



4-1998

## A Multiplicity of Goals in a Migrant Household

Patrick James Maher

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters\\_theses](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses)



Part of the Anthropology Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Maher, Patrick James, "A Multiplicity of Goals in a Migrant Household" (1998). *Master's Theses*. 4005.  
[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters\\_theses/4005](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses/4005)

This Masters Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



A MULTIPLICITY OF GOALS IN A MIGRANT HOUSEHOLD

by

Patrick James Maher

A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
Department of Anthropology

Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan  
April 1998

Copyright by  
Patrick Maher  
1998

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their various stimulating comments throughout the stages of this research, I would like to thank, in alphabetical order, Dr. Arthur Helweg, Dr. Alan Jacobs, and Dr. Erika Loeffler. I would also like to gratefully thank Dr. Robert Sundick for watching over me and inspiring me in times when I thought the completion of this paper was impossible. However, my greatest debt, of course, is to the people with whom I carried out this research, and above all, to the individuals described in the pages of this text.

Patrick James Maher

## A MULTIPLICITY OF GOALS IN A MIGRANT HOUSEHOLD

Patrick James Maher, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1998

This paper explores data collected on Mexican migrants who were living in southwestern Michigan during the Spring and Summer of 1994. Its purpose is to examine the role of the family among one migrant household and to determine whether the findings coincide with other studies completed on Mexican migrant families.

The data examined indicates two major problems in applying its findings to current migration literature. The first involves the concept of a 'united family unit' and the second relates to the notion of a 'common family goal.' The data suggests that the theory on which these concepts are based must be reconsidered and reformulated.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
CHAPTER	
I. PROLOGUE .....	1
II. INTRODUCTION .....	3
III. THE MULTIPLE GOALS ENCOUNTERED WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD .....	8
Family Life as a Mexican Migrant in Michigan .....	8
Methodology and Research Design .....	11
Trinidad's Goal .....	13
Felipe's and Maria's Goals .....	15
Enrique's Goal and Sylvia's Goal .....	16
Julio's Goal .....	17
Kim's Goal .....	18
IV. INTERPRETATIONS DERIVED FROM THE DATA .....	20
Family .....	20
Trinidad's, Kim's and the Children's Differing Families .....	21
Conclusions From the Data .....	23
Suggestions for Further Research .....	25
APPENDIX	
A. Letter of Approval From HSIRB .....	28

Table of Contents--Continued

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 30

## CHAPTER I

### PROLOGUE

Let me begin by describing a series of incidents from my field work:

Trinidad<sup>1</sup> sat at the dinner table with his three children, his daughter-in-law, son-in-law, and his live-in Caucasian girlfriend Kim. He was explaining that he did not care what his ex-wife was doing these days and that this group of people around him was his family now. As he spoke, he looked right at Kim and she, in turn, smiled back at him. According to Trinidad, the fact that everyone was eating dinner together showed how the family was "familia unida," a united family. As Trinidad made these statements, I sensed that not all of his words rested well with his children.

Within hours of this incident, Kim began bickering at Trinidad. She complained that their house was simply too crowded with Trinidad's children living there. She could not understand why the children could not move into the migrant housing with the other workers, and she informed Trinidad that her father, the owner of the orchard, had complained that Trinidad was helping his children too much in the orchard and neglecting some of his foreman duties. Last, Kim complained that Trinidad was not paying her enough attention. Throughout this bickering, Trinidad remained resolutely silent. The

---

<sup>1</sup>All names are pseudonyms, and identities are disguised to protect the individual while maintaining the integrity of the original data collected.



incident ended with Trinidad storming out of the house with a six-pack of beer in his hand. As the tension slowly abated, I sat with Trinidad's two sons, Enrique and Julio, in the living room. I asked them how often they spoke with their mother. Julio said his brother and he kept in contact with her frequently, sent her money when she needed it, and tried to visit her every year. Enrique explained that they sometimes worried about her because she was living alone and she was their mother and, most importantly, their family.

A few hours later, Trinidad returned to the house drunk. He asked for the whereabouts of Kim. Julio said that she was sleeping. In a drunken slur, Trinidad told his two sons that they were his real family and that Kim could never change that fact. However, within two days of this incident, Trinidad was speaking to his sons about how much help Kim was giving the family. He said that Kim was "one of us," one of the family. In response to this statement, Enrique slightly shrugged his shoulders in defiance and Julio looked down to the ground with unapproving eyes. After Trinidad left, Enrique said he was looking forward to "getting out of this place" and getting back to the open road where he felt freedom. A few days earlier, I had heard Trinidad's son-in-law Felipe make a similar comment. He said he wished he had not come to Michigan to harvest apples, and had done so only because his wife, Maria, wanted to see her father.

## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCTION

It is a common and fundamentally unchallenged truth in migration studies that families are clearly bound and readily identifiable entities. Populations are often divided into distinct groups which are referred to as "household units" or "family units" (see, for example, Barlett, 1980; Kearney, 1986; or Kemper, 1981). When examining the migrant family, emphasis is frequently placed on the strategies by which families, as collective entities or units, adjust to the changing opportunities and constraints presented by their broad political, economic, and social systems. In other words, changes in migrant social organization are understood as responsive strategies pursued by families or households whose members, guided by a common project, respond collectively to the challenges of family circumstances and the opportunities and constraints presented by their environment.

In the literature on migration studies, a clear outline of such concepts is provided by Charles Wood. Wood defines the household not as a residential unit but in economic terms as "a group that ensures its maintenance and reproduction by generating and disposing of a collective income fund" (1981:339). He suggests that many households must deal with threats to the adequacy of this fund, threats that stem from the intersection of broad politico-economic developments and changes in their own make-up and material

circumstances. He maintains that, in response to these problems, "the household actively strives to achieve a fit between its consumption necessities, the labor power at its disposal...and the alternatives for generating monetary and nonmonetary income" (1981:331). Within this framework, he argues that migration should be understood as "an integral part of the sustenance strategies the household adopts in response to the opportunities and limitations imposed by conditions beyond the household unit" (1981:338) or, more broadly, as "an important aspect of the adaptive strategy that the household pursues in response to changing constraints" (1981:340-341).

Wood is indeed by no means alone in so constructing the concept of 'family.' For example, Helweg (1986) analyzes Punjabi immigrants in the United States using similar paradigms. He portrays the migrant family as a unified group whose members can be dispersed over continents, without affecting the cohesive unity of the family (1986:109). He depicts the migrant family as an entity in which "individual desires are subordinate to family enhancement" (1986:109). In other words, Helweg sees the migrant family as a kin group that shares a common purpose, the advancement of the family (1986:110). In defining the family, Helweg goes as far as referring to the family as a unit. He states that "the kin group is a unit by which identity and self-esteem is linked with family" (1986:110).

Another migrant anthropologist, Kearney, also identifies the household as a unit of analysis (1986:347). He insists that migrant communities are made up of:

families that are broken down into households, some of which have two or three widely scattered houses. The household in turn consists of individuals, each of

whom can be identified and tracked in the various "spaces" (households) noted above (1986:354).

The dominance of the idea of well defined "family units" or "household units" manifests itself as well in the work most relevant to this present paper, the literature on Mexican migration. For example, Dinerman treats U.S.-bound migration from Michoacán as "an adaptive response on the part of enterprising households" (1978:485). For Dinerman, the household unit embraces a common identity and it acts together to maintain its social respect (1978:496). Similarly, Arizpe construes relay migration between the Mazahua region and Mexico City as one way in which "peasant households use migration as a strategy for survival and reproduction" (1981:187). Selby and Murphy, studying Mexican migrant decision making in five medium sized Mexican cities, conclude that "migration is a part of a complex strategy on the part of poor Mexican households to hold the family together" (1982:iv). Selby and Murphy define the family as a residential unit and emphasize the culturally specific goal of creating and maintaining a unified family (1982:iv). Finally, Massey writes that migration is "adopted by families as part of larger strategies for survival" (1987:1374).

Alongside the literature that depicts the Mexican migrant family as a collective, unified force in migration is the literature that portrays the migrant family as a nurturing and protecting unit. For example, Bacerra posits that although Mexican migrant families have "been modified by the social and economic pressures of American life," the ongoing influx of Mexican migrants serves to maintain certain enduring Mexican familial values. Bacerra goes on to argue that Mexican families provide "mutual support, sustenance and

interaction," which are key emotional and material aids in times of stress (1988:156). In similar fashion, Murillo (1971) concludes that Mexican families provide a sense of belonging and of well-being in a cooperative environment.

Rueschenberg and Burrell (1989) apply similar ideas to Mexican families that have permanently emigrated to the United States. They found that "as families of Mexican descent acculturate, they become increasingly involved with social systems outside the family while the basic internal family system remains essentially unchanged" (1989:232). Their study led them to conclude that Mexican families "did not become increasingly mainstream in their patterns of family interaction" (1989:241). Within their study, Rueschenberg and Burrell portrayed the Mexican family as a positive matrix that provided emotional and material support.

In another study, Sabogal et al. (1987) use the word 'familism' to describe life among Mexican migrants and immigrants. They define familism as "a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family" (1987:398). Investigating whether familism would change as a result of acculturation and migration, they found that familism remains a dominant feature of Mexicans living in the United States.

Considering these theorized depictions of the Mexican migrant family as a clearly bound and carefully defined unit that nurtures and protects its members even as it embraces as collective goal, why did I hear such different and conflicting perspectives from the migrant workers of my fieldwork?

In the following pages I shall examine the organization of one migrant family and the boundaries by which it managed itself. Rather than pursuing my argument in general and abstract terms, I shall draw concretely on the results of my fieldwork in southwestern Michigan. In an attempt to make my analysis as vivid as possible, I hope to weave it through the specifics of a single case, namely Trinidad and his relationship to the group of individuals around him. My analysis takes shape as a response to the concept of a unified "family unit;" I hope to show the intrinsic problems I found in applying this concept to my research. First, however, it will be useful to provide a brief description of the world in which Trinidad lived and of the family, in one sense at least, to which he belonged.

## CHAPTER III

### THE MULTIPLE GOALS ENCOUNTERED WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD

#### Family Life as a Mexican Migrant in Michigan

Mexican migration has always taken place in the context of U.S. domination. Within the last one-hundred years, it has both reflected and been shaped by the emergence of a highly developed economy in the United States and an underdeveloped and weak economy in Mexico (Cockcroft, 1986). Such ideas are well-established and date back to the late 1960's and early 1970's (see, for example, Cohen, 1973; Petras, 1967; or Frank, 1966, 1969). In relation to World Systems Theory, the United States has emerged as a core part of the international economy, while Mexico has been developed as an integral part of its peripheral. In Wallerstein's terms, Mexico has become a nation which plays "an intermediate role in the world economy...tending to produce manufactured goods for an internal market and weaker neighbors but still an exporter of primary products, playing the role of peripheral partner" to the United States (1979:246-247). This characterization of Mexico is stated frequently by anthropologists. As Kearney puts it, "Mexican migration to the United States... represents a unique situation of a long permeable land border between a highly developed and an underdeveloped country" (1986:332), and Mexican "migration is thus inextricably associated with issues of development and underdevelopment" (1986:331).

There are between 2.5 million and four million documented and undocumented Mexicans living within the borders of the United States today (Simcox 1988:23). Since 1970, well over 90% of deportable aliens caught in the United States, have been Mexican (Wilkie, Lorey, & Ochoa, 1988:307). Each year, thousands secretly enter the United States, although "the trip across the border is fraught with hazards" (Juffer, 1988:15). When captured, migrants are sometimes raped and/or severely beaten (Juffer, 1988).

The Mexican migrants among whom I was engaged in ethnographic fieldwork in 1994 came to Michigan to pick apples on an orchard of approximately 100 acres. At that time, 52 migrant fieldworkers lived in crudely built shacks on this land. Although I met each of the migrant workers at one time or another, most of my hours were spent with one particular migrant worker who I will call Trinidad. During this time I was also in frequent contact with his household members, Trinidad's two sons, his daughter, his daughter-in-law, his son-in-law, and his Caucasian live-in girlfriend. The vast majority of my data was produced in the context of extended conversations with Trinidad and his household members. In most cases, I talked with Trinidad alone, but sometimes I sat with all the household members, often over dinner.

When I first met Trinidad, he was in his late forties and had been migrating in and out of the United States for nearly thirty-one years. He began his involvement in the migration process in 1962. He was the only son in a family of five, and was the first in his immediate family to migrate into the United States. When Trinidad first migrated, he planned only to travel for one season. He sought a short term migration, but because the



income from migration ended up vastly exceeding the money he could make from working as a farmhand in Mexico, he continued his migration.

In 1965, he married at the age of 19. Trinidad hoped to end his pattern of migration after the birth of his first son, but his wife and children became dependant on his income from migration. Throughout his years of migration, Trinidad traveled most frequently to California, Florida, Ohio, and Michigan. Most of his years were spent traveling alone, while his wife raised their three children in northeastern Mexico. During these years, his purpose of migration was to support his wife and three children through monthly remittances.

By 1989, all of Trinidad's children had joined the migration process, but his wife remained in Mexico, living in their farm house. Evidently, the long periods of separation between Trinidad and his wife led to marital problems. Trinidad's wife took up residence on the farm with another man while Trinidad was migrating. This led to a divorce, and to the sale of the farm and its land, which disturbed Trinidad greatly.

After his divorce, Trinidad remained on the migrant circuit for four more years until he managed to secure a position as a permanent foreman on an orchard in lower Michigan, which I call the Honeybee Apple farm. Since the summer of 1993, Trinidad had been residing in Michigan with Kim, his girlfriend. They shared a small farm house on the edge of the orchard. In the winter, Trinidad remained as the only Mexican on the orchard, and he depicted his winter days as very slow and boring, but comfortable. In the spring and early summer of 1994, Trinidad's children had come to Michigan to take

part in the apple harvest. All of his children were present along with two of their spouses. These individuals were: Trinidad's 24-year-old daughter Maria and her husband Felipe, age 26; Trinidad's 26-year-old son Enrique and his 23-year-old wife Sylvia; and Trinidad's 21-year-old single son Julio.

Trinidad's daughter Maria had been married to Felipe for three years. They described their years of marriage as a time of almost continual migration. They had a two-year-old daughter who lived with Felipe's mother in Mexico. Felipe had been migrating since the age of 16. Maria and her husband had come to the apple orchard to work temporarily for the summer, as had all of Trinidad's children.

Enrique had been migrating for the past seven years. He had been married to Sylvia for two years. Their married life also was depicted as one of continual migration. They had no children.

Trinidad's youngest son Julio had been migrating for the past five years, and had spent the last two years migrating with his brother Enrique and Enrique's wife Sylvia. Trinidad had discouraged all of his children from joining a life of migration because of its hardships, but his children claimed, that for now, a migrant life offered more opportunities than living permanently in Mexico.

### Methodology and Research Design

I obtained my research data over a four month period by using the methodologies of participant observation which included taking part in daily life-events, participating in

some festivities, and conducting informal interviews. In the Spring of 1994, I was introduced to my primary informant through a Catholic priest who was involved in bringing medical and social services to Mexican migrants in Southwestern Michigan. Unfortunately, I was unable to live with the migrants, but I made almost daily visits to the camp while conducting my research there. All of my interviews, which were done in informal and casual situations, were completed in English. Most of the migrants were bilingual, but my inability to speak fluent Spanish limited me from a deeper understanding of the migrant community. I did my best to not only observe and participate in what was happening but also to examine how my presence affected the dynamics of the social interchanges. I never took notes in the presence of my informants, but I often made unnecessary trips to the bathroom where I jotted down my observations and thoughts. Upon returning home at night, I examined my notes and filled in any missing pieces.

Throughout this paper, I have changed all the names of my informants and have disguised the name of the apple orchard to protect the privacy of my informants. I obtained consent by telling my primary informant that I was interested in not only examining his life as a Mexican migrant, but also in writing about it to complete my graduate degree in anthropology. He seemed flattered by this request and agreed without hesitation.

Early in my research, I concluded that it was best for me to focus only on the case of Trinidad and the members of his household in order to use my time to best effect. I had one picking season to gather my data and I felt that observing two or three

households would compromise my ability to gather sufficient data for any of them. Thus, I limited myself to this one household. The more time I spent in this household, the more I questioned the idea so prevalent in the literature, that of a clearly bound "family unit" that embraced a collective goal. Indeed, I came to believe that I was experiencing a household that was fragmented by a multiplicity of individual goals. In what follows, I shall explain the various goals.

### Trinidad's Goal

Trinidad viewed the migration of his offspring and their spouses to Michigan as the primary way by which he could achieve his objective. This goal was the unification and definition of his family. For Trinidad, there seemed to be four underlying themes that were crucial in defining what it meant to be a family. Witnessing these themes in action made Trinidad feel that his goal was being fulfilled.

The first of these themes was living together. To Trinidad, this was expressed by his children's migration to Michigan and by their presence in his household. Trinidad's house was equipped with a full kitchen, air conditioning, and two extra bedrooms. Trinidad's married children used the two extra bedrooms, and Trinidad's single son, Julio, slept on the fold-out couch in the living room.

The theme of living together was also manifest in Trinidad's hope that someday a family farm would be purchased in Mexico. For Trinidad, living together ultimately would be fully expressed in the eventual settlement of all of his children around him on

a Mexican farm. This was his dream, his ultimate goal.

The second crucial element defining the family for Trinidad was collective labor. He saw this as being most fully realized by his girlfriend, himself, and his children working together physically. This was achieved daily in the harvesting of apples. Trinidad often worked with his children in the orchard, usually by loading filled bushels on his tractor's trailer, and bringing them to the weighing station. Kim would often ride with him and give a helping hand as well.

For Trinidad, a third way his family found definition was through mutual aid. This was most visible in Trinidad helping his children adjust to life as migrant workers. As one anthropologist states, "relatives contribute significantly to the adjustment of migrants, either by assisting in job search, (or) in finding temporary quarters" (Tienda, 1980:388). As foreman, Trinidad was responsible for hiring and dismissing migrant workers. Trinidad aided his children by assuring them a job in Michigan every year, and he used his hiring power to help his children on their migrating paths by strategically hiring individuals who had employment connections elsewhere. His children were then promised future harvesting jobs in reciprocity for Trinidad's actions.

Fourth, Trinidad felt that family relations should be characterized by selflessness. For example, Trinidad viewed his migration as a series of selfless acts on behalf of his family. He argued that he had left Mexico in the first place to aid his family financially, and that he had returned to Mexico yearly to help them manage the family affairs, at least until his marriage dissolved. In fact, Trinidad interpreted his staying at the Michigan

orchard year 'round as a selfless act to keep his family together because it ensured that the family could all come together under the same roof annually.

Thus, for Trinidad, the apple harvesting season in Michigan was truly an opportunity for the family to come together. The migration of his children to Michigan was a primary way by which his family could achieve unity and definition in its fullest form, and in turn, a primary way by which Trinidad could achieve his goal.

### Felipe's and Maria's Goals

To explain the goals of Felipe and Maria, it is first necessary to understand the history of their relationship. Maria told me that she had run off with Felipe when she was twenty years old. This had enraged Trinidad, and Felipe had been so terrified of a confrontation with Trinidad that Felipe married Maria in a secret wedding. The couple then waited an entire year before confronting Trinidad.

It was evident that Trinidad had not shed his past hostility. In fact, family members often joked that Felipe still feared Trinidad, and there seemed to be a cloud of tension that hovered over their interactions and was manifest in minor gestures and a lack of verbal communication. Over arching this situation was the fact that Felipe did not wish to migrate to Michigan. He made it clear to me on two occasions that he would rather be working elsewhere but had come to Michigan out of obligation to his wife's desire to see her father. Thus, for Felipe, the time spent in Michigan was a mild torture which he endured by going through the obligatory motions and actions of family unity.

Although Trinidad viewed Felipe's and Maria's migration to Michigan as a time when the family would share in a collective project and be unified, Felipe and Maria held a different perspective. They felt separated from Felipe's family and their daughter in Mexico. They both wanted to establish their own farming operation in Mexico so they could avoid further migration to the United States. This would allow them to unite with their daughter who lived with Felipe's mother in Mexico. Felipe placed a heavy emphasis on becoming reunited with his mother and living alongside his two brothers, one of whom had forsaken migration and another who planned to return to Mexico soon. Maria not only supported Felipe's dream, but she shared in it as well. Both Felipe and Maria were committed to a return to Mexico where they could unite with their child and create a family life that was tied to Felipe's lineage. They hoped to do this through the money they acquired while migrating.

#### Enrique's Goal and Sylvia's Goal

Although Felipe and Maria shared a common goal, this was not the case with Enrique and Sylvia. Their life was depicted by a triangle of goals, and Enrique was caught in the middle. Enrique was divided by his concern for his father, an obligation to his wife Sylvia, and of commitment to his own goals.

Enrique desired to continue the migratory life for many years to come. He claimed he felt a sense of freedom in migrating that no other life style could offer. However, Trinidad wanted his eldest son to seek permanent work in Michigan, possibly as an

assistant to him at the orchard. Trinidad saw Enrique's immigration to Michigan as a significant step to the family's reunification. Trinidad hoped that his eldest son's immigration would encourage his other children to follow. He claimed that the family could save more money working together year 'round and this would expedite the purchase of a farm in Mexico sooner.

The interactions between Enrique and his father led to almost daily tension. Trinidad viewed his eldest son as a kind of deputy to watch over the other children. Thus, he frequently gave Enrique orders that he expected Enrique to carry out. Enrique saw this as troublesome and when he expressed his desires for the freedom of migration, it was often accompanied with a complaint of how burdensome he found work under his father's command. This condition drove Enrique in two directions. One was away from a desire to come to Michigan where he would be placed under his father's command year 'round, and the other was toward the open road of migration.

On the other side of this triangle was Sylvia. Her goal was to return permanently to Mexico with Enrique. Sylvia wanted to settle down in her hometown and begin having children. At times, Enrique seemed resentful of the pressures that both Trinidad and his wife put on him. He appeared stuck between two conflicting family expectations.

### Julio's Goal

Since Julio was unmarried, he had no commitments to a spouse or child. However, this condition seemed to tie him more closely to obligations to his mother. Enrique



and Maria were occupied with marriages, and this seemed to shift most of the responsibility for looking after their mother into Julio's hands. As a result, his goal was tied to his mother in Mexico.

Julio wanted to be his own boss. His dream was to have his own cattle farm near his mother's home in Mexico. Julio claimed to have a girlfriend in his mother's town whom he hoped to marry. His plan was to save enough money to allow him to return to his mother's house, marry, and pursue his dream of being his own boss.

Trinidad was aware of his youngest son's dream, but he thought it an impossible one and he was convinced that Julio would "be with him" in the future. This is not to say that Julio's talk of independence did not cause Trinidad irritation. It did and I only saw Julio mention it once in front of his father.

#### Kim's Goal

Kim's goal was to live with Trinidad in a typical Western style best characterized by Trinidad's children seeking independence from a parent's household. She expressed this verbally in a multiplicity of ways. Kim often complained that Trinidad worried too much about his grown children, and his pledge to support them financially irritated her. In her eyes, Trinidad was not prospering financially. There were things she wanted, and she saw no reason why Trinidad's children should come before her. Kim also did not approve of living with his children. She did not like that Enrique, Sylvia, Maria, Felipe, and Julio shared Trinidad's residence during the picking season. Kim could not

understand why the children could not simply move into one of the migrant facilities like the other workers, and she made this clear to Trinidad on many occasions. Kim's goal was in complete contradiction to Trinidad's goal. In a sense, she sought family residential dis-unity rather than unity.

Kim's goal put a strain on her relationship with Trinidad's children, and, at times, the children would verbally express their dislike of her to their father. As a result, Trinidad was in a constant state of turmoil between his perceived obligations to his children and to Kim. When Kim was not present, Trinidad acted out this conflict by complaining of Kim's bickering and her overweight figure, much to the delight of his children and their spouses. Trinidad would then talk of the freedom he missed on the migrant circuit, but eventually, his words would turn to justifying his relationship with Kim. He did this by claiming that his children were much better off with him working permanently in Michigan because they were assured of a good job and comfortable housing. Thus, Trinidad chose to stay with Kim as he had done for the past two years, even though she rejected his ideas about family obligations and commitments.

## CHAPTER IV

### INTEPRETATIONS DERIVED FROM THE DATA

#### Family

The concept of family is intrinsic to much of the literature on Mexican migration, yet its meaning is often not clear. It is mostly used in association with the "family unit," but further attempts to define 'family' are seldom forthcoming. There have been broader attempts to define this concept, but coming to a consensus on what this word means seems daunting.

For example, Bernard and Spencer (1996) note that:

people know what they mean when they use the word family, and the meaning is usually made clear to others by the context in which it is used, but most would find it difficult to define precisely what sorts and range of relationships the word covers. (1996:223)

In another attempt at a definition, Kuper and Kuper (1996) identify two broad strands to its meaning. They argue that "family is a subset of an individual's kinship universe" (1996:283), and that family "refers to those who are linked by blood and marriage, though the linkages which are included in any particular instance is an open matter" (1996:283). Secondly, Kuper and Kuper claim that family is used as a virtual synonym for household, though (within the household context) they claim that although kinship linkage remains important, there is "implicit reference to a shared housekeeping and a

common domestic economy" (1996:283).

Due to this open-endedness of possible kin linkages that comprise varying families, anthropologists have sought concepts to delineate and construct some basic family structures. The concepts most relevant to my data are the ideas of an extended patrilineal family, a bilineal extended family, and a nuclear family.

### Trinidad's, Kim's and the Children's Differing Families

An extended family "consists of two or more linearly related kinfolk of the same sex and their spouses and offspring" (Nanda 1991:247). Within the extended family, "ties of lineality - that is, the blood ties between generations - are more important than the ties of marriage" (1991:247).

Patrilineal families are those that "trace descent through a male ancestor to a common male ancestor" (Schultz & Lavenda, 1990:268). Thus, within the patrilineal extended family structure, a family is organized around a man, his sons, and the sons' wives and children. Within a bilineal extended family, the family "is formed by people who believe they are related to each other by connections made through their mothers and their fathers equally (1990:264).

The word 'family' was often used within the household of Trinidad, but determining the meaning of this concept, or determining clear boundaries that defined the family, appeared impossible. This was apparently due to the fact that different individuals held varying ideas about family boundaries, obligations and loyalties.

The children of Trinidad bound their concept of a family around a bilineal extended structure. This was expressed by the children's ties to their mother and to their mother's relatives. Each of the children made a point of visiting her every year, and, most importantly, they utilized cousins from her side of the family to aid them on the migrant circuit. Thus they were bound to a family that excluded Trinidad and Kim, yet they were bound to Trinidad and Kim concurrently. In fact, Trinidad went as far as to refuse to validate this "other side" of family relations and his children refrained from speaking about them in his presence.

For Trinidad, the family was made up of an extended patrilineal family, of which he was the head and the authority. During the harvesting season, the family was complete for Trinidad and it needed no further definition. He often spoke of a well-defined, cooperative, and united family within his household, even though it was clear that his children saw things quite differently.

Kim sought to define the family in a nuclear sense, as "a family organized around husband and wife" (Nanda, 1991:242). Her desire was to solidify a bond between Trinidad and herself. For her, theirs was the primary relationship which needed nurturing. Trinidad's married children, in her opinion, ought to establish separate, neolocal nuclear units.

Within these three broad delineations of different families, there still existed other family boundaries. Maria had ties to her husband's extended family which she did not share with any of her siblings. Kim had family ties to her father, who owned the orchard,

to her own brothers and sisters, and to her biological parents. Also, Enrique held bonds with his wife's relatives, which none of his siblings shared with him.

It was clear that each household member defined his or her family members independently of the other's definitions, but additionally, each member's definition of who was included in his/her family changed within different contexts. At one moment a family would be defined as including member X, then it would be defined as not including member X. Most notable of this was the case of Enrique. In the evening, he often visited the migrant housing to see his wife's brothers. In this context, he would refer to them as his family, but under the roof of Trinidad and Trinidad's presence, Enrique referred to them as his wife's brothers.

At times it appeared that the family was a fluid and constantly changing entity in which no two individuals drew the same family boundaries. Family boundaries overlapped, coincided, and differed from one individual to another. In other words, the concept of family meant different things to different individuals within the household.

### Conclusions From the Data

During the four months that I interacted with people involved in migration between northeastern Mexico and southwestern Michigan, I heard numerous statements that suggested the existence of a united family, and people gave constant emphasis to the importance of family unity. Despite the frequency of these statements, I believe that, given the evidence that my fieldwork produced as a whole, my data is too complex and

contradictory to be placed into the rigid concept of a unified "family unit" or "household unit." Although I did witness many instances of unity and cooperation between the people of Trinidad's household, I also saw numerous cases of conflict, confrontation, and contradiction. Although I heard many references to unity, I also heard frequent comments about its absence, its breakdown and failure.

When talking initially about their family, household members commonly emphasized the ways in which they had remained united in the context of migration, but when asked to assess the impact of migration as a whole, they almost always argued that, alongside its material advantages, it had dismembered and destroyed their family. Most obvious of this in my data was Trinidad's divorce which was viewed as a dismembering family failure.

With regard to the economic household as a physical unit, I cannot claim to have found it a "family unit" that shared a common goal. Goals appeared to be individualized, and each person had a different agenda. Trinidad wanted reunification with his children, Kim wanted the children to be independent, Enrique wanted the open road of migration, Maria wanted to return to Mexico, Julio wanted to live near his mother and be his own boss, and Felipe and Maria wanted to live their "own life" with their daughter in Mexico.

My data also cannot support the concept of a well-defined "family unit" with clear boundaries. The household of Trinidad was comprised of seven individuals who each held differing boundaries of family membership. Among the household as a whole, the concept of family was unclear, unstable, and even, at times, like a changing and fluid

entity. With this in mind, I cannot say I witnessed a cohesive, cooperative and united family or household as other migrationists like Helweg (1986), Wood (1981), and Kearney (1986) have documented.

My fieldwork data was also riddled with contradictions, most obvious in Trinidad's relationship to Kim. Kim represented all that Trinidad did not believe. He stood for linear family unity, whereas she stood for independence among family members. Kim sought economic success for Trinidad and herself alone, whereas Trinidad strove for economic goals tied to his children. This relationship was truly paradoxical, even baffling and confusing at times. Another contradiction in my research was the difference I witnessed between talk and action concerning family unity. There was frequent talk about family unity, yet household members sought individual goals.

It may be possible that my data produced results different from the literature because my fieldwork situation was empirically and uniquely different. Trinidad was divorced and he resided with a Caucasian woman, a non-Mexican migrant. It is difficult to measure how much this relationship was responsible for the fragmentation of the household.

### Suggestions for Further Research

During my fieldwork, I was led, much like the literature that guided me, to search for a cohesive "family unit" that was unified in achieving a common family objective. For much of the time, I held one eye closed and identified all those things that bound this



household together. However, the contradictions that I witnessed could simply not be overlooked.

When reviewing my research as a whole, my first reaction is to claim that the concept of a 'united family goal' has been oversimplified and misunderstood in migration writings. In the future, individual goals should be looked at alongside common goals in families and households. When doing this, particular attention must be given to the discrepancy between the talk and action of informants.

Given the conflicting results my data produced on family boundaries, I suggest that the concepts of 'family unit' and 'household unit' be rethought. During my fieldwork, family boundaries were constantly unclear to me and even appeared to change. It would be better if families and households were viewed not as fixed entities but as processes that are fluid and modified.

Indeed, for analyses of family, the concept of "imagined community" (see, for example, Gupta & Ferguson, 1992) seems useful. Within these studies, communities are seen as imagined because "in the minds of each (person) lives the image of their community" (Anderson, 1983:15-16). Chavez (1996) has illustrated how Mexican migrants develop multiple identities due to an imagined sense of belonging to communities (1996:68). He explains, through individual cases, how a migrant's movements and decisions to settle or sojourn are directly related to a migrant's feelings for belonging to "imagined communities" (1996:63).

Another analogy that can be drawn from "imagined community" studies is the

idea that an individual can identify and "belong" to more than one community, or social grouping. As Chavez points out, "a migrant is not limited to membership in one community; sentiments and connections for one community do not categorically restrict feelings of membership in another" (1996:55). Such may be the case among migrant family membership. For example, as a migrant changes locale, does his/her sense of family membership, obligation, or loyalty change, and thus, does he/she at times identify with more than one family? And if so, for what reasons? Such an approach is not intended to replace societal, legal, or jural rules relating to the concept of family, but rather to highlight some of the factors that contribute to various interpretations or changes in the concept of "family" by its members.

If the same attention is given to the imagined formation of families as is given to the imagined formation of communities, the factors relating to how and why migrants construct their various families will be much better understood.

Appendix A

Letter of Approval From HSIRB



---

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

---

Date: August 12, 1993

To: Patrick Maher

From: M. Michele Burnette, Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Michele Burnette".

Re: HSIRB Project Number 93-07-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "The Spanish speaking migrants of Kalamazoo County" has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the approval application.

You must seek reapproval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: August 11, 1994

xc: Helweg, Anthropology

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Benedict

1983 *Imagined Communities*. London:Verso.

Arizpe, Robert R., Jr.

1981 *Relay Migration and the Survival of the Peasant Household*. *In* *Why People Move: Comparative Perspectives on the Dynamics of International Migration*. Jorge Balan, ed. Pp. 187-210. Paris: Unesco Press.

Bacerra, R.M.

1988 *The Mexican American family*. *In* *Ethnic Families in Americas: Patterns and Variations*, 3rd ed. G.H. Mindel, R.W. Haberstein and R. Wright, eds. New York: Elsevier.

Barlett, Peggy F.

1980 *Adaptive Strategies in Peasant Agricultural Production*. Bernard J. Seigel, Alan R. Beals and Stephen A. Tyler, eds. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 9:545-573.

Chavez, Leo R.

1996 *The Power of the Imagined Community: The Settlement of Undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States*. *American Anthropologist* 1:52-73.

Cockfort, James D.

1986 *Outlaws in the Promised Land: Mexican Immigrant Workers and America's Future*. New York: Groves Press.

Cohen, Benjamin J.

1972 *The Question of Imperialism: The Political Economy of Dominance and Dependence*. New York: Basic Books.

Dinerman, Ina R.

1978 *Patterns of Adaptation among Households of U.S.-bound Migrants from Michoacan, Mexico*. *International Migration Review* 12(4):485-501.

1982 *Migrants and stay-at-homes: A comparative study of rural migration from Michoacán, Mexico*. La Jolla, Calif.:Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies.

Frank, Andre Gunder

1966 The Development of the Underdeveloped. *Monthly Review*, XVII, September: 17-31.

1969 *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution. Essays on the Development, Underdevelopment and the Immediate Enemy.* New York: Modern Reader.

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson

1992 Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology* 7:6-23.

Helweg, Arthur

1987 Punjabi Immigrants in America: Focus on the Family. *In Perspective: Proceedings of the Research Committee, Punjabi Conference.* Surjit Dulai and Arthur Helweg, eds. East Lansing, MI: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University.

Juffer, Jane

1988 Abuse at the Border. *The Progressive* 52(4):14-19.

Kearney, Michael

1986 From the Invisible Hand to Visible Feet: Anthropological Studies of Migration and Development. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15:331-361.

Kemper, Robert V.

1981 Obstacles and Opportunities: Household Economics of Tzintzuntzan Migrants in Mexico City. *Urban Anthropology* 10 (3): 215-233.

Massey, Douglas S.

1987 *Return to Aztlan: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Murillo, N.

1971 The Mexican American Family. *In Chicanos Social and Psychological Perspectives.* R. Wagner and M. Haugiedsy, eds. St. Louis, MO: C.V. Mosby.

Nanda, Serena

1991 *Cultural Anthropology.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Petras, James

1967 The Roots of Underdevelopment. *Monthly Review*. IX, February: 49-55.

Rueschenberg, E. and R. Burrell

1989 American Family Functioning and Acculturation: A Family System Perspective. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* II, no. 3. Pp. 232-44.

Sabogal, Fabio, F.C. Martin, R.R. Otero-Sabogal, B.V. Martin and P. Perez-Stable.

1987 Hispanic Familism and Acculturation: What Changes and What Doesn't. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 9(4):397-412.

Schultz, Emily A. and Robert H. Lavenda

1990 *Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition*. New York: West Publishing Company

Selby, Henry A. and Arthur D. Murphy

1982 The Mexican Urban Household and the Decision to Migrate to the United States. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.

Simcox, David E.

1988 Introduction. *In* U.S. Immigration in the 1980's: Reappraisal and Reform. David E. Simcox, ed. Pp. 1-63. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Tienda, Marta

1980 Familism and Structural Assimilation of Mexican Immigrants in the United States. *International Migration Review* 14(3):383-408.

Wallerstein, Immanuel

1979 *The Capitalist World-Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilkie, James W., David E. Lorey and Enrique Ochoa

1988 *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, Vol. 26. Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications.

Wood, Charles H.

1981 Structural Changes and Household Strategies: A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Rural Migration. *Human Organization* 40:338-344.