

Wine Country Migrant Farm Work in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Project Report

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By

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Wine Country Farm Work in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In this project report, I present the results of my research project in partnership with the grassroots organization Líderes Campesinas Comité Sonoma-Napa (LCCSN), which focused on the experiences of the farmworker community in Napa Valley during the COVID-19 pandemic. I employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic with the purpose of documenting how the pandemic has impacted their lives and how this community perceives and copes with it. LCCSN and I were also interested in learning how farmworkers in the Napa Valley have responded and adapted to the pandemic with hopes of utilizing the findings to better serve this community. This has been a tremendous learning experience for both my partner organization and me.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE PROJECT

Introduction and History of the Project

When I first applied to the MA program in Applied Anthropology at San José State University, I had an idea for my project topic: I wanted to focus my research on preventative care practices among the Hispanic population in Napa Valley, California. As the COVID-19 pandemic started to unfold at the beginning of my first semester as a graduate student, I switched my focus a little bit and, in the pandemic, I saw an opportunity to explore and learn about this community and the ways they perceived, responded to, and coped with public health emergencies and disasters while also trying to keep my original interest, preventative care practices, as an area of focus.

For this project, I partnered with the grassroots organization *Líderes Campesinas Comité Sonoma-Napa* (LCCSN) with the intention of developing effective but also culturally sensitive outreach strategies to help the farmworker community of Napa Valley prepare for disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Hispanic immigrants make up most of the workforce in the vineyards of Napa Valley (Capps et al. 2012). Within the research, we were also hoping to learn about how this community interacts not just with disasters but also with organizations (e.g., local government, community-based organizations) and systems (e.g., employment, healthcare) that influence their overall wellbeing and health. Through a round of semi-structured interviews with farmworkers and leaders and discussions with members of the committee, we identified areas where there are still gaps between this community, employers, and governmental and nongovernmental agencies.

The objective of the partnership was to learn about the experiences of the farmworkers during the pandemic and to use the findings to improve and inform services offered by organizations such as LCCSN. The goal was to have services that are not only informed by farmworkers but which are also designed and carried out by farmworkers themselves. LCCSN promotes leadership among farmworker women which would make an ideal project partner. Disaster-affected people are not “passive, powerless victims” (Faas 2016, 15). Local communities are capable of leading epidemic prevention and response efforts, and ignoring their lived experiences in disasters or not including them can often lead to an increase in their marginalization. When we include local communities and where there is collaboration between researchers and communities, as opposed to outside organizations imposing expert “best practices” in lieu of community knowledge and values, disaster risk reduction, response, and recovery efforts stand to be much more effective and beneficial especially for the disaster-affected community (Faas and Marino 2020). Over all, the objective of the study was to learn how minority communities such as the farmworker community perceived the pandemic, how they were able to cope with it and how they responded and adapted to it: what changes and/or modifications helped them overcome this and what were the challenges encountered by this specific community. These findings would help to improve preparedness efforts for future emergencies and would also help understand how this community navigates systems and organizations that one way or another affects or has an impact on everyday choices they make when seeking help. The project aims to help close that gap that still exists between the farmworker community and resources available to

them through public, private, and nonprofit organizations. We want to learn from this community directly so we can offer services and adopt approaches that really work for them.

Problem Statement

The Hispanic community of Napa Valley has been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As it has been seen before in past epidemics, minorities usually suffer the most when a disaster occurs, and this has been the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of Hispanic residents in Napa tend to hold jobs in sectors such as agriculture and retail, businesses that during the peak of the pandemic remained operating as normal. This put workers in these industries at higher risks of contracting the virus and becoming ill. A study by the National Center for Farmworker Health (2021) also reported that an estimated of 49 percent of agricultural workers lack work authorization, making ineligible to receive aid such as unemployment or federal stimulus money. James Quesada and colleagues (2011, 2) state that the vulnerability of an individual is produced by their location in a hierarchical social order and its diverse networks of power relationships and effects and it is an indicator of inequity and social inequality. Hispanics are at a higher risk for suffering the devastating consequences of a disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic, their employment in high-risk sectors, overcrowded living conditions, lack of health insurance, lack of knowledge of healthcare system, underlying medical problems, low wages and ineligibility related to immigration status positions this community in a very unfavorable positions to endure public health emergencies and disasters overall.

Disasters and Covid-19 Pandemic

The approach to study disasters has shifted from one that considered disasters as “natural-occurring phenomena” to an approach that studies disasters as historically produced and resulting from the interactions between hazards and human populations and development (Faas and Barrios, 2015, 288). The dominant perspective to study disasters is based in the political ecology approach (Garcia-Acosta 2018, 4). The political ecology approach focuses on the unequal power relations in human-environment relationships, as well as interactions between their biology and culture (Faas 2016, 17). A. J. Faas (2016) states that one of the core strengths of the political ecology approach to the study of disasters is its focus to the “distal causes of hazard exposure and disaster and disaster impacts” (Faas 2016, 17) which is the historical production of vulnerability. Vulnerability is a socially constructed condition and is a function of power relations in the society in which it is socially organized, culturally sanctioned, economically materialized and politically and legally enforced (Garcia-Acosta 2018, 4). The political ecology approach does not only focus on the social and environmental factors as causal agents, it looks beyond to examine the processes and conditions that cause vulnerability in the first place (Faas 2016, 18). Process and conditions that are often human-produced. Though the concept of vulnerability has been used in disaster studies, some critics, argue that this concept has the potential to portray disaster-affected populations as “passive and powerless victims” (Faas 2016), taking away from these population their agency and their capabilities to deal with hazards, disaster, and risk.

Partnering with LCCSN

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, and Public Health data started to show that farmworkers and the Hispanic community in Napa in general were being disproportionately affected different organizations serving this community began to mobilize to respond to the emergency. This was not unique to Napa County only. In Salinas Valley, the “Salad Bowl of the Nation” that employs around 50,000 agricultural workers, a partnership emerged between a local clinic, Clínica de Salud del Valle de Salinas, and the UC Berkeley School of Public Health to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on farmworkers in this region to inform preventative strategies (Eskenazi et al. 2021). In Napa Valley, other organizations responded in different ways; for example, the Napa Valley Grapegrowers and the Napa Valley Farmworker Foundation, quickly responded to the pandemic by forming a “COVID-19 Taskforce” (personal communication) to provide bilingual information about COVID-19 to grape growers, vineyards managers, and vineyard workers. They also provided “COVID-19 healthy and safety kits” (personal communication) to farmworkers. These kits included face masks, hand sanitizers, and thermometers.

I began to reach out to organizations for a possible partnership as soon as I decided to focus my research on the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it had on the farmworker community. Because my project developed during the pandemic, it was a bit challenging to find an organization that had the time to partner with a student, everyone was busy responding to the emergency. LCCSN is a grassroots organization that has committees or chapters all over the state of California. Their mission is to strengthen the leadership of farmworker women and youth so that they can be agents of economic, social, and political

change and ensure their human rights. Líderes Campesinas, farmworker women, is dedicated to improving the lives of farmworker communities by empowering farmworkers to become leaders and agents of change in their families and communities. Their target are different aspects in the lives of farmworkers. They are female/women-focused but their services reach male farmworkers as well through different programs, campaigns, advocacy, and outreach and education that touch on issues related to Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Environmental Justice, and Labor Rights. The need to prioritize issues related to health and access to healthcare increased as the COVID-19 pandemic began to unfold.

I came across LCCSN while reading a study called “The COVID-19 Farmworker Study” (COFS), coordinated by California Institute for Rural Studies. The study’s purpose was to bring the voices of farmworkers from three different states (California, Oregon, and Washington), on how to respond to the ongoing pandemic. LCCSN was a key partner of the California Institute for Rural Studies in reaching farmworkers for in-depth interviews, focus groups and surveys. Besides their participation in the COFS, Líderes Campesinas, as an organization has been since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, collecting testimonials and feedback from the various regions and throughout the different phases of the pandemic. They partnered with various local collectives, advocacy groups, and students, and have been present in media coverage to represent farmworkers. LCCSN members have also been in the frontlines organizing the distribution of food and safety equipment in the fields, as well as arranging and advocating for mobile clinics for testing and vaccinations. Líderes Campesinas, as other organizations serving agricultural workers, also addressed Governor Newsom demanding the prioritizing of farmworkers and the inclusion of local community-

based organizations in vaccination plans. Líderes Campesinas, wrote two letters to Governor Newsom in the early phases of the pandemic. Ever since the pandemic started, and even long before that, LCCSN has been working to break those barriers that put the farmworker community not only in Napa Valley in a disadvantage position. The Sonoma-Napa chapter is new, but with collaborations with other local groups, LCCSN has already established a presence in the region, and trust among the laborers. At the time that I contacted them, LCCSN was partnering as well with the University of California Merced, they were helping with collecting surveys from farmworkers and immigrant communities regarding the COVID-19. When I first spoke to their coordinator, they were very surprised to hear that the discipline of anthropology could possible research the immigrant community. We had a meeting over zoom, and I introduced myself and the project. I shared with LCCSN my interest about learning about the experiences of the farmworkers during the COVID-19 and how this project could help them hear more directly from farmworkers themselves, as they were still working in the frontlines fighting the COVID-19. They were very receptive of my project and facilitated me conversations with the farmworkers.

Project Deliverables

For the deliverables to LCCSN, I created a PowerPoint Presentation where I shared my findings. I presented to LCCSN about the main themes that came out of the interviews. How the COVID-19 pandemic affected farmworkers in different ways and spaces, and how they handled it and coped with it. I included quotations extracted directly from interviews that I thought represented the lived experiences of farmworkers. The COVID-19 affected the way they performed their work, how they were socializing and the level of trust or mistrust

and/or knowledge they have about organizations such as LCCSN. I also included information on the demographics of my participants and allowed time for any questions, discussions, or comments. Initially, I wanted to prepare a list of possible recommendations for LCCSN depending on the main findings. As I was developing the presentation, I realized it would be best for them to come up with this list, if they thought anything could be improved in their campaigns. I did not want to come up with a list of recommendations on my own for them. As I keep arguing, they are the experts, they know better the community for they are part of the migrant farmworker community. I wanted the presentation to initiate some conversations on their thoughts about the results. Are they surprised at any of the findings? Did they expect these findings among this community? I wanted us all to figure it together ways to address the least favorable findings and come up with some solutions together.

Methodology

This is an ethnographic research design with the goal of identifying and describing patterns in migrant farm workers' experiences of the pandemic and how they perceive, respond to, cope with, and adapt to the pandemic. The study entailed one primary data collection procedure: semi-structured interviews with a quota sample of farmworkers from different vineyards. I also had key informant interviews with managers, specialist workers (e.g., machine operators), and conversations with members of the committee.

To analyze my data, I conducted inductive thematic analysis of interview data to identify important themes related to research questions (Bernard et al. 2017). LCCSN assisted me in identifying and recruiting participants. Originally, I had planned to have

fourteen interviews, but I ended up doing 24. Most of my interviews were over zoom or phone with some being in person, at the participants' homes.

Project Goals:

- I. Understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has have on the lives of migrant farmworkers.
- II. Understand how this community perceives, responds, copes with, and adapts to the pandemic.
- III. Help LCCSN improve and/or develop culturally sensitive and effective outreach efforts.
- IV. Give underrepresented communities the opportunity to share their experiences and participate in preparedness and response strategies.
- V. Advance the contributions of the discipline of Anthropology in the study of disasters.

Roadmap

This project report is divided into three main chapters. Chapter 1 is an in-depth introduction of the project and the partner organization, problem statement and some relevant literature on how the COVID-19 pandemic can be studied through a disaster lens. I also touched on project deliverables. Chapter 2 discusses the main findings of the research and I present the lived experiences of the migrant farmworker community through quotes that represent these experiences. In Chapter 3, I reflect on the project and its limitations and future opportunities for the discipline of anthropology in the study of disasters.

CHAPTER TWO

WINE COUNTRY FARM WORK IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Abstract

In this short article, I present the results of my project in partnership with the grassroots organization Líderes Campesinas Comité Sonoma-Napa (LCCSN), which focused on the experiences of the farmworker community in Napa Valley during the COVID-19 pandemic. I employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic with the purpose of documenting how the pandemic has impacted their lives and how this community perceives and copes with it. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, and I later translated into English the quotes used throughout this report. LCCSN and I were also interested in learning how farmworkers in the Napa Valley have responded and adapted to the pandemic with hopes of utilizing the findings to better serve this community. This has been a tremendous learning experience for both my partner organization and myself.

Keywords: farmworkers, COVID-19 pandemic, disaster, hazards.

“The truth is that it caught us off guard, we were not prepared, we were not prepared for something like this.” – Pablo, 52-year-old farmworker.

Introduction

Following one of the peaks of the coronavirus infection in July of 2020, the Hispanic community of Napa Valley accounted for 60 percent of the total of positive cases in the county, according to Napa County Department of Public Health (Klearman 2020,1). Employment in high-risk sectors, along with many other factors such living in crowded conditions and underlying health conditions, contributed to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this community in Napa Valley. In this study, in collaboration with grassroots organization Líderes Campesinas Comité Sonoma-Napa (LCCSN), I examine the experiences of the farmworker community of Napa Valley during the COVID-19 pandemic

to learn how this community responded, coped with, and adapted to it. The objective of my project was to utilize the findings to improve and/or inform strategies to help this community be better prepared and equipped for future similar crises. Overall, my partner organization and I were interested in learning how their efforts and services can be improved to better serve farmworkers.

LCCSN is a state-wide grassroots organization dedicated to improving the lives of farmworker communities through different campaigns and projects that address issues of domestic violence, pesticide exposure, labor conditions, and rights among others. As the pandemic began to unfold, the local committee in Napa and Sonoma, was determined to represent the farmworkers dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Through semi-structured interviews, I collected information that I later analyzed to identify salient themes. I presented my findings to the committee in a PowerPoint presentation and suggested a few recommendations.

In my interviews with migrant farmworkers, I often heard the phrase: “*nos agarro desprevenidos*” or “it caught us off guard,” “it” referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, the coronavirus, or both. I frequently noticed people using the terms coronavirus and COVID-19 pandemic, or simply pandemic, interchangeably, not really acknowledging or recognizing the difference between a hazard (virus) and a disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic. This study serves as an example to show again how epidemics usually target the poor, minorities, and people of color (González and Marlovits 2020), and how natural or technological hazards do not lead to disasters on their own. It is imperative to distinguish hazards from disasters to effectively develop and employ mitigation and preparedness strategies. Disasters are the

result of the interaction between a hazard, whether natural or technological, and a society at a specific level of vulnerability and risk, both conditions that allow for a hazard to turn into a disaster are socially constructed (Garcia-Acosta 2018, 4). Participants were often able to name certain conditions such as crowded living conditions as contributing factors to the disproportionate impact, however, not a lot of conversation about the systems that allow for inequalities in housing, employment, access to high quality healthcare and low-paying jobs came up. They would almost refer to the virus as the only factor responsible for the disastrous impact the COVID-19 pandemic had in such communities, not making any reference to the role other processes and systems as proposed by Faas and colleagues (2020), play in disaster outcomes, and mitigation and preparedness efforts. I was also surprised to learn that most participants thought their employers' responses to the pandemic were effective.

“I think we were more affected by the pandemic because we had to go to work. I know a lot of people who stopped going to work and were able to stay home safe, us on the other hand had to go to work every day, we did not stop going to work.” – Ignacio, 45-year-old migrant farmworker.

In the following section, I present the themes I identified from interviews. They are narratives of their lived experiences: Stories of struggle and hardship and stories of support and lessons learned. Overall participants expressed experiencing challenges at the workplace, with information, and when navigating institutions and resources. However, there were also plenty of stories about coming together in interesting ways to support one another and lessons learned. The findings in this study can possibly inform future response and preparedness efforts not only from local organizations serving this communities but also

from the community members themselves. I end this chapter with a quotation that I think can be interpreted as a call to action for everyone including citizens, public health, and government officials.

Struggles at the Workplace

“It was very hard at work. Especially during harvest, we had to wear a mask and be running around, sweating. Sometimes I felt I could not breathe. But we had to follow the guidelines, because if we did not, they could send us home, but it was hard, then also during the fires, it even got worse because of the smoke. It was horrible.” – Roberto, 43-year-old migrant farmworker.

Several struggles in the workplace came from the different guidelines adopted by employers to reduce the spread of the virus among farmworkers. The implementation of the use of facemasks came up in a lot of conversations as a struggle and a challenge, along with the effects of social distancing. Wearing a mask while performing such physical work made it very hard to breathe. Farmworkers are constantly moving around, running, and usually under very harsh weather conditions. They said that even though they spend most of the time outdoors, *al aire libre*, the mask was an inconvenience. They explained to me that sometimes during harvest they worked by contract, rather than by the hour, so they had to move faster, work quicker to get the work done sooner, in the least time possible. Because of safety reasons, they are required to wear glasses to protect their eyes, so when the pandemic started and the use of a face mask was mandatory, wearing both, a mask, and glasses, made it almost impossible for them to perform their job because the glasses would become fogged and they could not see. They could not take the mask or the glasses off so it was very hard for them.

Apart from that, the pandemic affected farmworkers emotionally. Many of the participants expressed experiencing feelings of isolation, loneliness, and sadness. It became apparent by the different conversations that “socializing” with their co-workers during work and outside of work was important for this community and that the guidelines adopted by employers and Public Health officials to contain the spread of the coronavirus negatively impacted them emotionally.

“We usually eat together during our lunch breaks. We share our food, for example, we plan to each bring something to share each day. When COVID happened, they prohibited us from eating together and from sharing our food. We had to sit very far apart from one another and it was just hard because we were so used to always being together and talking and laughing.” –
Guadalupe, 52-year-old migrant farmworker.

Conversations of struggle and hardship were very common. Even though a lot of them did experience financial hardship, this was not their biggest concern. Some of them stated that money was a concern mostly at the beginning of the pandemic because they knew other people were being laid off work so they thought this would happen to them as well. As the pandemic continued to unfold and agricultural workers were labelled as essential workers, farmworkers in Napa Valley continued to work as they usually would. They told me that their hours were not reduced at all so their income was not affected, which they said was a good thing for them. However, they expressed being fearful of getting sick at work.

“Fortunately, we never stopped going to work, my hours were not reduced. I was scared to get sick because that is when you would be sent home. But after, we were told that if we became sick, they were going to pay us those days so that was somehow a relief. My biggest concern was getting sick and not being able to provide for my family, especially because I do not have papers so I knew I was not going to be getting any money from the government as other people were, but luckily, I was only out for couple weeks

at the beginning of the pandemic and they paid me.” – Ricardo, 33-year-old farmworker.

Though the narratives of farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic were very similar in general, documented, and undocumented workers experienced different challenges often related to their citizenship status. Undocumented workers, specifically the elderly, reported unique challenges. The elderly were one of the first groups to be encouraged to stay home due to their higher risk of becoming severely ill if infected with the virus. Undocumented older adults shared with me that they were not only concerned for their health but also for their financial situation. They were being laid off work and they were not eligible to apply for unemployment. Stories of this specific group of people tell a very different experience.

“I was one of the first ones in my job to be laid off. They were saying that older people were at higher risk so I had to stay home. This worried me a lot because what was I going to do. I needed to work to pay for my rent, and food and bills. I knew I was not going to be getting unemployment because I cannot, so what I did I had to go look for work somewhere else. Yes, I was afraid to become sick but I had no option.” – Fernando, 62-year-old migrant farmworker.

There were two very different narratives when speaking to documented and undocumented people. Farmworkers with legal status became concerned to a certain point, they were mostly concerned for not knowing exactly what would happen if they had to stop going to work but when the government started to announce the assistance available, this brought some relief to them. On the other hand, farmworkers who lacked legal status had very real concerns: if they lost their job, they could not apply for any of those benefits that

were available to others. The benefits that became available to US Citizens or green card holders, such as stimulus checks, were not received by people who lacked legal status. Their immigration status limited farmworkers from accessing resources and put them in very tough situations. Even though several participants reported not losing income, the ones who did lose their jobs had to find other ways to bring money home, in ways that often-entailed increased risk to their health.

Concerns were not only related to money but also to interacting with the health care system and other agencies. Documented and undocumented folks experienced challenges in navigating the health care system and organizations such as nonprofits. Some of these challenges were related to rumors, misinformation, mistrust, and issues related to language barriers and eligibility requirements.

“We just did not know what to do. They were saying that there was help available but sometimes we are even scared to share our names because we are afraid, they are going to start asking more and eventually they are going to find out we do not have papers and then you get ICE called on you. We prefer not to come in contact with anyone.” – Rosalia, 55-year-old farmworker.

Participants told me that all these requirements would discourage them from seeking assistance. They would struggle and spend the little savings they had instead of reaching out to these agencies because they would not meet the requirements. They told me that even though some would say that you did not need a legal status to receive the aid, other requirements such proof of address or residency would prevent them from qualifying. These were challenges present also with documented folks whom had limited English proficiency.

Struggles with Information, Mistrust, and Rumors

“There were a lot of rumors going on. Me as an older person I was scared to go to the hospital because I had heard that over there, in the hospital, they were killing us, the elderly, to not pay us our pension, our social security. I was scared, I did not want to go.” – Luis Angel, 67-year-old farmworker.

Farmworker Luis became sick with COVID-19 during the summer of 2020. He became severely sick before he sought medical attention. Once in the hospital, he wanted to go home because he had heard so many things that people were saying happened to COVID-19 patients. He also expressed feeling very scared and nervous because he did not speak English and no one in the hospital spoke Spanish. He did not know what was going around him and he had no communication with the hospital staff. Luis’s experience when interacting with the healthcare system shows how information and rumors impact help seeking. This *miedo* (fear) of going to the hospital or even to get tested was present in a lot of interviews. The fear not only originated because of rumors and misinformation about the treatment received in hospitals, but also due to language barriers and lack of knowledge about the healthcare system.

As the vaccine became available in 2021, the misinformation, and rumors continued. Expressions of doubt that a vaccine could be developed so quickly, and rumors that it could make males infertile circulated among the workers. People would become hesitant about going to the hospital or getting vaccinated in part due to all these rumors, but also because a lack of access to accurate information in their language. They expressed waiting until they were feeling terribly sick to go to the hospital. They were afraid.

Throughout the interviews participants openly expressed that in fact at the beginning of the pandemic they thought the pandemic was all a lie. People also stated that they did not believe in the virus and they often would say that it was only like a cold but worse. They explained to me that this belief was specifically more present at the beginning of the pandemic. Stories of mistrust and rumors are not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the outbreak of the West Africa Ebola epidemic from 2014 to 2016, there was also a certain social life of Ebola denialism. Abramowitz (2017) states that this happened in part because of the way the message about the epidemic was being disseminated among local communities. This was also the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of the participants referred to how they thought everything was being made up by the government and that the government was saying that the virus had come from China.

“The truth is that I did not believe. The truth I thought it all was invented by the government and that it was all rumors.” – Jose, 35-year-old migrant farmworker.

Narratives of Support and Lessons Learned

“If this pandemic has taught us something, is that we need to really appreciate the ones we love, our family and loved ones, we never know when one of us can be gone.” Enrique, 37-year-old farmworker.

There were a lot of narratives of loss and grief: loss of income, loss of health, loss of stability, security, and huge changes in everyday life. But there were also lots of stories of solidarity and supporting one another during difficult times. Support came mainly in two ways: financial support and emotional support, and the lessons learned throughout the pandemic were shown mostly as learning to appreciate family and friends and the time spent with them. There were also some references to learning to be more prepared in the sense of

having a safety plan for when a disaster occurs, but most of the conversations showed a sense of appreciation for family and health.

“The truth is that I did not believe. The truth I thought it all was invented by the government and that it was all rumors.” – Jose, 35-year-old migrant farmworker.

“Sometimes we spend too much of our time working, some of us have even two jobs, always trying to bring the bread home that we forget to make time for the family. Yes of course, we need to go to work, but this pandemic has taught me that we do not have anything secured. We could lose our job from one day to another.”- Luisa, 35-year-old farmworker.

Farmworkers expressed helping and supporting one another by dropping off food for friends or family members who were sick and in quarantine. Words of encouragement, phone calls, messages and sometimes video-calls were some of the ways in which they continued to interact socialize and provide emotional support. Another interesting thing they shared that they learned was becoming more familiar with technology, there was a lot of talking about learning to use smartphones and applications such as zoom. The stories of sending money to their relatives in Mexico was very common throughout the interviews. This became especially important when a family member or friend would become sick with COVID-19. They told me that the healthcare system in Mexico is very different from the one here.

“In Mexico, if you don’t have money, they won’t take in into the hospital, you have to pay at least something up front.” – Eric, 25-year-old farmworker.

They expressed feeling very concerned for their relatives over there because they know how hard the situation is, and the way they thought they could best support them was financially. They expressed that even though they had it tough here, they knew their family back in their home country had it worse. They explained to me that even though there is a

public healthcare system in Mexico, this system has always been known to not be the most efficient, that it is always overwhelmed and even during normal times to be seen by a doctor through the public healthcare system, can take months. During the pandemic, the healthcare system became extremely overwhelmed and impacted and COVID-19 patients were not being admitted. They told me that the only way a person could get treatment was in a private hospital, or having a doctor come to the house and provide treatment there, but these two were very expensive options for people living in Mexico.

“Yes, you could have a doctor come check you in your house, and if you needed oxygen, you could buy a tank, but these were expensive, only the people with money or people who had relatives over here in the United States who could send money, would be able to afford this option.” – Jorge, 44-year-old farmworker.

When COVID-19 hit their small hometown back in Mexico, and a lot of people were becoming sick and dying, a group of farmworkers organized a *kermes* to send money to buy oxygen tanks and other supplies for their relatives and friends back home. A *kermes* is a festival where several activities take place but it can also be a way to raise money usually in the benefit of a good cause, by selling traditional homemade dishes and sometimes doing raffles. *Kermes* is usually held in a big open space and each person is selling their dish at a little station. To raise money and help their families and friends back home, this group of farmworkers in Napa held a *kermes*. They prepared food and sold it and because of the COVID-19 protocol and guidelines they accommodated to options such as drive through, delivery, and pick up. In this small town, the nearest hospital, became overwhelmed and the private ones with space were too expensive. A few doctors in the town were willing to come see patients in their homes and prescribe medicine or monitor them, but the problem was that

many of the people needed oxygen and the oxygen tanks were scarce and expensive. This group of farmworkers organized a *kermes* and all the sales went towards helping people in their hometown.

People use *kermes* to also raise funds to help when someone here in the states would become ill or pass away. They would raise money and give it to the family of the deceased for funeral expenses because they know how expensive this can be. I found out that this is a practice very common among this community to provide some sort of financial relief when a friend or relative is going through hardships. Even in normal times, they told me that sometimes farmworkers organize themselves to raise money when someone gets sick or when someone passes away and they need to repatriate the body to the home country.

This is mostly how financial support came up in my conversations with farmworkers, most of the help was monetary. Another way in which they supported one another financially was by *cooperando*, or cooperating. Basically, when a member of the crew or an employee became sick and had to miss work, almost everyone in the company, or at least the whole *cuadrilla*, crew, would pitch in with whatever amount of money they wanted to give and someone would take the money to the affected person as a way of support. They told me that even though they would not always bring together a big amount of money, it was in a way a little help, some relief. This is also again a very common practice among this community when someone is going through a rough time. For example, when someone is diagnosed with a terminal illness, or someone gets into a car crash or just has an unexpected expense, they organize themselves and do a *cooperación*. Other ways in which they supported financially was also by setting up crowdfunding pages in benefit of the affected person or family or by

partnering for example with local businesses such as taco trucks for a donation but these were not as common in the conversations.

“We had lived some illnesses, or similar events such as the fires or the earthquake but not a pandemic like this. This was out of the ordinary, an ugly illness, bad. And well it could be said that the pandemic leaves us as lesson to be more prepared, to be more informed. Personally continue to practice good hygiene not only for this virus, but for others that are around, follow preventive measures. This is what is left by this and to look for information in reliable sources. The health departments need to be more prepared, because we would see in the news that there was no space anywhere for the sick, also politicians need to not bring this into politics, they should sit down together and look for the solution that would benefit us instead of one saying one thing, the democrat says this and the republican says another thing.” – Jesus, 52-year-old farmworker.

Conclusion

My conversations with farmworkers taught me about the different challenges and struggles they faced during the pandemic, but they also taught me the ways in which they overcame these. Challenges were financial and emotional and at work and when navigating institutions and resources. These were often related to lack of understanding and knowledge about systems, language barriers and fear. Undocumented and documented workers experienced the pandemic in different ways. Their concerns were quite different therefore both groups deserve different approaches. The undocumented elderly population suffered unique challenges linked a lot to their migration status and their higher risk for becoming severely ill as well as less literate groups of migrant workers and some Indigenous workers who do not speak or understand Spanish and English. These are the groups within this community of migrant farmworkers whose needs require special attention.

Even though several local organizations including LCCSN quickly mobilized to respond to the crisis, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on this community, made evident that there is still a gap between farmworkers, organizations, and resources. To narrow this gap, and based on my findings, I suggested to LCCNS the inclusion of Indigenous workers in campaigns and outreach events. These campaigns must be culturally and linguistically competent. Farmworkers reported overall trusting their employers, therefore LCCNS should continue to partner with contractors to implement educational and training workshops. Topics at these workshops can include the following: employee benefits, unemployment compensation, health insurance, technology and financial literacy and disaster preparedness, among others. The financial burden the COVID-19 pandemic had on certain groups within this community such as the undocumented workers, must be addressed too. A fund designated for immediate access by both documented and undocumented workers should be a priority. Eligibility requirements to access this fund should be carefully considered and minimal as many reported that a long list of requirements often prevents them from qualifying for the assistance. The pandemic as disastrous as it was, offers an opportunity to improve and change farmworkers situations, and their wellbeing over all. With the proper support from formal organizations and local government officials, they could be more prepared for future disasters.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I reflect on project outcomes, goals, and the limitations of my research. I also touch on future work opportunities not only with grassroots organizations such as LCCSN but other organizations working with farmworkers, and other minorities communities. I conclude by talking about past and possibly the future contributions of anthropology in disaster preparedness and response efforts.

“The road is long, but not impossible”- Luisa, 46-year-old Farmworker Leader.

Outcomes and Key Project Findings

When I started to conduct my interviews, we were still deep in the throes of the pandemic. It was interesting to hear my participants going back and forward to terms such as *antes de la pandemia*, or “before the pandemic.” It became obvious that none of them had experienced anything like this in their lives before. They shared experiencing other disasters such as the wildfires of 2017 and 2018 and an earthquake that happened in 2014, but never something of this magnitude.

“We had never experienced an illness like this. We have lived fires and the earthquake, but never a pandemic like this. It was scary but we knew this too will pass and that we were going to make it, just as we have before, we go through so much every day that is not easy for something to bring us down.”- Mario, 51-year-old migrant farmworker.

Even though the experience was new, it seemed that some of the challenges and the ways they navigate these challenges were not totally new and unknown to this community. After analyzing my data, I concluded that even though the pandemic was indeed a new, scary experience for many, the stories of struggle, hardship, coming together and ultimately overcoming migrant farmworkers lived during the pandemic, were present before the pandemic. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, a person experiences an unexpected expense, such as a funeral, migrant farmworkers often come together and gather money to help the affected person. This shows that some of the struggles were present in this community even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but so were some of the tools they use to overcome these challenges. It would be safe to say that working with a mask under harsh conditions was something new to this community, but they managed to make it through. Experiencing illness and the isolation from the measurements taken to prevent the spread of the virus was something they had never experienced. This was one of the biggest impacts the pandemic had on my participants, but it is unfortunate to say that many of the other challenges shared during the interviews is something that they go through almost every day. Reaching out for help to nonprofits, attending to the doctor and being accurately informed, accessing resources is something that they often do not do even during normal times. This was something of course that was exacerbated by the pandemic.

I learned about the different reasons why migrant farmworkers decide not to reach out for help in times of need and how their immigration status affects these decisions. Often enough, even when they were struggling, they decided to not reach out to local organizations because of different reasons, for many of the participants who shared they are undocumented,

the reasons are being afraid of interacting with anyone who might ask about their status.

There is also the language barrier, even though not many of my participants were Indigenous, I often came across people whose primary language was not Spanish but Mixteco, a dialect spoken among Indigenous groups from states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. These groups represent a population within the migrant farmworker community at higher risk of being left out of preparedness and response efforts during a disaster. In fact, a *supervisor* shared with me that it was challenging to communicate with this specific population the COVID-19 protocol, especially later when discussing the vaccine.

This challenge was not only related to the language, but also due to the diversity within the migrant farmworker community and the engrained mindset of superiority of certain groups over others. Often enough Indigenous groups struggle with discrimination because of their skin color and their ethnic background. They are hierarchies within Mexican migrants, hierarchies that could be rooted back to the colonial caste system where Indigenous groups sit at the bottom of the pyramid and white or “white mestizos” are usually at the top (Trejo and Altamirano 2016). These hierarchies can be based on skin color, language spoken and ethnicities. This was present at the vineyards where usually the *mayordomo* was of a lighter skin tone and Spanish speaking, most of the Indigenous workers I encountered were working in the line. This is something that needs to be considered when preparing and responding to any crisis. Even among Mexicans, the ethnic diversity and hierarchies could play a role and should be considered in preparedness and response efforts, but are often overseen.

Undocumented and documented folks experience disasters in different ways. Their concerns are quite different and with great reason. Usually, documented workers are eligible to receive unemployment benefits, even during normal times, when a documented person loses his/her job, it is not of such big concern because they know they can apply for unemployment benefits, or can easily find another job. Some employers do require proof of authorization to work in the country. On the other hand, an undocumented worker cannot afford to risk to lose their job due to the fact, that unemployment benefits are not available to them and finding another job that hires undocumented people can be hard. These are the populations that need special attention when a disaster happens, they have unique needs and experiences.

These key findings can inform future response strategies. Usually, from the conversations I had with farmworkers over all, they are familiar with struggle and suffering. as they told me, they do it daily, but they are also familiar with coming together and just being resilient and strong. The pandemic offers an opportunity to improve and change their situation with the support from formal organizations and local government officials, they could be more prepared. They possessed the knowledge and they are the experts in their struggles and lived experiences. Who better than themselves to say what works and what does not work?

Limitations of the Research

The LCCSN is new to the Napa area and even though they are a well-established organization known in the community, the path to gain the farmworker community trust is still long. I am very grateful for the participation of the people I interviewed. They have

given me the opportunity to see them from another perspective. When I started my research, I thought it would be easier to talk to farmworkers. Soon enough I realized, it was going to take me more than just explaining what I was intending to do. I understand now, it is not so easy for them to just talk about their experiences to a complete stranger. During some of my interviews, I could tell people were hesitant to talk to me. Even though I explained to them how everything was going to be anonymous and I was going to be the only to know their real identity, my participants were just not very convinced. This “mistrust,” if it can be named like this, is a limitation of my research, and I do not blame them for being suspicious of me or other outsiders or institutions. Their suspicion is very real and valid. Groups who have been historically marginalized, as it is the case with immigrants and specifically undocumented immigrants, any interaction could feel and in fact could be a threat. As shared from other researchers working with undocumented migrants such as Jason Pribilsky (2007) working with migrants in New York he encountered some of the same challenges. They fear deportation. It was challenging to get them to talk to me, and this became even more challenging when I told them interviews were going to be recorded. At one point I was getting “yes” and “no” answers and I felt the information I was collecting was not going to be yielding salient data. This was a hard-to-reach population and I would have not done it with the help of my partner organization.

Impact and Anthropological Difference

What is the role of anthropologists in epidemics? This is something that was brought to my attention when I first met with the coordinator of LCCSN. When I introduced myself to her, and I said I was working on a Master’s in Applied Anthropology and I wanted to

study farmworkers in the COVID-19 pandemic, she was shocked to hear how the discipline of anthropology has contributed and can continue to contribute with studies about immigrant communities, minorities, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. The response of anthropologists to the West Africa Ebola epidemic, has been one of the most rapid and expansive anthropological interventions to a global health emergency (Abramowitz 2017).

Anthropologists advocated for West Africans living in Ebola-affected countries to be treated with basic human decency, dignity, and respect. The discipline of anthropology has the potential to help support epidemic responses that are sensitive, just, and effective (Leach 2019). Epidemics also provide anthropologists an opportunity to learn about the capabilities of local communities to respond, deal and cope with infectious diseases. Anthropologists have an important role along with epidemiologists and other health officials in epidemic preparedness and response.

Away from preparedness efforts and response and recovery strategies,' the discipline of anthropology can help switch our perspective of "experts." Understanding and including the perspectives of local communities' responses and coping strategies, and most importantly involving them in disaster planning and recovery efforts, can help in reducing negatively disproportionate impacts on them. A.J. Faas and Roberto Barrios (2015, 291) state that state-driven disaster recovery efforts, efforts that generally ignore the local and affected community in disaster planning and recovery, can increase the marginalization of the most vulnerable rather than help in their recovery. Likewise, Virginia García-Acosta (2021) states that political leaders tend to ignore local initiatives in their decision-making processes when it comes to effective disaster mitigation. My project has the potential to give farmworkers, a

historically marginalized population, and often ignored in local decision-making processes, the opportunity to participate and get involved in local disaster preparedness efforts. Including their perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic, their response, and coping strategies can inform effective and culturally sensitive policies at the local level. At a broader level, the understanding of the socioeconomical and political conditions that allow pandemics to disproportionately impact some populations over others can also aid in the development of effective mitigation strategies of pandemics (González and Marlovits 2020, 15). Because the COVID-19 pandemic is new, there has been a few studies that have focused on the experiences of immigrant communities during a disaster like this. As small as this research project was, 24 interviews, it is one of the few studies looking into the experiences of migrant farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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