Kristina Fullerton Rico
Dissertation Defense Introductory Slides

I. Background: **Aging and International Migration**

A. The **sociology of aging** is rarely studied in the context of **migration**

1. When it is, it tends to focus on
    a) **retirement migration** (e.g. wealthy Americans moving to countries w/lower costs of living)
    b) **privileged return migration** (return migration for migrants with authorization to cross borders legally)
    c) **aging while undocumented in the U.S.** (nascent research area corresponding with demographic trends, largely focused on lack of safety net benefits)

B. I came to this topic after beginning fieldwork to study **transnational families** and **family separation.** I encountered research on "**aging in place**" (which refers to older adults' preference to live in their own homes and communities and the supports needed to make that possible). This research is NOT focused on migrants.

At the same time, I was seeing **immigrant rights discourse** that used the frame "home is here" to advocate for undocumented immigrants' right to remain in the U.S. That raised several sociological questions for me.

1. From previous research on Mexico–U.S. migration, we know that most undocumented immigrants would have preferred to practice **circular migration**. In fact, most people I met through my research described themselves as having two homes: one in the U.S., and the other in Mexico, but because of immigration policies, they are unable to move freely between them, and this will likely be the case as they age. **What does it mean to age in one home and be cut off from the other?**

2. How do undocumented immigrants with close transnational bonds navigate common experiences in later life?
    a) Transitioning out of work
    b) Experiencing **declining health**
    c) Confronting mortality

(1) own mortality
(2) loved one's mortality

d) Experiencing **familial role transitions** and **upward and downward transfers of care**, e.g.
   (1) becoming a grandparent
      (a) caring for grandchildren
   (2) relying on children for material support (housing, economic assistance)
   (3) relying on family members for **care**, especially during periods of illness or if one must manage a chronic illness

3. We also know from previous research that Mexican immigrants think of themselves as **labor migrants** and **target earners** who come to the U.S. to earn money to improve their quality of life in Mexico. **What happens when immigrants in this position can no longer work?**

   a) Undocumented Mexican immigrants often talk about "going back," but most do not because circular migration would be too risky and because they and their families in both countries rely on their earnings. (It's also possible that this is a "**myth of return**" rather than an intention.)

   b) However, given that the current era of U.S. immigration policy is characterized by **immigrant exclusion,** undocumented immigrants experience significant pressures to leave the U.S.

   c) We also know that migrants maintain close transnational bonds and may want to return to their communities of origin.

   d) Both the pressures to leave and the desire to return may be intensified when individuals can no longer work in the U.S.

4. In my Master's thesis I wrote about undocumented parents contemplating what it would be like to leave behind some of their family members to reunite with others. In my dissertation research, I found that there were in fact older

adults who were doing this, as well as older adults whose family members in Mexico were dying, so they could no longer return to be with them.

5. What do enduring transnational relationships allow us to learn about the **strength of familial bonds** despite long-term separation? What is it like to go back to one's community of origin after decades away? How is this shaped by U.S. immigration policies? And, given what we know about how penalties **"spill over"** to mixed-status families and communities, what are the collateral impacts of return migration due to undocumented status?

II. Motivating Questions

A. Chapter 1

1. **How do undocumented immigrants in the U.S. anticipate death and grieve from afar; how do transnational death and grief impact their relationships; and what does this tell us about mourning from afar more broadly?**

B. Chapter 2

1. **What drives return migration of older undocumented immigrants? How much agency are return migrants who were undocumented able to exercise, and how do return and post-return experiences vary among this population?**

C. Chapter 3

1. **How does return migration in later life transform grandparenthood, and what does this tell us about how immigration policies impact mixed-status extended families?**

III. Methods

A. Why Puebla and NYC

1. strong migration flow

a) Most Mexican immigrants in New York City hail from the state of Puebla — members of this community jokingly refer to it as Puebla York. Nearby states, including Tlaxcala, Guerrero, and Morelos, as well as Mexico City, are also well-represented (Quiroz Becerra 2014;

Smith 2005).

b) This made it feasible to conduct a binational study, as I could travel between New York City and central Mexico.

c) disrupted circular migration

(1) Mexican migration to NYC grew between the 1980s and early 2000s, so most of the respondents in my study had some experience with circular migration before it became too dangerous and could talk about how this disruption affected their lives.

This is different from studying migration to newer destination sites, e.g. in the U.S. South

d) My work also builds on *Mexican New York* (Smith 2005). However, because Smith conducted fieldwork between 1988 and 2002, many of his participants had attained documented status through the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 (Smith 2005). This allowed the families he studied to travel between the U.S. and Mexico, so their transnational experiences were largely lived in person. Engaging with this work led me to ask how transnational bonds endured for people who could not be together physically?

B. Positionality: "There are always ways in which an ethnographer can be part of the community with whom they work, but also be an outsider in other respects" (Miranda 2022)

1. I'm a Mexican immigrant with close transnat'l bonds who grew up in a mixed-status community but I've always had U.S. citizenship
    a) how to talk about things, what NOT to say
    b) Research comparing documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants finds that documented immigrants travel to Mexico, while undocumented immigrants are "caged in as long-term settlers" (Massey et al. 2015)
    c) experiences with transnational death

C. Briefly mention methodology and time in the field

1. Previous experience in low-wage jobs in NYC (2012–2013)

2. Began fieldwork in 2017
    a) 2017: NYC, Puebla, and Morelos
    b) 2018: NYC, Puebla, and Morelos
    c) 2019: NYC
    d) 2020: virtual fieldwork only
    e) 2021: NYC and virtual fieldwork
    f) 2022: NYC and virtual fieldwork
    g) 2023: NYC, Puebla, Morelos, and Tlaxcala

IV. General Broad Conclusions of Dissertation

A. Undocumented aging sheds light on the extent of **immigrant exclusion** in the U.S. today, on the **significance of immigration status** for undocumented immigrants and their mixed-status, transnational families, and the **penalties and collateral impacts from U.S. immigration policies** that they *all* must endure.

V. Next Steps

A. I plan to publish one other chapter from the dissertation as a journal article and to submit a book proposal in the next year. I am still deciding whether the book should focus on undocumented, transnational aging or on transnational, mixed-status families in Mexico and the U.S. more broadly.

EXTRA SLIDES

- INTERVIEW METHODS
    - "I set out to be an ethnographer who would supplement and member-check with interviews, but interviews became more central in my methods because they helped me establish clearer boundaries, explain my positionality, address unequal power dynamics, and invite collaboration from my research participants.

    - I use interview methods to address unequal power dynamics and increase transparency. In doing research that uses participant-observation and semi-structured interviews, I have found that interviews can be a powerful tool for ensuring participants understand what I am studying, setting clearer boundaries, and creating space for participants to shape my research agenda

    - By sharing my own experiences as an immigrant who maintains close transnational relationships, I also sought to increase transparency about my social location and the ways it might limit my perspective.

    - At times, this approach may be uncomfortable for the researcher (e.g. I often felt awkward answering questions about my relatively privileged upbringing in Mexico), but I have found that it can increase the sense of trust and reduce participants' fears that they "don't know enough" to be interviewed. For example, an older participant told me that he worried he would not be a good person to interview because he lacked formal education. However, after the interview, he began approaching me at community events to talk about his experiences and felt more comfortable sharing his own opinions about the current political climate, as well as observations he had made from his experiences as a long-time migrant.

    - Because interviews were not my only source of data, I was comfortable letting participants direct our conversations. After interviews, participants often made suggestions about what I should research in the future. In one instance, this led to a research project on transnational mourning.

    - Using examples from my own research, I highlight three aspects that have been particularly useful: 1) using the interview process to obtain more informed consent by explaining my research interests and the logic behind the questions I ask, 2) allowing participants to direct the conversation and being willing to answer questions, and 3) being candid about how I came to this research and what I plan to publish.

    - Like I mentioned, I originally intended my research to be primarily ethnographic, supplemented with interviews with key informants (gathered near the end of my research trip), but as I began doing fieldwork, I noticed that

        - relationships felt very asymmetrical (interactions felt deferential; university affiliation gave me an "aura of expertise," generally felt like people were nervous around me)

        - research didn't feel transparent enough (e.g. I would read people IRB consent document and ask if they had questions, but no one did)

        - positionality (came to this research because I'm from Mexico and have lived a cross-border life; most of my family still lives in Mexico, so I spend a lot of time engaging in similar behaviors to what I study. However, I'm in a much more privileged position relative to many of my participants. I didn't want to gloss over that, but it was difficult to talk about my position or to know when to bring it up.)

TAKEAWAYS: What I've learned from doing interviews in ethnographic research:

- Don't assume that interviews should be subordinate to participant-observation. Using both methods concurrently has worked well for me, and doing interviews earlier in the research process improved the fieldwork experience (for me and, I would argue, for participants).

- Interviews can be a tool for addressing issues around research ethics and consent—especially because ethnography is often murky, and it's important to explain what we're studying and how.

- Interviews can also be used to talk about positionality and the way a researcher's social location might limit her perspective.

- Interviews can be used to lessen unequal power dynamics between researchers and participants.
    - Dialogue
    - Contextualized research questions (i.e. This is what the literature suggests. Does that resonate with your own experiences?)
    - Openness to input, research ideas, detours, and collaboration

        - I hope that hearing about my experiences may be helpful to some of you as you decide how to do research in the future, and I'm looking forward to our discussion here.

- my views on ethics
    - micro: interview should not be re-traumatizing; at their best they are empowering (allowing people to learn how much they know and to "talk back" to the research) or therapeutic (get what I wrote about this from depth paper)

    - meso: share research with immigrant-serving institutions

    - macro: policy change

- Immigrant Exclusion Policies: border militarization, heightened immigration enforcement, limited opportunities for undocumented immigrants to adjust their status/integrate into U.S. society legally, and increasing restrictions on immigrant rights that make immigration status consequential in daily life

- Overarching question: I wanted to understand how immigration restrictions in the U.S. impact aging, and how undocumented immigrants and their families respond.

- Framing for each chapter
    - Chapter 1: Given that immigration restrictions have almost eliminated unauthorized circular migration and cross-border travel, undocumented immigrants and their social networks in their communities of origin must endure long-term separation, including during important moments like dying, death, and bereavement.

    - Chapter 2: Despite not being targeted for deportation, having lived in the U.S. for decades, and having built families and lives within U.S. borders, many older adults return to Mexico.

    - Chapter 3: Given what we know about the collateral impacts of other penalties for undocumented status, the importance that grandparents tend to hold in Latine families, and previous research on how the U.S. has interfered and limited family formation for racially marginalized groups, including undocumented immigrants, it is important

to understand how return migration impacts mixed-status, transnational families.

- Pictures of NYC in Puebla and Puebla in NYC

- Overarching findings
    - I find that U.S. immigration policies negatively impact the social and emotional wellbeing of older adults, lead them to endure permanent family separation, leave them socially isolated as they grieve, separate them from their communities, and continue to limit their lives and transform their families even after they have left the U.S..

- Why my research matters
    - This research has important implications for understanding how undocumented immigrants and their families navigate penalties that have received less scholarly attention than deportation and nuclear family separation (e.g. international immobility, transnational death and grief, coerced return migration, extended family separation, loss of care in later life, and cultural losses for later generations).

    - And I hope to share this research more widely so that these experiences can shape policies to support immigrant integration going forward.

- Why 50+
    - *Age:* I chose 50 years of age as the minimum because unauthorized immigrants tend to work in physically taxing jobs, which makes working into older ages difficult. As a result, workers often reduce or their work hours or find themselves forced to stop working at younger ages relative to white-collar professionals (Durand 2004). Because of this, researchers studying older returnees from the U.S. to Mexico examine the migration patterns of individuals aged 50 or older (Durand 2004; Sheftel 2021). Furthermore, while conducting interviews and fieldwork, I have observed that concerns and fears about where to spend the last portion of one's life are primarily raised by — and seem most pressing to — respondents over the age of 50.