migrant children’s social, emotional and intellectual school readiness. And it is still true today, as it was in 2005 (Kossek et al.), that additional study is needed on interventions that promote dual societal support of joint participation in breadwinning (earning wages) and caregiving. Future work is also needed to challenge migrant stereotypes that support discrimination and the inability to fully utilize social services and effectively manage employer relations in ways that rebalance possible employer abuse of economic and social power over migrant workers and their family’s well-being.

In order to address acculturative stress factors and resource deprivation, future studies and interventions should include a focus on the following areas: (1) sources of resilience for migrant farmworkers and their families; (2) social networks for both individuals and families; (3) migrant children’s education and development; and (4) family supportive supervisory behaviors. While the work and life circumstances of migrant farmworkers are unique, validated approaches to supporting employees can be customized and applied to this population. There are multiple potential benefits from such initiatives – for migrant farmworkers, their families, their employers, and indirectly the agriculture sector of the U.S. economy.
References


