

Wells

Daughters and Granddaughters

DAUGHTERS AND  
GRANDDAUGHTERS  
OF FARMWORKERS



*Emerging from the Long  
Shadow of Farm Labor*

BARBARA WELLS

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*For Valentina and Maya Garcia Wells*

## P R E F A C E   A N D A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

As an Anglo graduate student in sociology, I was honored and privileged to work with a leading Latina family sociologist, Maxine Baca Zinn. I learned from her that to be a successful scholar, one must ask the right questions and be committed to the virtue of hard work. In working with Maxine, I became convinced of the explanatory power of a structural analysis that takes into account the intersection of race, social class, and gender. The honor continued as we collaborated on what is by now a well-known analysis of Latino families, "Diversity within Latino Families: New Lessons for Family Social Science" (2000). Beyond specific Latina/o concerns, I have been privileged to work with Maxine and D. Stanley Eitzen on a diversity-based approach to family sociology in the textbook, *Diversity in Families*. It is the convergence of these two themes in my intellectual development—seeing the analytical promise of structural analysis and developing an interest in Latino families—that brought me to the present project.

My decision to undertake this research project was further encouraged by what I perceived to be a challenge put forward by authors of an article in a leading journal in the field of family studies, the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. In a review of the research on ethnic families from the 1990s, "Marital Processes and Parental Socialization in Families of Color: A Decade Review of Research" (2000), McLoyd and her coauthors concluded that if one had to deduce the current demographic realities of the United States from the quantity of research on Latino families, one would conclude that these families were a "miniscule" percentage of the population. The authors called for more and better research on Latino families. The circumstances have changed in ensuing years as more research has centered on Latino families. Much of the new research is excellent, but it has been clear that more qualitative research is needed. This book is the product of a process of thinking carefully about how I might contribute to the body of research on this important segment of the U.S. population.



My greatest thanks go to the women, daughters and granddaughters of farmworkers, who participated in my research. As I prepared to launch this project in Imperial County, I did not know whether the Latinas I hoped to interview would share their family histories and the stories of their own lives with me. A research fellowship in the summer of 2005 allowed me to explore that question. During this time, I made many community contacts and pretested my interview with Mexican American mothers who met my criteria for research participation. I found then, and in every subsequent research trip to the Imperial Valley, that local residents—both Anglo and Mexican American—were entirely gracious with their time and encouraging of my work.

In concluding my interviews, I always asked the participants if they had questions for me. Sometimes women asked me for advice or asked me to tell them about Tennessee, where I work and live. But the most common question to me, an Anglo woman from someplace else, was, "Why are you doing this?" The subtext to their question was, "Why would you care?" When I told them that my goal was to help all of us in the United States better understand families like theirs, most simply said, "Thank you." Some gave me a hug and a few shed a tear. As I wrote this manuscript, I have tried to honor my commitment.

Special thanks go to several Imperial County women who supported my work in ways that truly made a difference. Kimberly Collins, Director of CCBRES (California Center for Border and Regional Economic Studies) at San Diego State University—Imperial Valley, gave me research associate status, provided an office, and helped me understand a complex research setting. Gloria Arrington, site supervisor of the Brawley One Stop, provided me with a space for conducting interviews in a private setting and patiently explained the intricacies of social service programs in California. Maria Solano and Norma Gamez also provided important assistance.

I must also acknowledge the Hernandez family of Brawley. Julian and Maria Hernandez were immigrant farmworkers who picked and packed melons. The Hernandez home continues to be the gathering place for large extended family celebrations of holidays and other hallmark events for the Hernandez, Garcia, and Duarte families and others. I first learned of the Hernandez family of Brawley and about the Imperial Valley more generally from my daughter-in-law, who is one of Julian and Maria's granddaughters.

The time I have spent in field research in the Imperial Valley has been my most satisfying professional work to date. I have never failed to be fascinated by the people and the place. My time in the Valley was all the more dynamic because my husband, a historian, was at the same time working on his own research, which overlapped mine in some ways. His project, centered on religious aspects of the Latino civil rights movement in California associated with the career of Cesar Chavez, brought the lives of farmworkers to his mind as well as mine. We found in this research, as in life, that sociology and history are compatible pursuits, with perspectives that complement and support each other.



I am indebted to funding from Maryville College's Faculty Development Committee for this research. I also acknowledge the support of the Appalachian College Association, first for a John B. Stephenson Fellowship and second for a Ledford Award to support Caitlin Teaster as a research assistant for the project. Caitlin's meticulous work in transcribing and coding many of the interviews was vital in moving this project forward.

I am grateful to Peter Mickulas at Rutgers University Press for guiding me through the publication process. I thank Rosanna Hertz, the *Families in Focus* series editor for my book, for her thorough engagement and careful review of the manuscript. This book is the better for her efforts. I also thank Maxine Baca Zinn and Ann Tickamyer for their helpful suggestions.

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## A B O U T   T H E   A U T H O R

Barbara Wells is a professor of sociology at Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee, where she is also vice president and dean of the college. She is coauthor (with Maxine Baca Zinn and D. Stanley Eitzen) of *Diversity in Families*.

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## INTRODUCTION

*For me, my goal for my kids is that you don't have to suffer like Mom suffered. And you have to be better than Mom because it's getting harder. And you don't have to go to the fields—unless you become a bum and then that's where you're going to end up. But God forbid. You play it smart, stay out of trouble.*

—Rosa Navarra, second-generation Mexican American

Rosa Navarra is a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two who grew up in a farm-worker household. Rosa has reason to celebrate. She has achieved her long-term goals of completing an associate's degree and getting a good job in border security. She hopes her sons will find an easier path than hers to financial stability.

Farm labor framed the first twenty-five years of Rosa's life. She remembers helping her parents in the fields as a young child. Her first job was in farm labor and she continued in that work until she was in her mid-twenties. She resolved early on to get the education that would provide her with a better life, but these plans were initially derailed by a pregnancy. She attributes her eventual achievement to her own determination and the support of her family. She says, "So I got pregnant, and I knew it was going to be hard. But I always told myself in the back of my mind and in my heart—I will finish. I will at least get my associate's of science. Someday I will do it. Whether it's with the kids or not, I'm going to do it. And I thank the Lord that I did something, you know." For a number of years Rosa worked and took classes at the local community college. When she was out of work, she attended school and received welfare. She frequently worked the graveyard shift to minimize her time away from her boys. She has relied heavily on her father and brothers to step in and care for sons. She explains their assistance in these terms: "We're real united as a family, so it is cool."

Rosa's achievement is impressive. Neither of her parents, a U.S.-born father and a Mexico-born mother, ever attended school; both speak mainly Spanish. Her father and two brothers continue in farm work. Rosa relishes her own accomplishments, but fears that if her sons are not careful, they might yet end up in farm labor.

In contrast to Rosa Navarra, Claudia Gomez and her family, husband Manuel and five children, are currently experiencing hard times. The couple had been hopeful about their economic situation when Manuel moved from field labor to construction work a few years ago, but he has had a disabling accident and Claudia is currently unemployed. In better days, when Manuel did construction by day, she worked at night. As she says, "I don't want to leave my children with no one." Now Claudia is especially frustrated because her husband, who cannot work, will not take much responsibility for housework at home. She states, "He won't make breakfast, not clean, no nothing. He says, 'That's not a man's job, that a girl's job.'"

Claudia, a thirty-year-old second-generation Mexican American, tries to be realistic about her job prospects. She believes that her lack of education and family size work against her. She says, "When I apply for jobs, I haven't tried to apply for the good-paying jobs, more than the minimum [wage]. I don't have my high school diploma. I didn't go to college. And then, on top of that, I have to say that I am a mother of five children. If I were hiring, I would say, why would I hire this person? I would hire the gal that is out of college, or no kids, no nothing, you know what I mean?" Claudia's current circumstances are related, at least in part, to what she calls a difficult home life as a child. Her immigrant farmworker parents, adjusting as they were to a new environment, did not understand the importance of education in their new setting. They did not encourage her to do well in school, and, in fact, impeded her educational progress. Claudia explains that when she had homework to do, her parents would turn off the lights and force her to go to bed before she finished her work. She "messed up" and became pregnant at age seventeen, then dropped out of school.

Although discouraged, Claudia is not without hope. She enjoys being an informal mentor for certain of her children's friends, whose parents, she believes, are inattentive to their children's needs. She aspires to work with troubled teens who might benefit from her support.

I met Rosa and Claudia in Brawley, California, where, in 2005, I began a research project and was interviewing Mexican American women about their work and family lives. I returned in 2007 and 2010 for additional research. I had come to the Imperial Valley, one of the great agricultural valleys of California, to explore the work and family experience of U.S.-born Mexican American women. I was particularly interested in native-born women precisely because they were born, raised, and educated in the United States. My interest in this group was due, in part, to what I perceived to be a national climate of public fear and suspicion regarding Mexican immigrants. The concern of many seemed to be that Mexican immigrants had little desire to integrate into American society, whatever that might mean. With anti-immigrant sentiment on the rise, it seemed important for me to ask how it was that second- and third-generation Mexican Americans, children and grandchildren of immigrants, were going about their lives in the United States.

My initial research questions might have been asked of any group of women in any community in the United States. First, how do women who are mothers negotiate their work and family responsibilities? Second, how do their families manage to sustain themselves economically in a particular social and economic context (in this case, a disadvantaged rural place)? And third, to what extent have the families represented by these women experienced intergenerational upward mobility?

Those general research questions connect to a number of related questions about the Mexican American experience in the United States. Questions about labor force experience and responsibilities for children connect to persistent stereotypes about family traditionality and rigid gender roles among this population. Questions about how families make ends meet connect to the concept of "familism," which is a strong orientation toward and obligation to the family. Familism among Mexican Americans has sometimes been critiqued as a deterrent to economic well-being among this population. And, finally, millions of Mexican immigrants have entered the United States as economic migrants. They have come in hopes of a better life for themselves and their children. A large segment of these were drawn by the availability of jobs in western agriculture. To what extent have these hopes been realized across generations of Mexican-origin families?

The women in my study are not, of course, just any group of women. They are Mexican American women, daughters and granddaughters of farmworkers, who live in a poor agriculture-reliant county at the Mexican border. They are members of a racial-ethnic group whose historical place has been to provide low-wage, temporary labor in the United States. The permanent settlement of Mexican-origin families in the United States has been controversial and frequently unwelcome. As to social class origins, the labor niche that Mexican immigrants have historically been most likely to fill is farm labor. This work is arguably the lowest-paid and most marginal work among all job categories.

At the heart of the national understanding of the United States as a "nation of immigrants" is the assumption of upward mobility. Immigrants leave home and country in pursuit of the American Dream in the Land of Opportunity. The American Dream most hope to achieve is "not the excessive wealth of the very rich, but the middle-class standard of decency implicit in a family's ability to own its own home, live in a decent neighborhood, have access to good transportation, and send its children to good schools" (Pedraza 1996, 479). Immigrants hope for a better life for themselves but count on it for their children. The assumption is that with hard work, each generation will better its socioeconomic position relative to the last.

The prospects for upward mobility among the Mexican-origin population have been a topic of considerable scholarly conversation, with a substantial body of research focused on the consequences of immigration for second- and third-generation Mexican Americans (see, for example, Fry and Lowell 2006; López and Stanton-Salazar 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Vasquez 2011; Waldinger, Lim,



and Cort 2007). Scholars now recognize that the old “straight line” assimilation model was oversimplified. This model derived from the European-based immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and assumed that each succeeding generation became more integrated into U.S. society, which contributed to their experience of upward mobility (Foner and Kasinitz 2007). Upon examination, this model does not apply to the post-1965 “new immigration,” in which most immigrants are people of color from Latin America and Asia.<sup>1</sup> They join a racially stratified society in which racial-ethnics experience unequal access to social opportunities and privileges. Systematic racial disadvantage compounds the challenges of integration—especially economic integration—of Mexican Americans into U.S. society.

My analytic strategy in this book is, as Maxine Baca Zinn has written, to “locate family experience in societal arrangements that extend beyond the family and allocate social and economic rewards” (1990, 72). Here I take into account social structures of race, social class, gender, and other systems of inequality. Thus a gender-based analysis of women’s individual and family experiences is inadequate on its own, because social class and race/ethnicity will also powerfully shape their work and family lives. Increasingly, scholars use the concept of social location, that is, where one is located on hierarchies of race, social class, and gender, to uncover and understand diversity in individual and family experiences (Baca Zinn and Wells 2000).<sup>2</sup> This means that I look for the structural antecedents to individual outcomes.

Further, I assume that spatial location matters. Social, political, and economic forces create environments for family life that vary across geographic space. One of the tasks of rural sociology has come to be contesting the overgeneralization of research findings that are based on urban analyses but tacitly assumed to describe all spatial contexts. Research in many other fields of social research, including the family field, typically does not emphasize locale as an explanatory factor. My research incorporates the methodology of rural social science in that it includes a strong spatial component. The rural border setting of this study provides both an opportunity and a necessity to connect women’s experience to place.

Ruth Zambrana critiques conventional research on Latino families as “largely reactive, seldom identifying root causes of social problems and rarely providing an in-depth understanding of the structural and historical factors that shaped the experience of Latino groups in the United States” (2011, 244). I share Zambrana’s concern and have very intentionally been attentive to the structural factors and historical circumstances influencing the families represented in this research. Two major issues came to the forefront as I interacted with the Imperial County women. Most important was the degree to which farm labor—as past and present reality—was formative as they narrated their lives. A close second in importance, and quite obvious from looking at a map, is how their lives were deeply affected by their proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border.

I found that the legacy of a farmworker past took center stage in explaining the work and family struggles experienced by these women. The organization of western agriculture was experienced as an oppressive structure that created barriers to mobility not only for immigrant Mexican farmworkers but also for succeeding generations. We see the pervasive nature of the ways that agricultural production continued to influence the lives of these second- and third-generation Mexican American women and structure their opportunities. A focus on farm labor proved central to understanding how inequality is created and sustained in this context. The everyday challenges associated with life in this agriculture-reliant community are exacerbated by its location at the border.

The stories of Rosa and Claudia forecast, in part, the direction of my research findings. Both are daughters of farmworkers. Neither expected that becoming a mother meant staying out of the labor force; it was clear to both women that their earnings were needed to supplement their husbands' incomes. As a young woman, Rosa had aspirations for her own education as a way to leave farmwork behind. A pregnancy intervened and the marriage it precipitated eventually dissolved, but with the help of her family, she has created a far more economically stable life for herself and her sons. Claudia's experience has been different. She had expected her husband to be the family's primary breadwinner. As a mother of five without a high school diploma, her family's main economic chance was for her husband to move out of farm work and into higher-paying construction work. She tried to resolve the need for her own continued labor force participation by split-shift parenting and expecting her husband to share the household work. Her husband's resistance to "helping her" at home has been a great burden. Claudia works on filing her husband's disability claim and looks for a job herself, but without extended-family assistance, this family relies on welfare, subsidized housing, and food stamps. She is beginning to wonder about her long-term obligation to this man.

Rosa, Claudia, and the other women I interviewed grapple with the same work and family issues facing mothers across the United States. These concerns include unplanned pregnancy, single parenthood, marriage, negotiating housework, earning a living, and concerns for children's care and education. The lives of the women I interviewed, mostly working class, are in some ways similar to those of other groups of women similarly situated in American society. But they are also different. Many second- and third-generation women experienced obstacles to "getting ahead" that are clearly related to the recentness of their family's immigrant experience. Many are building their adult lives without a clear road map. Immigrant parents, some with little English language proficiency and no formal education, have frequently not been able to assist children in setting educational goals and working to achieve them. Some women now express deep regret for circumstances that brought them to teen pregnancy, early marriage, and a limited ability to support their families.