

## How Research and Cultural Training Can Improve Efforts to Assist Immigrant Workers from Many Backgrounds

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California's agricultural production is valued by the state's Department of Food and Agriculture at \$46 billion a year, and accounts for almost a fifth of total U.S. agricultural output. The lives and labor of farmworkers contribute to California's agricultural bounty, yet research has shown that farmworkers are typically not paid enough to pull themselves or their families out of poverty. That is, most earn less than \$15 thousand per year for individuals and \$30,750 for a family of four. What is more, studies document that farm work is one of the ten most dangerous jobs in the United States, and farmworkers often suffer inhumane working and living conditions.

Many policymakers and advocates try to help farmworkers, but unfortunately, differences in culture and language often prevent them from effectively addressing problems farmworkers care the most about. To do better, civic leaders must help change agents in government and service organizations learn about the diverse cultural identities, perspectives, and expectations of those they seek to help. To enhance cultural competency, researchers can help service providers understand people's unique needs and model meaningful efforts to reach across differences in culture and language. To this effect, my collaborators and I worked with labor agencies and community advocacy organizations serving California farmworkers. Our research can serve as an example to other organizations working in similar circumstances

### Understanding Diverse Groups of Mexican Immigrant Farmworkers

According to the California Research Bureau, the majority of California farmworkers are foreign-born – specifically Mexican immigrants. But to simply identify that category as making up the majority of California's agricultural workforce overlooks the many specific cultural and language groups found among Mexican immigrant farmworkers in the United States. Among the two-thirds of California farmworkers who come from Mexico, a large proportion is from indigenous groups or are of indigenous descent – at least one in three and perhaps as many as four-fifths (according to the 2010 Census). The four major indigenous groups sending workers from Mexico are Mixteco, Zapoteco, Triqui, and Mayan speaking peoples. Variations in language and culture among these groups present important challenges to researchers, policymakers, and service-providers.

### Educating Providers – and Helping Immigrant Workers Understand Their Rights

My colleagues and I worked with the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency to develop a process to better inform California farmworkers of the state's labor rights laws and health and safety practices. We also developed a training program for labor agency staff and immigrant advocates to help them better serve their diverse constituents.

To begin, we identified, categorized, and analyzed the 86 educational resources offered by the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency and its sub-agencies. We examined the *readability* of educational materials, using scales to peg the difficulty of the texts in both English and Spanish. To help the agency workers understand implicit and explicit messages contained in their materials, we also developed 25 questions intended to reveal cultural biases, assumptions, and worker experiences. After gathering and analyzing the answers, we then analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of each educational resource in communicating the intended information to farmworkers.

We then worked with the agency to organize five separate focus groups composed of labor agency staffers, representatives from mestizo immigrant and indigenous advocacy organizations, and some Mexican

farmworkers themselves, from both mestizo-immigrant and indigenous backgrounds. Staff members from the labor agency and service organizations were included in the focus groups to allow us to better understand the challenges the service providers face when communicating with immigrant and indigenous farmworkers. Focus groups also helped us identify organizational practices that prevented effective collaborations across departments and organizations during the course of serving farmworker constituents.

Our focus groups included translations for mestizo-immigrant and indigenous farmworkers so that they could participate and describe how they preferred to receive support in their native languages. Each of the focus group participants also had the opportunity to speak about the current anti-immigrant U.S. political climate and its implications for their work or organization. In addition, the special training program we developed for agency staff is intended to allow them to replicate our cultural competency evaluation process, so they can continue to evaluate and improve resources for farmworkers.

## **A Model for Researchers, Practitioners, and Civic Groups**

Our efforts show that research on cultural competency issues can and should be informed and responsive to real-world practices and should help practitioners take their own steps to keep improving. The principles we used can transfer to other settings, where researchers and practitioners should:

- See the experiences of marginalized people as important evidence for evaluation studies.
- Facilitate the preparation and delivery of materials in various native languages.
- Recognize that input from people from particular disadvantaged groups is an important part of the process of producing materials and programs to serve them – including input sensitive to shifting social and political climates.

Scholars dedicated to making sure research is relevant to those who need it most must ensure that study designs do not reflect or further entrench inequalities and disadvantages. As our work among mestizo and indigenous Mexican immigrant farmworkers shows, scholarly and practitioner efforts to build cultural competency risk being superficial or counter-productive if they are not sensitive to their own actual impact on various groups among those served

**Read more in Sayil Camacho and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "Lost in Translation en el Fil: Actualizing Cultural Humility for Indigenous Mexican Farmworkers in California," *Latino Studies Journal*, (Forthcoming 2020).**