Entrapment and (Im)Mobility On the U.S.-Mexico Border[1]

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Lucas Jackson/REUTERS

INTRODUCTION

U.S. immigration law enforcement policies are trapping increasingly large numbers of unauthorized or undocumented migrants and their families. This is especially pressing in the region near the U.S.-Mexican border, where law enforcement is concentrated, and where people are enclosed inside the country and prevented from moving around locally to access vital resources and reunite with loved ones. We conceive of this dynamic phenomenon as "processes of entrapment," in which police and other state agencies impose significant risk on the movement of undocumented people, as these individuals exercise various forms of agency by foregoing travel and covertly defying movement controls. In this perspective, people are not permanently grounded as they are partially and complexly impacted by the movement control system.

We first consider how recent U.S. immigration and border enforcement policies entrap people. We then explore how to operationalize this "macro" pattern in ethnographic research, making the conceptually and methodologically significant point that political-legal forces are only part of the many elements leading to entrapment and immobilization. Other entrapment factors include transportation constraints, poor health, lack of geographic knowledge, gendered roles and restrictions, etc. We also introduce the concept of "morality of risk" to help us understand how and why trapped people take severe risks to defy immigration policing. This article discusses the significance of entrapment for applied and ba-

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sic social science for the study of spatial mobility, enclosure, and inequalities of movement.[2]

Our main source of ethnographic material is research on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, in particular from the lead author's research on *colonias* in New Mexico, focusing on issues of migration, farm work, and social and political processes of community formation.[3] This work is also based on ethnographic research (2006-2007) on access and barriers to health care among uninsured immigrants in urban and rural areas of El Paso County, Texas; entrapment plays a significant role in that study.[4]

ENTRAPMENT PROCESSES: BROAD STRUCTURES
AND ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES

Advanced capitalist economies and transnational linkages drive vast flows of migration. At the same time, U.S. migration policy is divided, permitting both significant volumes of legal migration, and "illegalizing" other, equally large volumes of immigrants. The politics of migration is contradictory, resulting in the displacement of broader debates onto border enforcement "solutions." The end result is a disproportionate concentration of immigration law enforcement efforts at and near the U.S.-Mexico border. Indeed, this peaceful border has been gradually militarized. For undocumented migrants, the cost of crossing the border has risen and the risks of death and injury are higher, yet the enforcement effort has had little effect on the net migratory flow.[5] In short, we are witnessing the intersection of powerful social drivers of migratory movements with rigid and punitive policy responses, entrapping human communities in the middle.

In response, undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America are reducing the frequency of their trips back and forth, and are remaining for longer periods inside the U.S. This national-level entrapment probably plays an important role in the growth of the U.S. undocumented population and the formation of contemporary immigrant communities and enclaves. The main impact for most populations in the interior is on relatively infrequent transnational trips, so that entrapment is not experienced on a daily basis; this pattern is changing, however, with intensified interior immigration enforcement. For communities near the U.S.-Mexico border, entrapment is an important feature of everyday life.

The specific geography of immigration and other kinds of law enforcement in the borderlands helps explain the re-

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> We call this "entrapment."

gional intensity of entrapment processes.[6] First, federal immigration law enforcement (Border Patrol, military observation posts) are concentrated along the Mexican boundary. This makes return from Mexico costly and difficult, discouraging voluntary trips south of the border (e.g., to see sick relatives) and making return from deportation harder. Second, fixed Border Patrol checkpoints on all the main highways leading away from the border, at a distance of 25 to 100 miles into the interior, impede travel into the interior of the United States. A presumably large population (although of unknown size) is thus trapped between the boundary and the interior, in the cities and the small settlements along the borderlands.

Entrapment processes are not just a matter of people being enclosed snugly between the U.S.-Mexico border and Border Patrol checkpoints. Rather, Border Patrol, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, and local police (who are sometimes *de facto* immigration law enforcers, as discussed below) regularly patrol the streets and roads of these trapped zones, parking at key intersections, outside houses, or alongside parks, health clinics, and other public spaces. Entrapment processes thus occur constantly in the zones we describe, although people find ways to hide and avoid this policing.

This situation has worsened in recent years, as the military (largely withdrawn from border law enforcement in 1997) returned in the form of large-scale deployments of National Guard troops. The Border Patrol continues to grow in size and technology, and 700 miles of physical and virtual border walls are in planning stages, in addition to existing walls in settled areas of California and Arizona. During 2006 and 2007, attempts at comprehensive immigration reform failed in Congress; the aftermath was even greater border immigration enforcement and renewed interior immigration policing including worksite raids. Local law enforcement agencies have entered immigration enforcement —by law, a federal matter— in some parts of the borderlands.[7] For example in Texas, the El Paso county sheriff in 2005-2006 operated roving checkpoints on roads leading out of rural communities while

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checking for license, insurance, and other automotive violations. These requests for identification from suspected undocumented immigrants led to their cornering, detaining, rounding-up, and trapping immigrants like cattle in what local residents refer to as "*redadas*," or round-ups.

In the U.S.-Mexico border region, recent migrants live in poorer neighborhoods and apartment complexes in the larger cities, and in settlements on the margins of cities and scattered in farm districts, including *colonias*. In urbanized areas, undocumented immigrants experience trapping processes, but do have the advantage of access to urban transportation, greater population densities, and the relative anonymity of the city. The smaller communities provide more seclusion, but the trapping processes are also exacerbated by limited transportation and options for commerce and services and bottlenecks in the road system that are used as traps by federal and local law enforcement.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK
FOR ENTRAPPING PROCESSES

The aforementioned summary of entrapment processes emphasizes the impact of state activities and large-scale or structural forces more generally on mobility. However, when considering the individual's experience, and when doing research on mobility at the ethnographic level, many different impediments and barriers to movement overlap and interact. This work draws attention to the presence of multiple and simultaneous processes of entrapment, from personal-level phenomena (e.g., physical disabilities) to the regional and national-scale context (e.g., immigration and border policy) (see Figure 1). Many immigrant individuals or households experience several overlapping immobilizing factors at once (see Figure 2). Multiple processes of entrapment coexist and often interact, reinforcing each other and reducing the person's ability to escape the paralyzing web. We refer to this experience through an expressive if inelegant phrase: "multiple whammies." When multiple trapping processes become tightly interlocked, people who might solve one of them alone cannot resolve all of them at once and as a result suffer high degrees of anxiety and discouragement.

However, not all undocumented people in these zones are completely trapped without recourse. For example, people find ways to signal each other about the presence of im-

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FIGURE 1: ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTINUUM:
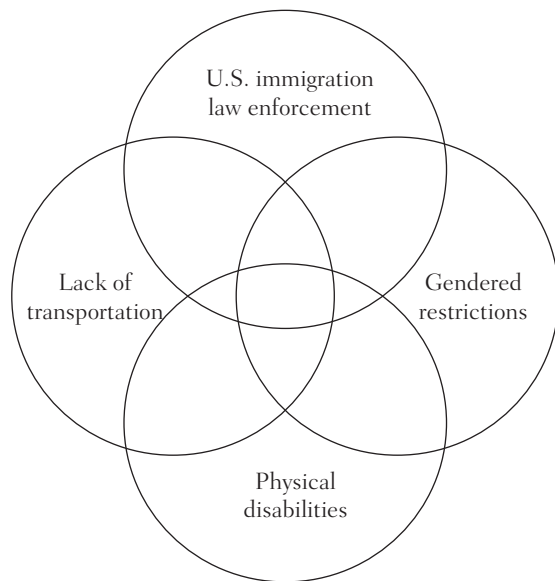ENTRAPMENT PROCESSES FROM MACRO TO MICRO

Macro
1) U.S. ideologies, politics, and economics
   a) Geographic patterns of immigration policing
2) Transportation barriers
   a) Isolated location
   b) Economics of transportation
   c) Personal transportation situation
3) Lack of geographical knowledge
4) Gender and other social-cultural restrictions on movement
5) Demands on time and effort in a fixed location
6) Fear and anticipation of risks
7) Physical disabilities
Micro
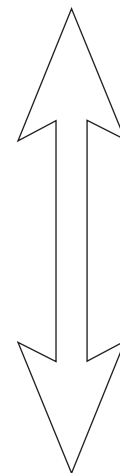
FIGURE 2: OVERLAPPING CIRCLES ILLUSTRATE EXPERIENCE OF OVERLAPPING AND INTERACTING ENTRAPMENT PROCESSES

Sheriffs' requests for identification from suspected undocumented immigrants led to their cornering, detaining, rounding-up, and trapping immigrants like cattle in what local residents refer to as "redadas," or round-ups.

amid serious risks.[9] In some cases, risks are taken *vis-à-vis* entrapment processes because of strong moral demands.

The morality of risk concept is linked to the literature on immigrant networks, in particular, support networks among kin and people from the same hometown or local area. Miguel Moctezuma delineates various ways undocumented Mexican migrants cross the U.S. border, and highlights the role of networks, trust, and interpersonal obligations in obtaining effective and less chancy modes of entry (such as personally known smugglers and non-professional helpers) under current border conditions.[10] These forms of assistance are not just immediate and practical, but come to be part of a cultural framework, following Vélez-Ibáñez's understanding of how people learn, practice, and give meaning to strong interpersonal obligations required for effective networks.[11]

migration law enforcement and sometimes, unfortunately, hide from all types of law enforcement. They negotiate special circumstances that require taking risks crossing checkpoints and hiding and sheltering other sojourners. Trapping forces also give rise to amateur and professional human smugglers who operate throughout the United States moving people in and out of trapped communities and across interior Border Patrol checkpoints. Border-region immigrants often use humor, ingenuity, and resilience in their efforts to frustrate the authorities. The application of tactical knowledge and social organization to skirt arrest speaks both to agency and its limits in the state of permanent liminality.[8] Cellular and home phones enable people in networks to forewarn one another of the sporadic presence of Border Patrol and law enforcement agents.

Entrapment consists of a complex set of processes and social relationships in which people negotiate their presence and mobility within heavily patrolled communities. Even with the severity of multiple trapping processes, our ethnographic approach pays attention to complex outcomes and the agency of trapped people. We document and analyze exactly when and how people choose to defy law enforcement, according to a specific "morality of risk." Morality of risk refers to different social-cultural frameworks for evaluating courses of action

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE
OF RISK AND ENTRAPMENT

Ida Sánchez, a single mother, felt compelled to host a family of undocumented migrants on their northward journey. Sánchez's case exemplifies what the woman refers to as "moral duties" involved in helping *paisanos* seek a better life for themselves. Sánchez is a single mother with four children, who works the night shift at a local dairy. At one point, she housed seven other people in her home who had arrived from her hometown in Durango. The migrants had looked for work locally, while saving to pay for their *coyote*'s fees. Collectively, they were engaged in the immigrant experience as border crossers, temporarily living and working in the borderlands, while raising enough money to pay for their journeys up north.

In the meantime, these migrants had to rely on the assistance of a *conocida* (an acquaintance) from their home state of Durango, who offered them *posada* (temporary housing or asylum) on their journey north. Sánchez explained her commitment to her compatriots as a moral duty to assist immigrants

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> current border conditions.

in need by using the verb "*tengo*" as in "*tengo que ayudarlos, no hay de otra*" (roughly this translates to "I must" or "I have to help them, there's no way around it."). To her, taking the risk of aiding undocumented immigrants from her hometown is morally the right thing to do.

Conclusion

The study of entrapment processes has significant implications for applied social science in three areas: social analysis, public policy, and research methods and ethics. Studies of migration and mobility need to include in their analysis not only the barriers and fears involved in defying detention and deportation by state officials, but also the ways in which people protect themselves and obtain mobility, along with the consequences of such actions. It is important to conceptualize intersecting barriers to movement and various forms of agency (with major risks entailed) in order to operationalize the key concepts of mobility and enclosure in field research. Tougher immigration enforcement efforts and policies often do not suppress moral decision-making, and the subsequent defiance of the state. However, they do confront people with constant, terrible dilemmas, anxieties, and tensions, as well as significant risks of injury, robbery, and death. The personal cost of entrapment is enormous. We have come to understand that freedom and accessibility of movement is fundamental to people's well-being in the contemporary world. But not everyone has access to it. Recent scholarship sometimes overstates the ease, volition, and freedom of movement, especially for powerless populations.[12]

Movement inequalities originate from and interact in complex ways with other inequalities, such as nationality/citizenship, race and ethnicity, age, gender, and class. The modern state practices delineation of spaces through borders, identification of people through documents (e.g., passports), and surveillance of populations through inspections. Surveillance ("security") is treated as a positive addition to freedom, in this case the freedom to move openly near and across borders. It is a normal aspect of life for the documented. But there is also an "illegalized" population in the United States, lacking such documentation. These people move around the borderlands and across the international boundary deliberately avoiding surveillance, or are locked into place by entrapment processes; they are outside "normal" surveillance and freedom. **M**

Notes

[1] This article draws on work previously published in *Human Organization* vol. 66, 2007. We thank the Society for Applied Anthropology for permission to use elements of that text.

[2] For a more detailed discussion on public policy applications and research methods and ethics of researching trapped and hidden populations, see Guillermina G. Núñez and Josiah McC. Heyman, "Entrapment Processes and Immigrant Communities in a Time of Heightened Border Vigilance," *Human Organization* vol. 66, no. 4, 2007, pp. 354-365; and Josiah McC. Heyman, María Cristina Morales, and Guillermina G. Núñez, "Engaging with the Immigrant Human Rights Movement in a Besieged Border Region: What Do Applied Social Scientists Bring to the Policy Process?" *NAPA Bulletin* 31 (2009), pp. 13-29.

[3] Guillermina G. Núñez, "The Political Ecology of the *Colonias* on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Human-Environmental Challenges and Community Responses in Southern New Mexico," *Southern Rural Sociology* 24 (2009), pp. 67-91.

[4] "Health Behaviors and Access Barriers to Uninsured, Undocumented Immigrants in El Paso County: An Ethnographic Study," funded by the Paso del Norte Health Foundation, PI Nuria Homedes. We thank the foundation for its support; errors and misinterpretations are the sole responsibility of the authors and not of the foundation or other research team members.

[5] A good summary is the book by Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on "Illegals" and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[9] Olivia Ruiz Marrujo, "Riesgo, migración y espacios fronterizos: una reflexión," *Estudios demográficos y urbanos* no. 47 (2001), pp. 257-284.

[10] Miguel Moctezuma Longoria, "El circuito migrante Sain Alto, Zac.-Oakland, Ca.," *Comercio exterior* 50 (2000), pp. 396-405, http://rimd.reduaz.mx/documentos_miembros/1817521.pdf.

[11] Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, "An Impossible Living in a Transborder World: Culture, *Confianza*, and Economy of Mexican-Origin Populations" (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).

[12] Hilary Cunningham, and Josiah McC. Heyman, "Introduction: Mobilities and Enclosures at Borders," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 11, no. 3 (July-September 2004), pp. 289-302.