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Outdoor Clusters in an Agricultural Community of the Eastern United States

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Abstract

Researchers have long been interested in male "assemblages" that gather in urban areas, and to a much lesser extent, in farming communities. Researchers in farming areas posit a propensity for alcohol consumption among unmarried men and gathering for instrumental purposes as reasons that groups "assemble." The present analysis extends these rare investigations by analyzing aggregations of farm workers enrolled in a university drug study in a farming community of the southeastern United States. Findings included: non-users were more numerous in clusters than participant-users enrolled in the formal drug/alcohol study; more frequent contacts took place on days following a weekend, when men sought information on work (availability, pay rates, etc.); more than three participant-users were rarely observed hanging-out together. Clusters varied between "anchor" (extended longevity on any given day) and "cycled" (members come-and-go). Most clusters were small: the mean number of persons per cluster was 3.65 with fewer users (mean 1.50) than non-users (mean 2.15). Extending these field data (supported by conversational observations) to distinguish contacts as 'weak ties' and 'strong ties' revealed greater frequency of 'weak ties' showing that male farm workers generally were engaged in non-drug interactions to secure information on work and/or housing.

Keywords: Agricultural labor; Outdoor clusters; Weak-tied interaction; Drug use; Alcohol use; Eastern United States

Background

The migrant people, scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure... Sometimes amusement lay in speech, and they climbed up their lives with jokes. And it came about in the camps along the roads, on the ditch banks besides the streams, under the sycamores.... Grapes of Wrath [1].

From street corners where the poor congregate in urban areas to lesser known rural areas where agricultural workers gather, the practice of "hanging-out" has long generated theoretical interest within the social sciences. Apart from displaced Oklahoma share-croppers described by John Steinbeck in the above quote, agricultural workers of varied backgrounds "hang-out," when not laboring in the fields. A chapter covers this phenomenon for African American farm workers during summers they spent in migrant camps of upstate New York, for example, in the classic study, Migrant Agricultural Workers in the America's Northeast [2]. Similar practices among Latinos are described for farming towns in California by Haley [3] and Du Bry [4]. In rural towns of south Texas from which originate men and women who perform migrant farm labor elsewhere in Texas and in other states, these assemblages or gatherings are called la palomilla (plural form, palomillas) [5-7].

Considered an essential human revolution put into motion by our ancestors, agriculture has long been a necessary food production system that has shifted from meeting local needs to the extensive needs of regional and global populations [8-12]. Given the continuing importance of agriculture within a global economy, as a means of food production and a source of economic livelihood, the study of the agricultural labor systems can reveal the effects of irregular and physically demanding work on individuals dependent on farm labor. The evolutionary processes of agricultural advancements have resulted in increased knowledge on how to meet the extensive needs of multiple populations, which has simultaneously – and in reverse – focused on meeting the needs of agriculture for a sustainable water supply [13]. Natural water systems visible and measurable as surface water and rain-fed systems are the main sources for agriculture [14-16]. Presently, nearly 80% of agricultural production is supported by rain-fed water sources [17].

Based on research with farm workers in the eastern United States, in this article I re-visit an updated version of la palomilla, defined by Rubel [6] as "a network of informal dyadic relations among age-mates," that is both "amorphous" and "unstable." Rubel posited that la palomilla plays a role in the transition between adolescence and marriage for men of Mexican American heritage. The fluidity that he attributes to la palomilla reflects its organizational focus as a spontaneous, casual gathering. Limon's [18-20] description of working-class men at south Texas barbecues (carne asada "meat roast") resembles la palomilla, except that many men in his study were married and nearly all were young adults. Spielberg [7] in contrast mentions nothing about marital status, and he identifies la palomilla as a character-building unit for males through inter-personal, unstructured social contacts.

The importance of la palomilla to social life of farming communities in south Texas is implicit within published descriptions for the fictive town of Mexiquito in Rubel's [5,6] study, that of McBurg in Limón's [18] study, and the unnamed border town in Spielberg's [7] critique of Rubel's original study. Barbecues and alcohol to celebrate special occasions, and, at times, relax when not at work, are defining

characteristics in Limón's account, more than those of Rubel or Spielberg. These celebrations are a variant of la palomilla. They allow the practice of gathering (assemblage) through spontaneous or semi-spontaneous meeting, while emphasizing group formation as a vehicle for conversation and all-male drinking. "Hanging-out" and drinking among men, identified in this instance as la pachanga, is reported for home-based farm workers in small towns of south Texas [19], and among migrant workers who travel for seasonal farm labor, while living at a state-subsidized family residence center in northern California [20].

Until recently, field research in these earlier studies had not focused on use of drugs by agricultural workers. Use of alcohol and drugs among farm workers is mentioned in more recent research by Victor García and Laura Gonzalez [21,22] in the Northeastern United States, James Inciardi and his associates [23] along the Delmarva Peninsula, and a multi-sited investigation of farm workers along the east coast led by Norman Weather-by [14], in which the author served as project director and ethnographer. Field data for the current analysis was collected over the first year of that study.

My objective in this article is to examine bona fide "clusters" in an agricultural area that is located outside sites of previous studies in south Texas (home-base residence), upstate New York (seasonal residence) and northern California (seasonal residence). I seek to answer the question of whether these male-predominant clusters are grounded in instrumental purposes or whether these groups exist with a sole intent to facilitate alcohol or drug use. Ultimately, field materials in this article consider a dimension of street-level interactions in a farming community, rather than an urban setting, where most research on street life has been conducted [23].

To frame my field data, I draw on the interactional model of 'weak ties' and 'strong ties' that postulates that frequency of contacts over the same social circuits serves different purposes. I suggest that the struggle to secure farm work is a guiding force for group formation that meets instrumental and expressive needs. Gathering in small groups is largely a product of the presence of men and women outside the peak hours of a staging area, defined as any location where men and women wait to be selected for day-haul jobs or assigned to a labor crew. At the core of cluster formation is the desire of individuals to work rather than pursue recreational activities that may include alcohol and/or drug use. Rather than properties inherent in these clusters as small groups, the irregularity and uncertainty of farm labor in and of itself propels workers to other pursuits. Some men may play basketball or soccer, for example where towns provide such facilities, and others may choose day-haul labor or work temporarily outside agriculture.

Relatively few individuals among those whom I observed visibly engaged in illicit drug use in the principal settings where men and women hang-out in the agricultural community that served as my principal field site. While drug use does occur outdoors, it rarely is visible in the street. The street cluster more often provides an activity site to negotiate arrangements or share information on places and people for which to be wary, generate tales of past exploits, and, all the while, sustain the street cluster as an informal clearinghouse to exchange work information.

Introduction

La palomilla is my starting point. The title of this article reflects my intent to examine the general practice of "hanging-out," whether traditional forms of la palomilla or updated versions, as the means by which persons of all ages, primarily men and sometimes women, "assemble" or gather as a cluster (social group) in a farm community other than one already a researched site. Material for this analysis was derived from the early phases of a field study in a small town of the rural Southeast that I call Farmington [24]. Most of the research which I conducted through this study, especially the first eight months in Farmington, was completed in a six-block area that forms the main commercial and social interactions in the town. To collect the observational data analyzed in this article, I recorded basic social interaction and spatial movements of people from various vantage points of observation across the interior of the six-block area. For this analysis, I combined observational materials with risk behavior data from a large-scale formal survey of substance-using farm workers at risk for HIV.

Despite the detail provided by Limón [18], Rubel [5,6] and Spielberg [7] of males at the carne asada (Limón) and in la palomilla (Rubel, Spielberg), there is no discussion of drug use [1] beyond alcohol consumption in these "assemblages." Research by Alaniz [20] on pachangas (drinking groups) among men in a state-subsidized migrant family center in northern California follows earlier work by Trotter [19] on the Texas/Mexico border in which each author provides a cultural basis for all-male drinking groups where no mention is made of drugs other than alcohol. In this article, I seek to go beyond the tacit assumption of social homogeneity and an alcohol-use imperative implicit in studies by Alaniz and Trotter. I include quantitative data on clusters absent in prior studies and conclude by delineating aspects of interactions within street clusters.

Farm Workers

The social science and public health literature assumes that farm workers are transient. They are considered 'seasonal' when they work part of the year in agriculture, whether they work in or outside the immediate 'locale' and 'migrant' when they travel across state or county borders to secure agricultural employment, whether or not they work all year-round. 'Seasonal' refers to the temporal dimension of an assumed spatial mobility. 'Migrant' emphasizes spatial aspects of an assumed temporal impermanency within one or more locales catering to practices beyond of that of seasonal labor.

Research on farm workers generally is conducted when they are working in an area where investigators have access. Thus, most of the published literature on agricultural workers is based on studies designed by university researchers. The field site of the investigation is close to a university, and students often participate in the research (e.g., sociology students who conduct interviews or nursing students who secure clinical specimens). Thus, the emphasis in the social science literature is farm workers living in a select few of innumerable labor camps found in more than one-half of the 3,000-plus counties in the United States.2 Studies by less often focus on the 'home base' which is the place to which farm workers return and where they may live when not migrating, that is, when they are not following-the-crops and working on-the-season.

One of the classic studies of farm labor, Agricultural Workers in the Northeast [2], focused on migrant camps in upstate New York, while describing the culture of a 'home base' brought to life in the camps, when farm hands were not working. Camp activities were drawn from southern Black culture and included interactive performances among male assemblages that parallel an organizational potential for

spontaneous, casual gatherings, described for Mexican American men in south Texas. At the time of Friedland and Nelkin's field research (1966-1968), most farm workers along the East Coast of the United States were "internal migrants" (within one country) of African American origin. Mexican nationals often were found in farm labor in the Midwest or along the Pacific Coast in western states. The number of Latino agricultural workers continues to increase on the East Coast [21,22,24] and elsewhere in the country [3], and increasingly includes indigenous workers, especially on the West Coast [25], whereas workers of African American descent, who once predominated in agriculture, have decreased on the East Coast [26-28].

The Field Study

For this analysis, I conducted field observations in a circumscribed area that I call La Calle ("The Street"). These observations form an intensive period of data collection, where I focused on cluster formation and dissolution, as well as frequency of contact between farm workers who "used" illicit drugs and "non-users." After hearing human services staff describe "street people" who spent time within the six-block area that comprises La Calle (I regularly attended meetings of an inter-agency council), I recognized that occasional view of "street people" as drug users assumed their presence was a public nuisance and potential threat to moral order. Taylor [29], for example, described newspaper editorials in the Old South that complained of "drunkenness" and "loafing" visible in the center of small towns on the weekends. From a practical perspective, I recognized a need to examine social interactions in La Calle, to ascertain whether it was solely based on drug use, discover whether drug-using farm workers spent more time with users or non-users and whether they preferred 'hanging-out' with "migrants" or "townspeople." Finally, from a theoretical perspective, owing to its absence for nearly half a century following the first studies of urban assemblages, I sought to provide an analysis on a phenomenon unstudied for farm labor.

Methods

Behavioral data were drawn from eight months of field notes. Comprising a full season of winter-demand labor in Farmington (October to June), these eight months coincided with the highest counts of respondent enrollment for an off-campus, research-education project for which I served as director and fieldworker. For purposes of my analysis, "respondent" refers to a man or woman who enrolled in the larger study and "participant" identifies an enrolled respondent whom I later observed in La Calle. For the larger investigation, current drug use and experience in agricultural labor were eligibility criteria.3 Respondents were chosen for the larger study by sampling from a randomized list of living sites. Most living sites were registered as labor camps, similar to typical worker housing throughout the South. Thus, a number of respondents from the larger study became an "emergent sample" that I observed one or more times in La Calle.

As director of the research-education project, I served as the "on-site" administrator. As fieldworker-ethnographer, I spent time in La Calle, where I interacted with men and women who came to the six-block area, at the same time that I acquainted myself with respondents, as they enrolled in the larger project. As the project director, I conducted a few survey interviews, accompanied outreach teams, and monitored protocol implementation. I verified identification when names were used in La Calle and office-clinic; clarified names, if I was uncertain, when someone approached me to talk; and was assisted by participant-users who voluntarily identified themselves and/or each other. As an unanticipated outcome of my observational activities, 18 persons (users/workers) enrolled in the larger study, after I had met them in La Calle.

The Setting

The attraction of La Calle as a staging area was a centrally-located grocery store and its ample parking space that occupied a full block. Closer in size to the blocks of rural towns than large cities, four of the six blocks comprising La Calle were standard size for interior blocks (25 X 150 feet); the remaining two blocks along the town's main street were slightly smaller (25 X 125 feet). Vehicular traffic was slowed by four-way STOP signs at the interior intersections and two-way STOP signs on adjoining streets to the six-block area. High-volume but slow-moving pedestrian traffic gave the area the flavor of a Latin American plaza, making La Calle the social center of the town. The perimeter of La Calle merged with interior spaces where interaction took place throughout the day and nighttime. Despite an informal 2: 00 curfew upon close of the last business, laborers and work-seekers were back by 4: 00 and 5: 00 in the morning.

Four interior sites of La Calle attracted mainly male gatherings: Cole's Take-Out, Ridge Groceries, Sun Tavern, and Muñoz's Beds [4]. All four shared in common concrete blocks, plastic crates and upturned buckets informally used for seating. Hence, sitting led to interaction. Object portability gave store owners and clerks a way to manage gatherings, simply by removing seats. Availability of shade combined with site architecture transformed each site into nested sub-sites, especially those with overhanging roofs or large trees. Following local usage, I call general sites "places" and the nested sub-sites "spots." As traditionally used by environmental psychologists, synomorphic refers to mini-sites nested within a general site [30]. I made most observations at Cole's Take-Out (57.3%), the convenience store that had open-air seating on the west side which remained under shade until around eleven o'clock in the morning.

The Sample

Social interactions and observations of respondents-as-participants took place amidst a continuing circulation of mostly men but also women in and around the commercial businesses and informal gathering sites of La Calle. A total of 143 participants from the larger study were observed in La Calle one or more times over the first eight months of field research. Eighteen of these 143 "became" respondents in the larger project (ten before and three after December in Year 02; three during Year 03 and two during Year 04). The 143 observed participants represented 24 women and 119 men, comprising one-fifth of the total sub-sample of 680 respondents (564 men, 116 women) who enrolled during the four-year study in the base station (Farmington), and more than one-third of 404 respondents enrolled during the first year of investigation in the base station.5 There were 14 instances where my recognition of a participant-user in La Calle was an annotation in field notes as "participant," that is, someone whom I recognized but was unable to identify. All 14 were lost to the larger investigation (never returned for scheduled follow-up), which eliminated any possibility of identification. Thirteen of these 14 men were observed once, and one was observed twice.

The Data

Material in this article was extracted from field notes and combined with the survey data collected for the larger investigation through standardized instruments administered by locally-hired staff. Drug use data were culled from a Risk Behavior Assessment (entry-baseline; follow-up). Behavioral data were extracted from 87 observation sessions over 77 days (ten split sessions the same day) at times of peak activity when men and women gathered before/after dawn in the shape-up parking lot to board vehicles (buses, vans, trucks, cars) that took them to the fields and orchards surrounding town, and packing plants at the edge of town, and again in late afternoon when they returned. I coded behavioral data in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) from the field notes that I prepared from the 87 observational sessions in La Calle.

I chose times of peak activity for observations at pre-dawn in the morning and pre-dusk in the evening. Mean observational time for the 87 sessions was 1.5 hours (89.46 minutes); median time was 88 minutes. 8 Mean (89.46) was close to the median (88.00); thus, the time range was evenly distributed (high 195, low 33 minutes). Fifteen sessions were more than two hours; one was over three hours. Field notes covered 129.72 hours of observation for a full agricultural season from October to May. Coded and entered into SPSS, these field notes generated 2,045 entries on observations within the six-block area. Possible number of mornings and afternoons, as separate blocks of time over the eight-month period, summed to 506: 253 days X 2 = 506 periods. Hence, the 87 sessions comprising 57 mornings and 30 afternoons represent 17.2% of time available for observation. All days of the week Sunday through Saturday were represented.7 Over these eight months, I recorded the time and the date that I entered and exited La Calle, and annotated each participant sighted, noting the location, who was present, and other information, including details on the activity and subsequent actions [31,32]. I used a layered approach that began with "scratch notes" made in the field that were developed into "field notes" through a word-processing file that permitted retrieval and coding [33]. Observations were recorded for each spot and each place where I stood or sat as well as when I moved between spots and places.

Codes were generated for 245 behaviors among the total of 2,045 entries coded from field notes. Following longstanding procedures for observational research [31-37], I coded each participant singly as an isolate for each appearance in La Calle. These 2,045 entries comprised 377 instances in which a participant was interacting with one or more participants (58.9%), and/or one or more non-users, or both categories, as well as 263 instances in which a participant was observed alone in La Calle (41.1%). In short, 377 activity-encounters represent "clusters" that comprised two or more persons, wherein at least one was an observed participant-user. Thus, clusters analyzed in this article focus on those with one or more persons who were respondents in the larger study that used drugs other than alcohol (verified through a field-drug-test at the time of enrollment/follow-up), as well as reported use of alcohol in most instances.

Behaviors were coded as actions (e.g., "walking," "seated," or "standing") or interaction (e.g., "talk," "exchange money"). Similar to Kramer's [31] emphasis on "scan samples" and Van Gelder and Kaplan's [38] concept of "a completed sequence of behavior," I created the construct of activity-contact to differentiate individuals and groups. For example, five standing men and three seated men talking within a group (when two were "participant-users") would be coded to distinguish two "users" from six "non-users," who was standing and who was sitting, and field notes showed other behavior(s) of interest. Participant interactions generally represented dyadic (45.9%) and three-person (18.6%) activity-contacts, that is, I rarely observed more than three participant-users interacting or hanging-out together.

Results

Each man and woman in La Calle might act as an individual, but more often she or he was participating in a group. Given strategic exchange of information on who's hiring, where one may stay and eat, and where one might move if accommodations were uncomfortable, talk was the most common behavior at 60.2 percent of the behavioral isolates (e.g., "talking-while-standing" at 46.6%, "talking-while-walking" at 21.6% and "talking-while-sitting" at 20.5%). Movement across space comprised 24.4 percent (e.g., "walking-in-the-street" at 11.4%), and stationary actions comprised 15.4 percent (e.g., "consume" at 6.3% [food mostly], followed by object exchange at 4.7% and odd-jobs in the informal economy at 3.4%, such as collecting cans.

Clusters

For cluster data, I generated counts of participants who interacted with non-users, and included total number of persons per cluster. Participating in a group, even if passive (no talk), was coded "engaged-with-a-group" (122 of 143 participants, one or more times). Number of contacts with participants and non-users in groups, then, became a proxy measure for network activity. Twenty persons were coded as "singleton," having never been observed in a group; most were walking in the six-block area, without stopping to talk or join a cluster. Participants contacted other participants (i.e., users) as well as non-users, as they interacted ("engaged-with-a-group"). One type of cluster formation was two or more persons who interacted briefly, as cursory contacts, before one left without further interaction. Cursory contacts were short and comprised few individuals, generally occurring between two persons on bicycles and in cars, particularly if they stopped to talk without exiting the car or dismounting a bicycle. At times, these cursory contacts developed into one of the two types of clusters described below.

One type of group formation was an anchor cluster that kept one or more of its original members, as various individuals joined and left the group (participants and non-users). If one or more of the original member(s) remained within the cluster, there was an incentive to maintain the group. I adapted the concept of "anchor" from the construct of "anchor household" proposed by Griffith and Kissam [27], defined as family members remaining behind as other members of the household migrate and return from "seasonal work."

A second type of group formation was a cycled cluster, where members were replaced by new members, at some point after original members left. Group size for cycled clusters generally was larger than a cursory contact and smaller, at least initially, than that of anchor clusters. Over time, original members disperse and newcomers become new members. Cycled clusters gather for diverse purposes. The tone and style of social interaction of the new cluster is re-constructed by members who join the group, as it "leaves" the residues of purpose for whomever previously occupied the space, mixed with new themes of interaction by those newly joining the cluster.

The practice of mixing across clusters, that is, moving between or among clusters, occurs occasionally but does not affect the process of cluster maintenance. Mixing as "member sharing" appeared to be an inclination of certain individuals. A member of one cluster would leave

to join another cluster or talk with someone, and, rather than leave the site, return to the original cluster. For example, my first day of field observation, I observed among several groups at the west side of Cole's, a cluster of one woman and four men. Calling my nickname, the woman left the men to walk over to me. We stood outside the counter-seats, visible to everyone at the west wall of the store. After we had talked for a few minutes, she returned to the cluster. If I had been a participant, her action would have been "mixing," as she returned to the cluster of men she left. This encounter was significant for another reason. As a respondent in the larger study, she had sanctioned my presence in the area, by spending time to talk with me, leading to my acceptance that day and continuously throughout the period of observation within the six-block area.

Among the 377 activity-contacts that I observed in La Calle over eight months of field observation, I estimate that most were cycled clusters, and the rest were anchor clusters. My estimate is informed by the totality of my long-term research, both in Farmington and in other farming communities where I spend brief period of participant-observation. I cannot derive a more exact percentage, since I sometimes left La Calle or moved to another place or spot within the six-block area, before cluster members dissipated. Over 87 sessions, I witnessed a substantial number of clusters for full duration (anchor and cycled), but I did not observe the full cycle for each of the 377 activity-contacts from which I have formulated categories of cluster formation.

"Work" was a common theme of talk during cluster participation. Scattered in my field notes are references to men and women discussing farm labor recruitment, related processes of farm labor organization (e.g., amount of pay by piece rate or by hour, cost of housing, crew composition), and corresponding assessments of another person (typically not present), whom one came to know while working together. One entry in field notes illustrates how one's interest in job and rate of pay may facilitate securing agricultural work.

Main Parking Lot: Woman approaches bus where I watch crew leader at the open door turn people away. She asks, "Do you have work?" (Tiene trabajo?) The crew leader gently shakes his head, "No." Without missing a beat, she asks how much he pays and how far the truck is from the field. He answers her questions. When she asks a third and fourth question, he does not respond, but motions for her to board the bus. She showed an obvious interest in the work, but more importantly, she demonstrated a gentle persistence that indicated she was a good worker. Through her polite manner, she acknowledged his authority as "boss" [Monday morning at dawn].

Her first question was whether work was available, followed by asking about rate of pay for a worker in his crew, which is the principal concern for workers and contractors alike. A week later I observed her receive a check for that first week of work. On another occasion, I was talking one morning before 6: 00 o'clock with a man (participant in larger study) who excused himself when a work bus stopped at the side of Cole's. He walked to the bus, as the door opened, and asked the driver for current wages paid to his workers, before he returned to continue talking with me. He explained that when he had the opportunity, he secured information to compare the pay of other crews to the wages (similar to the first question the woman mentioned above asked the harvest bus driver) that he was earning with his current farm labor crew.

The mean number of times in which participants engaged in clusters ranged from 1 to 31, and the mean number of times that participants were "alone" ranged from zero to 15. Thus, men and women participated in clusters in La Calle more than they spent time by themselves. Most clusters were small: mean number of persons per cluster was 3.65 (Table 1). There were fewer users (mean 1.50) than non-users (mean 2.15) per cluster, and a greater range of non-users (1-20) than users (1-5) per cluster. I rarely observed a cluster in La Calle of more than three participants at one time (four participants four times and five participants gathered together twice only). Less than 16 percent of the clusters had no non-users.

Mean Number of Participants Per Cluster				
	Users	**Non-Users**	**Total**	**N**
Crew-wait	1.19	8.44	9.63	16
Odd Jobs	1.78	1	2.78	9
Barracks	1.28	2.94	4.28	18
General	1.51	1.84	3.36	334
Total	1.5	2.15	3.65	377
Range	1-5	1-20	1-20	
Note: The term "participants" refers specifically to those individuals enrolled in a local study of drug-using farm workers.				

Table 1: Size and composition of worker clusters, La Calle, Farmington.

As another dimension of engagement with a group that served as a measure of network participation, the mean number of person-contacts per participant was 13.60. Participants in La Calle contacted a mean number of 3.33 different participants a total of 4.15 times over the eight-month period. The most person-contacts by participants of other participants were 102 and 96, and the next closest were 64, 62, 59 and 58 contacts. Each of these six by far had higher totals for unduplicated participant-contacts ranging from 13 to 21 (twice); all other participants except two had less than ten unduplicated participant-contacts each. One who participates in a cluster might accumulate a high score for number of person-contacts, but garner a low score for their unduplicated contacts with other users. That same participant may accumulate a high score for unduplicated contacts with participants (users) by interacting with distinct persons in different clusters, by mixing clusters, and when clusters alter membership over time. The unduplicated count of participant-contacts provides a proxy measure of worker networks comprising "weak ties" [39-44] that occurred in a dispersed fashion within La Calle.

Those who contact many persons infrequently differ from those who contact the same individual(s) many times. As an analytic construct, the number of persons whom one contacts is a suitable measure for "weak tie" (few contacts with many persons), wherein sharing information across a range of contacts increases one's access to beneficial network resources [39,43-48] that usually comprises information on improved or better-paying employment. Whereas "strong ties" resemble cliques (few persons repeatedly contacted regularly) that may link members through "acquaintance chains" [40], "weak ties" take place across a broad base of social contacts that encourage exchange of information and, sometimes, resources. Given observations in previous studies of farm workers [2,24,26,27], the present study quantitatively amplifies what this field research qualitatively has proposed, that agricultural labourers are deeply concerned about their employment opportunities. At the same time,

this analysis postulates a corollary generalization that interactions by farm workers to obtain current information are predominated by "weak ties".

Mean Number of Cluster Contacts					
	Users	**Non-Users**	**Total Person-Contacts**	**Minutes Between "Sightings"**	**Clusters N**
Sunday	1.61	2.35	3.96	7.85 m	23
Monday	1.45	2.55	4	2.76 m	11
Tuesday	1.25	2.81	4.06	6.64 m	16
Wednesday	1.42	1.81	3.24	6.58 m	83
Thursday	1.64	2.2	3.85	8.11 m	59
Friday	1.42	2.11	3.53	8.37 m	122
Saturday	1.63	2.33	3.87	4.87 m	63
Total	1.5	2.15	3.65	6.58 m	377
Range	0-34	0-21	1-102	n/a	n/a

Table 2: Cluster contacts by day of the week, La Calle, Farmington.

As a further confirmation of the utilization of "weak ties" in La Calle, days of the week varied in number of total person-contacts, contacts by participants with other participants, and contacts with non-users. High to low person contacts included (chronologically): Tuesday, Monday, Sunday, Saturday, Thursday, Friday and Wednesday (Table 2). Contacts with non-users were higher on the first three days of the week (Tuesday, Monday, Sunday), when someone who is not working seeks employment, or when one who is dissatisfied seeks another job. Contacts with other participants (users) were higher at the end of the week, when work slows down, and paychecks are issued (usually Friday evening or Saturday morning). Days that begin the week, then, were days in which participants (users) more often interacted with other persons, especially with non-users. The reverse was true for other days of the week. This suggests that interaction varied for person-contacts by day of the week, which, based on common themes in everyday talk in La Calle, was related to sharing information on work availability, called "switch-boarding" by Griffith and Kissam [27]. Given the number of weekend participant-users (based on data from the larger study of drug use), information exchanged might include places and spots to procure licit or illicit drugs, particularly at the end of the week. These data suggest, first, that drug-using agricultural workers used "weak ties" (more person-contacts, especially with non-users) when these ties would be effective, namely, early in the week, as a helpful form of social interaction grounded in exchanging job-seeking information. Second, variation in who contacts whom, that is, non-users versus users, suggests that drug-using farm workers have different purposes for interacting socially, as they activate weak tie contacts differentially on distinct days of the week.

Regulars in La Calle

Subtracting 14 unidentified men and 20 participants observed "alone" in La Calle, there were a total of 109 men and women for whom there are comparative data from the larger study. Active Regulars include 40 participants whom I observed six or more times and Casual Regulars include the remaining 69 participants observed five or fewer times. Among the 109 participants, there were eight different countries from Central America and the Caribbean, ten southern states, three northern states and five other states among places of birth. Slightly more than one-half of the U.S.-born were born in the South, and a larger portion of Casual Regulars (36.2% of 69) than Active Regulars (20.0% of 40) were born outside the United States. Overall, the Casual Regulars and Active Regulars were following general trends of migration into the Lower South from other areas of the South [26,49,50], from specific areas in the United States [51,52] and countries of Central America [25,27] and South America [53]. All 109 were linked to agriculture, and all but five were active in farm labor, as seasonal workers in the local area or as migrants who traveled.

Casual Regulars and Active Regulars were diverse in ethnicity across a range of different ages. More than one-half of the Active Regulars were over age 40 (mean 41.02 years), and they were significantly older than Casual Regulars (mean age 36.17 years) ($p<0.012$). Four-fifths of the Casual Regulars and Active Regulars were men. None of the women who were Casual or Active spent their youth overseas (all but one was born in the states). One-half of the Active Regulars (52.5%) and one-third of the Casual Regulars (37.7%) were African American. A higher percentage of Casual Regulars (46.3%) than Active Regulars (22.5%) were Latino; 11 were U.S.-born Hispanics, and 30 were transnational workers from Central America or the Caribbean. The remaining Casual Regulars and Active Regulars included North American Whites, Caribbean Blacks and Native Americans born in and outside the United States (Table 3).

		Active Regulars		Casual Regulars		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Total		40		69		109	
Men		32	80	54	78.3	86	78.9
Women		8	20	15	21.7	23	21.1
Ethnicity and National Origin							
Black (North America)		21	52.5	26	37.7	47	43.1
Latino (Latin America/Caribbean)		5	12.5	22	31.9	27	24.8
White (North America)		7	17.5	8	11.6	15	13.8
Hispanic (U.S.-born)		3	7.5	8	11.6	11	10.1
Native American (U.S.-born)		1	2.5	2	2.9	3	2.8
African Descent (Caribbean)		2	5	1	1.4	3	2.8
Native American (Central America)		1	2.5	2	2.9	3	2.8
Arrival in Farmington							
1990s		5	12.5	10	14.5	15	13.8
1980s		12	30	20	29	32	29.4
1970s		8	20	9	13	17	15.6
1960s		9	22.5	18	26.1	27	24.8
1950s/earlier		6	15	12	17.4	18	16.5
Mean Age		41	-	36.2	-	37.9	-
Range in Ages		21 to 62		20 to 61		20 to 62	
Note: Demographic characteristics were derived from data secured through the larger study of drug-using farm workers.							

Table 3: Characteristics of active regulars and casual regulars, La Calle, Farmington.

In short, farm workers who used drugs and were observed in La Calle comprise persons of diverse ethnic backgrounds, national origins and ages with variable residence in the farming community. This social and residential variability challenges the theoretical assertion that the composition of social groups is necessarily based on functional and structural characteristics of participants who share a common background. In the case of farm workers, they are more likely to share functional similarities (labor skills and desire to work) than structural (no prior contact until they meet in Farmington; often dissimilar in age and social background).

These field data further modify early descriptions in the literature of la palomilla. The gatherings in La Calle, which I am calling "clusters," follow practices observed by others in agricultural areas [2,3,26]. They differ from la palomilla, first, because they are not limited to age-mates and, second, they do not necessarily precede marriage [5,6]. Palomillas are a form of interaction assemblage that is culture-generative [7] and survival-oriented (emphasis on "weak ties"), more than it is or once was a stage of life common for agricultural areas of South Texas. Clusters in La Calle in contrast represent a variation of la palomilla, as reported in the literature, at the same time that they represent a more diverse "assemblage" of social categories, given the context of Farmington as a combined migrant-seasonal farm town/home-base community.

Transition in La Calle

To the question of what becomes of people who spend time in La Calle, I tracked the whereabouts of participants in later years of long-term field research. I coded the 40 Active Regulars by whereabouts two years and four years after the initial eight months of observation. Those who left town (no longer found in La Calle), were coded Gone. Through conversations with acquaintances or family (former roommates continued to come to La Calle, for example), I verified which Active Regulars truly were Gone (left town). Two years later, 14 of 40 Active Regulars had left Farmington (35%). Many of them left town at the end of the same year they were observed in La Calle. Interestingly, three of the 14 men, I later encountered in the northern part of the state, where I went for a brief study three years after these data were collected in La Calle. One of these three later returned to Farmington five years after I had first observed him in La Calle, nearly two years after the conclusion of the larger study.

Those spending the same amount of time in La Calle two years later had a higher mean number of person-contacts than those who left Farmington (Gone), and both these categories had a higher mean number of person-contacts than those who spent less time in La Calle. Those who left (Gone) had a higher mean number of unduplicated "weak tie" contacts than those spending the same amount of time, and these two categories had a higher mean number of person-contacts than those spending less time in La Calle. Those never re-appearing had a lower mean number of contacts with non-users than those spending the same or less time in La Calle (Table 4).

Lower rates of repeat person-contacts among participant-users suggests that interaction in La Calle encouraged weak ties for reasons that included extended access to information on jobs and housing, as well as news on places where farm work would be available outside Farmington. As confirmation of these generalizations, the first four of six individuals with the highest number of participant-contacts (102, 96, 64, 62, 59, and 58, respectively) were among those who left town at the end of the year after being observed in La Calle. For the observed participants (this analysis), the exchange of information sometimes included crucial details on procurement of preferred drugs for personal use, generally close to end of the week. The inferred model of information exchange is one of new acquaintance interactions and renewed person-contacts by participants with other participants (users) and non-users in gathering sites where farm workers spent time in La Calle.

Mean Number of Person-Contacts						
	Persons	Clusters	All Users	Unique Users	Non-Users	N
Same	33.92	10.17	9	6.92	3.58	12
Less	23.93	9.36	7.57	5.36	3.21	14
Gone	31.29	9.57	9.5	7	2.71	14
Note: The term "unique users" refers to instances of being the only active regular (participant-user) observed within a cluster.						

Table 4: Cluster contacts by active regulars, La Calle, Farmington.

Discussion

The preceding analysis adds to a literature on outdoor assemblages by including cluster formation among farm workers. At the same time the analysis complements observations in the literature that describe the irregularity and uncertainty of agricultural labor, which compels a corresponding need for workers to find employment. The present analysis suggests that cluster participation in agricultural areas serves purposes that primarily include information job resource sharing rather than information shared solely on recreational activities, such as drug procurement or emphasis on alcohol consumption. As they actively seek ways to work in and outside field labor required for agriculture, farm workers first and foremost focus on securing and performing migrant work on-the-season and/or seasonal farm labor close to home-base communities where some might eventually establish a long-term residence. One afternoon at the west side of Cole's Take-Out, for example, a participant described his view of farm labor, "It's fast, but it doesn't last," he told me. Among the Active Regulars who left the community, this was the last time I spoke with him, as he was "gone" a few weeks later.

A low number of repeat contacts by known drug users over the 87 observation sessions during peak social activity across a six-block area in Farmington suggests that drug-using farm workers seek out a range of activity-contacts in which they engage in a group when not working. That their range of contacts is high and scattered, rather than limited to few individuals or solely to those who use illicit drugs, is suggested by formation of clusters at several places and spots where men, and also a few women, gather and interact, day and night. Spontaneous meeting in anchored and cycled clusters is conducive to the generation of weak ties. Interaction with more individuals provides farm workers with contacts for exchange of information on opportunities for travel, work and daily necessities (like housing) inside and outside the community. Information on drug use was observed to be a very small part of resource sharing. Formation of weak times is ongoing in La Calle, which overrides the less frequent generation of strong ties. Amid irregular agricultural work cycles, strong ties may be a luxury not conducive to securing continuing work in agriculture. The needs of farm labor emphasize viability in a job market that is dependent on weak tie formation, rather than the maintenance of strong ties. It is primarily for their work needs that those who spend considerable time in La Calle seek to establish a range of weak tie contacts.

What is noteworthy in the present study is that the behavioral observations uncovered an uneven character in formation of variable size clusters, whose members ranged widely in social divisions by race, age, ethnicity and national origin. Gender is a constant characteristic of those who gather, as it is the men who most often spent time at "hang-with" sites in La Calle. Peopled by formation of typically male-oriented clusters, public space in La Calle contrasts sharply with the domestic sphere of home. Women spending time in the six-block area, who occupy public spaces outdoors, were typically commercial sex workers, female workers awaiting rides to the fields in the early morning, as well as bar workers and store clerks who walk through the area to arrive at work. Those most notably marginal were the sex workers and those who perform farm labor. Barmaids and store clerks occupy indoor spaces for the duration of their daily sojourn into the interior of La Calle. Owing to extensive experience in Farmington that begins as children or teens, many workers spending time in La Calle were townspeople, who mingled with each other at the same time that they interacted with migrant workers who had arrived in town but had lived for varied periods of time in Farmington [54].

Overall, the data illustrate a transition for players in La Calle, an area of Farmington that serves as its primary day-haul and farm labor shape-up area that simultaneously attracts and generates considerable

interaction. Variation in participation levels, or intra-cluster variability, for social activities within La Calle ranged from casual to frequent contact. One-third of the users who regularly spent time in La Calle continued to frequent the area; one-third spent less time; and one-third left town within two years, typically at the end of that first year – and they did not return to Farmington in the five years of field research that followed (four with the larger study; two as an independent investigator). Departures appear greater for winter-demand than summer-demand farm labor. A greater percentage of respondents, for example, left Farmington as winter-demand farm workers (35.0%), than 25.3 percent of Latino summer-demand workers who left an eight-county area where they had been recruited for participation in a field survey of exposure to chemicals on farms in one state of the eastern United States [55,56].

Regardless whether they were born, moved or planned to remain in a town from which they sought agricultural employment, men and women who perform farm labor gradually spend more time in locales that become a home base. Farm workers become townspeople, owing to the decision to stay in a town, which often is influenced through social interaction with townspeople. Like a few men and women in Farmington who do not perform agricultural labor, some farm workers engaged in drug use. Drug-using farm workers do not act or exist in a social vacuum. Participants in one such gathering area, La Calle, were generally inclined to gather in clusters where co-present users were minimal in number or absent; limit cluster participation to less than four users at any given time; and spend similar amounts of time with non-users and users with a preference for non-users. La Calle was not a constellation of sites where places and spots were zones of contact for drug use, or where drug-using farm workers concentrated wholly with other drug-users (whether they were farm workers or not). Those few persons who do farm work and do drugs, then, were an integral part of the interactions that took place in La Calle. But illicit activities were not the main focus of outdoor activity in La Calle. Drug-using farm workers did not monopolize any of the places and spots of social interaction in La Calle, as there were times when numbers of non-users in cycled clusters occupied these same public spaces in La Calle.

Although the difficult conditions of farm labor engender frustration [25-26,54], it may be the irregularity and movement to/from locales that marginalizes agricultural workers from stable employment ultimately serves to buffer risk for drug use by some workers, as it encourages the continuation of use for drugs already initiated, particularly for alcohol. Those who cannot afford the "luxury" of locale-to-locale travel that characterizes migratory farm work, and those who are disinclined to join clusters that form in the central areas ("downtown") of rural towns, may well be those who face greater risk for drug use, augmented by increased network-generated strong-tie contacts rather than more common weak-tie contacts that facilitate worker movement and, thus, decrease permanency of work and residence in rural locales of risk. For it is the constant generation of weak ties that provide the primary basis to access up-to-date information that leads to improved conditions in housing, employment, and support services, at the same time that these active networks of information sharing may generate opportunities for a few men and women to seek and engage in consuming drugs and/or alcohol. Future endeavors should consider the role that clusters in similar circumstances serve for information-exchange and the extent to which a focus on securing a job within agriculture deters farm workers from consumption of drugs and alcohol.

Notes

- Limón [19] employs narrative devices to comment on the issue of drug use: marijuana use by a main informant, those who using hard drugs who described their experience, and the sorrow of hearing of family members who use. However, drug use was not the focus of his study.
- States vary for the state agency (e.g., health, labor, commerce) that is assigned to inspect and license migrant labor camps.
- Drug use was verified through a field kit for urinalysis (ON-TRAK) for derivatives of cocaine (cocaine, crack-cocaine), THC (marijuana and hashish), morphine (heroin). For feasibility study (spring the first year), amphetamine tests were discontinued, owing to no "positives."
- Several recent changes occurred in La Calle, notably, closing of Cole's Take-Out (property for sale) and new management for Ridge's Groceries.
- The feasibility study started late in the agricultural season (March through June) for Year 01. Each subsequent year of the larger study comprised the full agricultural season, September to June, for Year 02, Year 03 and Year 04. Follow-up interviews after enrollment for the larger study were limited to two per respondent.
- One unidentified man, observed twice the first year of field research before he left the town, re-appeared in Farmington five years later – but our interaction was too brief to secure a name.
- I was cautious in annotating time; removing a watch from my pocket would skew otherwise unobtrusive observation. I included notes on occasions people interacted with me (as observer). Although listed and coded, none of the contacts with me were included in the tallies.

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