

# Evidence of Organizational Injustice in Poultry Processing Plants: Possible Effects on Occupational Health and Safety Among Latino Workers in North Carolina

Antonio J. Marín, MA,<sup>1</sup> Joseph G. Grzywacz, PhD,<sup>1</sup> Thomas A. Arcury, PhD,<sup>1</sup>  
Lourdes Carrillo, BS,<sup>2</sup> Michael L. Coates, MD, MS,<sup>1</sup>  
and Sara A. Quandt, PhD<sup>3\*</sup>

**Background** Over 250,000 workers are employed in poultry processing, one of the most dangerous industries in the US. These jobs are increasingly held by immigrant workers who are frequently undocumented, lack knowledge of workers' rights to workplace safety, and who are reluctant to pursue their rights. This situation creates the potential for organizational injustice, made visible through abusive supervisory practices, and leads to situations in which occupational illnesses and injuries are likely to occur.

**Methods** This paper draws on data collected during the research phases of a community-based participatory research and social justice project. Two hundred survey interviews and 26 in-depth interviews were collected in representative, community-based samples in western North Carolina. Analyses describe associations between one aspect of organizational injustice, abusive supervision, and worker injuries.

**Results** Workers' reports of abusive supervision are associated with a variety of specific and summary health indicators. The associations are stronger for women than for men. These suggest that the use of relative power within the plant may be the basis for injuries and illnesses. Three types of power relations are described that form the basis for these abusive interactions in the plant: ethnicity (American vs. Latino), immigration status ("good papers" vs. undocumented), and rank (supervisor vs. worker). Two factors modify these relations: kinship (preferences and privileges for family members) and gender.

**Conclusions** Among Latino immigrants working in poultry plants, power differences reflecting organizational injustice in the form of abusive supervision may promote occupational illnesses and injuries, particularly for women. *Am. J. Ind. Med.* 52:37–48, 2009. © 2008 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

**KEY WORDS:** *immigrant; occupational health; poultry processing; organizational justice; Latino*

<sup>1</sup>Department of Family and Community Medicine, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

<sup>2</sup>Western North Carolina Workers Center, Morganton, North Carolina

<sup>3</sup>Division of Public Health Sciences, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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\*Correspondence to: Prof. Sara A. Quandt, Division of Public Health Sciences, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Medical Center Blvd, Winston-Salem, NC 27157.  
E-mail: squandt@wfubmc.edu

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## INTRODUCTION

Poultry processing workers have some of the highest occupational injury rates of all US industries [Human Rights Watch, 2004; GAO, 2005]. In 2004, close to 20,000 poultry workers nationwide reported occupational injuries or illnesses severe enough to miss work or seek medical care, for a rate of 7.8 per 100 full-time workers. The nonfatal injury rate was 5.5/100 workers [BLS, 2005a], and the illness rate, 2.3/100 [BLS, 2005b]. Poultry processing had the sixth highest occupational illness rate of any private industry in the US in 2004 [BLS, 2005c]. As troubling as these statistics may seem, it is estimated that as many as two-thirds of injuries are not reported and therefore are missed by the current reporting system [Rosenman et al., 2006; Boden and Ozonoff, 2008].

Cumulative trauma disorders are high, affecting workers whose jobs require repetitive movements [Lipscomb et al., 2007b]. Skin and respiratory illness and injuries are also high, because of exposure to meat proteins and chemicals, trauma from knives, and from aerosolized contaminants, which include a mixture of organic poultry dust (skin debris, insect parts, poultry excreta), chemicals, bacteria, and endotoxins [Beck and Nissen, 1982; Stehr-Green et al., 1993; Quandt et al., 2005].

In 2004, the poultry processing industry employed an estimated 235,100 workers [BLS, 2005a]. A substantial proportion of these workers are concentrated in southern states, including North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas [USDA, 2004]. Greater than 50% of poultry production is controlled by five corporations, resulting in a heavily consolidated industry. Turnover in poultry processing is known to be high, exceeding 100% in some plants [GAO, 2005], suggesting that the number of current workers dramatically underestimates the number of individuals exposed to the industry. During the 1980s the number of poultry processing workers represented by a union fell from 46% to 21% and remains low [GAO, 2005]. Although the industry has long relied on a predominantly minority workforce, it is increasingly reliant on workers who are foreign-born [GAO, 2005]. Fully 42% of poultry processing workers are Hispanic, and 26% are foreign-born, representing countries from across Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific.

Substantial potential exists for worker exploitation in the poultry processing plants. Over the past three decades poultry processing plants have relocated to rural areas in the Midwest and Southeast to reduce labor costs and better compete in an intensely competitive industry [Kandel and Parrado, 2005]. Rural areas, particularly in the Southeast where poultry production has boomed since the 1980s [Kandel and Parrado, 2005], have limited unionization and few social services devoted to the protection of workers' rights [Saucedo, 2004]. The minority, and sometimes undocumented, workers employed have little political power to demand attention to

their needs and rights to a safe workplace [Striffler, 2002; Lipscomb et al., 2005].

The increasingly Latino and predominantly foreign-born composition of the poultry processing workforce [GAO, 2005] creates additional opportunities for worker exploitation in the plants. Many Latino poultry processing workers have little formal education [Kandel and Parrado, 2005; Quandt et al., 2006] and limited English fluency, which interferes with workers' ability to understand, let alone exercise, their rights [Saucedo, 2004]. A large proportion of workers are believed to arrive in the poultry processing plants without appropriate documentation [Grey, 1997; Striffler, 2002; Quandt et al., 2006], resulting from companies' direct attempts to hire immigrants in their home country through newspaper ads, recruitment videos, and social networks [Grey, 1997; Grey and Woodrick, 2002; Johnson-Webb, 2002; Saucedo, 2004]. Whereas workers with documents may feel secure to raise complaints in the workplace [Striffler, 2002], it is unlikely that workers without documents will raise complaints because of fear of retaliation from supervisors or managers, and possible job loss [Fink, 1998; Saucedo, 2004]. Job loss for immigrants is a paramount concern, especially in rural areas that may offer few employment alternatives. It is also unlikely that workers, regardless of documentation status, will file formal complaints about the employer because of fears about possible reversal of immigration status or the discovery of family or friends with immigration problems [Saucedo, 2004].

Worker exploitation can be viewed as an issue of organizational justice. Organizational justice researchers are fundamentally concerned with equality in three domains [see Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001]. Distributive justice emphasizes the perceived fairness of outcomes such as compensation, benefits and opportunities relative to individuals' contributions or inputs. Procedural justice focuses on the perceived fairness of the procedures an organization uses in decision making, including decisions about how to distribute outcomes. Interactional justice focuses on interpersonal dynamics within an organization and highlights the degree to which individuals are treated with dignity and respect. Injustice in any of these three areas—unfair distribution of outcomes, unfairness in the way that procedures are implemented for some workers relative to others, and management practices that undermine personal dignity or that are disrespectful—can all be viewed as exploitative of workers.

Organizational injustice likely has health implications. Injustice and perceptions of unfairness form a salient psychosocial stressor that can undermine health through a variety of behavioral, psychological, and biological mechanisms. Consistent with this view, several studies have linked indicators of organizational injustice to worker health outcomes [Elovainio et al., 2002, 2004; Moliner et al., 2005],



and some evidence suggests that behavioral manifestations of stress, such as disrupted sleep and more frequent experiences of job strain interfering with family life, partially mediate these associations [Elovainio et al., 2003; Judge and Colquitt, 2004; Greenberg, 2006]. Organizational injustice can also affect health directly as when workers are unequally assigned to job tasks with elevated risk for injury or occupational exposure, or when risky job assignments are used by supervisors as punishment. Although plausible, no research could be located that directly supports this linkage. Consequently, the goal of this study was to characterize the social environment of the poultry processing workplace, arguing that power differentials and subsequent injustice create conditions conducive to exploitation that may result in occupational injury and illness. The article will first present evidence that the organizational injustices, in the form of abusive supervisory practices, described by Latino poultry processing workers employed by several different companies in western North Carolina are linked to health outcomes in the workers. Second, it will describe the types of power relations that may fuel abusive supervisory practices and thereby clarify the context of organizational injustice experienced by the workers.

## **METHODS**

### **Study Design and Locale**

This research used a mixed quantitative–qualitative design to explore and document the experiences of Latino poultry workers residing in rural North Carolina. Data collection was conducted in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Surry, Wilkes, and Yadkin counties in Western North Carolina. These counties were selected because they are home to poultry processing plants and a high number of poultry workers.

### **Quantitative Study**

#### **Sample**

Face to face survey interviews were conducted with 200 current Latino poultry workers 18 years of age or older in the study area. The details of this survey have been described elsewhere [Quandt et al., 2006]. Briefly, a site-based sampling method was used to recruit a representative sample [Arcury and Quandt, 1999; Muhib et al., 2001]. During formative research project staff compiled a list of 41 residential enclaves (sites) in the study counties known to have a high concentration of Latino poultry workers. Individuals at the sites were approached for participation. Respondents were recruited at all 41 enclaves proportional to the estimated number of eligible residents. Because

not all workers live in enclaves, a total of 70 workers who lived outside these enclaves were also recruited, proportional to the estimated size of the immigrant poultry worker population.

### **Data collection**

The study was explained to all respondents, and each gave informed consent, as approved by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine Institutional Review Board. Interview content was developed from existing Spanish translations of questions and scales, where available. All interviewers were native Spanish speakers familiar with the study counties. Interviewers participated in an extensive training, and conducted a minimum of two practice interviews before beginning study data collection. Field supervisors collected and reviewed questionnaires on a weekly basis. Fourteen percent of respondents were recontacted to verify interviews; no cases of inaccuracies or fabricated data were discovered.

### **Measures**

Illness symptoms were assessed with 20 questions asking whether the respondent experienced the symptom in the past month. The items were selected from several symptom inventories, including the Cohen–Hoberman Inventory of Physical Symptoms [Cohen and Hoberman, 1983] and the Quality of Well-being, Self-Administered instrument [Kaplan et al., 1997]. Five symptoms potentially related to poultry processing work are the focus of this paper. Respiratory symptoms was coded 1 for respondents reporting “yes” to the items asking about “coughing or wheezing” or “shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.” Skin problems was coded 1 for respondents reporting “yes” to the item asking about “dry skin, rashes, or other skin problems.” Neck or back problems was coded 1 for respondents responding “yes” to the item about “pain, stiffness, cramps, or weakness in neck or back.” Arm, wrist or hand problems was coded 1 if the respondent responded “yes” to the item asking about “pain, stiffness, cramps, or weakness in arms, wrist or hands.” Leg or foot problems was coded 1 if the respondent responded “yes” to the item asking about “pain, stiffness, cramps, or weakness in the legs or feet.” Eye problems was coded 1 if the respondent responded “yes” to the item asking about “any eye pain, irritation, discharge, or excessive sensitivity to light.” Additionally, three dichotomous summary measures of health were created. Fair/poor health was assessed with a single item asking participants to rate their overall level of health. Individuals responding fair or poor were coded 1, whereas those responding good, very good, or excellent were coded zero. Any poultry-related symptoms was coded such that respondents with one or more poultry-related symptoms (i.e., respiratory, skin, neck



or back, arm or wrist, or leg or foot) were coded 1, zero otherwise. Finally any musculoskeletal symptom was coded such that respondents indicating symptoms in any body region (i.e., neck or back, arms, wrists or forearms, or leg or foot) were coded 1, zero otherwise.

Depressive symptoms were measured with a 10-item short form of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D). The 10 items were originally identified by Kohout et al. [1993] to replicate the factor structure of the full CES-D, and recent evidence suggests that these 10 items adequately capture depressive symptoms in immigrant Latino samples [Grzywacz et al., 2006]. Estimated alpha of the short CES-D in this sample was 0.83.

Three items measuring retaliatory supervision were taken from the 6-item Abusive Supervision Scale [Tepper, 2000]. Respondents were asked how strongly they agree or disagree with statements about their supervisor's ability to punish the worker (see Table I). The item responses were summed for all three questions for a total score that ranged from 3 (low retaliation) to 12 (high retaliation). Estimated alpha of retaliatory supervision items was 0.86.

### Data analysis

Responses to each retaliatory supervision item were examined by gender using cross-tabulations and chi-square statistics. Similarly, possible gender differences in summary scores for retaliatory supervision were examined using a *t*-test. Associations between retaliatory supervision and health outcomes were examined by fitting a series of logistic

regression models whereby dichotomous health outcomes were regressed on a continuous score reflecting individuals' exposure to retaliatory supervision. The logistic regression models were stratified by gender, and all models controlled for depressive symptoms to account for possible reporting biases introduced by mood at the time of interview. Length of time in the US, the only demographic characteristic associated with retaliatory supervision, was also included in the models to account for level of acculturation. All data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 15.0 software (SPSS, Inc.; Chicago, IL).

## Qualitative Study

### Sample and recruitment

Study counties were divided into three areas based on location of the poultry plants, and a minimum of eight persons were interviewed in each area. Inclusion criteria were: a current or former poultry processing plant worker, age 18 or older, and Latino. The target sample was 24, with half being men and half, women. Interview respondents were recruited through community-based organizations and contacts made during ethnographic exploration of the communities.

### Interview guide

Qualitative data collection for this study consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview guide

**TABLE I.** Responses to Retaliatory Supervision Items and Total Scores by Gender

	Women		Men		Gender comparison	
	%	N	%	N	Test statistic	P-value
My supervisor could give me undesirable job assignments					$\chi^2 = 2.21; df = 3$	0.53
Strongly disagree	34.3	34	29.7	30		
Disagree	17.2	17	22.8	23		
Agree	26.3	26	30.7	31		
Strongly agree	22.2	22	16.8	17		
My supervisor could make my work difficult for me					$\chi^2 = 6.28; df = 3$	0.09
Strongly disagree	38.4	38	41.6	42		
Disagree	26.3	26	26.7	27		
Agree	16.2	16	23.8	24		
Strongly agree	19.2	19	7.9	8		
My supervisor could make things unpleasant here					$\chi^2 = 10.75; df = 3$	0.01
Strongly disagree	42.4	42	41.6	42		
Disagree	23.2	23	24.8	25		
Agree	15.2	15	27.7	28		
Strongly agree	19.2	19	5.9	6		
	M	SD	M	SD		
Retaliatory supervision (total score)	6.64	3.23	6.31	2.50	$t = 0.81; df = 198$	0.42



was designed to discover the workers' experience in the poultry industry, their knowledge of how this kind of work could affect their health or that of their families, and their knowledge of ways to prevent health consequences of their work. During the interviews they were encouraged to talk about the physical and social work environment of the plants.

### **Interviewers**

Participants were interviewed by one of two trained interviewers who were native Spanish-speakers. Both were thoroughly familiar with the larger Latino communities in their counties, and one had previous experience in conducting in-depth interviews.

The interviewers completed a training program before contacting any potential participants. The program involved instruction presented by the investigators regarding: (1) the purpose of the study, (2) the sampling and recruitment process, (3) the content of the interview, (4) informed consent and participant anonymity, (5) referral information for participants, and (6) interview mechanics (e.g., asking open-ended interview items and appropriate probes, recording interview notes, operating the tape recorder, asking and recording fixed-response interview items). Each interviewer was required to conduct at least two practice interviews with Latino poultry workers. Recordings of the practice interviews were reviewed and critiqued by the investigators before the interviewers began conducting the study interviews.

### **Interview process**

The study was explained to all respondents, and each gave informed consent, as approved by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine Institutional Review Board. Interviews were conducted at a place and time in which each participant felt comfortable. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted an average of 1 hr.

### **Data analysis**

The 26 in-depth interviews were transcribed and translated into English by a professional translation service and reviewed by Spanish speaking members of the research team. Questions regarding the accuracy of translations were addressed prior to analysis by comparison with the original transcript or recording. The transcripts were managed using *ATLAS.ti* [Muhr, 2004], a software program for text-based data analysis. The researchers individually reviewed the transcripts to develop a preliminary code set (i.e., list of recurring themes and patterns). The final code set was negotiated and finalized as a team. The text of each transcript

was then coded by one member of the team and reviewed by a second to ensure consistency. Using *ATLAS.ti*, text pertaining to individual codes was summarized, and relationships between codes were identified in additional rounds of analysis. For these analyses, four codes (and their definitions) formed the focus of the analysis: RACISM (discussions or experiences of racism encountered by workers and families); POWER (statements that indicate hierarchical or power relationships between bosses, supervisors and workers, as well as within groups of workers); STEREO (stereotypes of Latinos, positive or negative); and STATUS (information and concerns about immigration status). When direct quotations are presented in text, the interview number is given (J-#) as well as the date of the interview.

### **Sample characteristics**

In the quantitative survey, the sample consisted of 101 men and 99 women. Men ranged in age from 19 to 65 years (mean  $\pm$  SD = 33.6  $\pm$  10.7), and women, 20 to 60 (33.3  $\pm$  8.3). Marital status was married or living as married for 74.5%. Number of children reported ranged from 0 to 6. All but one were born outside the US. Slightly less than half (47.5%) were born in Mexico, 33% in Guatemala, and the remainder in other Latin American countries. Years living in the US ranged from less than 1 to 40 years (median = 8). Over half (66%) had attended school through the sixth grade or less.

Participants in the qualitative study consisted of 13 men and 13 women. They ranged in age from 25 to 52 years (median = 35.5). All but six were married or living as married. The number of children ranged from 0 to 6. Fifty-eight percent were from Mexico, 27% from Guatemala, and the remainder from other Latin American countries. Number of years spent living in the US was between 1 and 26, with a median of 10. Educational levels were low, with 16 having attended school in their country of origin through the sixth grade or less. Only 2 attended high school, and 2 attended college. None had any schooling in the United States.

## **RESULTS**

### **Quantitative Results on Abusive Supervision and Health**

The quantitative results provide support for the idea that the abuse of power in plants can have effects on physical health of workers. The retaliatory supervision measure in the survey has a mean score of 6.64 ( $\pm$ 3.23) for women and 6.31 ( $\pm$ 2.50) for men, out of a possible 12 (Table I). There is no difference between women in men in retaliatory supervision scores. However, the total score masks gender differences in responses to individual items. More women than men



strongly agree with the statement “my supervisor could make things unpleasant here” ( $P < 0.01$ ). Similarly, although not significant at conventional levels, more women than men strongly agree with the statement “my supervisor could make my work difficult for me.”

There were no gender differences in reports of symptoms. Arm and hand symptoms in the past 30 days were reported by 46%; neck or back, by 36%; eye, by 29%; leg or feet, by 23%; skin, by 22%; and respiratory, by 15%.

Retaliatory supervision is associated with reporting illness and injury symptoms, controlling for mood at the time of the interview and length of time in the US as a marker of acculturation (Table II). The associations are consistent for women, showing that every one unit (SD) increase in retaliatory supervision is associated with roughly a 10–30% increase in the odds of various health outcomes typically related to occupational injuries (e.g., musculoskeletal pain, eye problems, general injury and illness), as well as rating health as fair or poor, having one or more health problem, and having musculoskeletal problems. For men, retaliatory supervision is associated with skin and neck/back problems, and with having one or more health problems.

## Qualitative Results

Respondents described three types of power relations that served as the basis for supervisor-subordinate interactions in the plants: ethnicity, immigration status, and job

rank. For each of these, the potential for abusive supervision and the actual behaviors of the supervisors consistent with abusive supervision are reported.

## Ethnicity

The first basis of power relations in the plants is ethnicity. Latino workers report that clear preference is given by the company, as represented by managers, to American workers over Latinos. This happens in a number of circumstances. The most basic is related to job assignment: Americans get easier jobs, and the differences are evident as soon as workers are hired.

“... I tell [the inspector], “look at the lines and see if you see an American doing a hard job.” The hardest jobs on the line are the breast, pulling the skin off, and the legs. Those jobs are very hard and you have to have strength and stamina. You can’t see a single American doing that. Only Mexicans do it. Notice that when a Mexican first starts, he goes directly to do that job. If an American comes in new, they have him pick up pieces of chicken that fall on the floor. They keep them doing that until there’s an easy job which opens up so that they can place them into it. But they don’t give a Mexican that opportunity.” J-7 01-10-05

Latinos reported that not only are the American workers routinely given easier jobs, they also are given cleaner or less

**TABLE II.** Adjusted Odds Ratios of the Association of Retaliatory Supervision on Specific and Summary Occupational Health Indicators by Gender Among Immigrant Latino Poultry Workers

	Women, N = 99		Men, N = 101	
	Odds ratio <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	Odds ratio <sup>a</sup>	95% CI
Specific health indicators				
Respiratory	1.13	0.94–1.35	1.19	0.96–1.50
Skin problems	1.06	0.92–1.23	1.23*	1.00–1.52
Neck/back pain	1.29***	1.12–1.50	1.32**	1.07–1.63
Arm/hand pain	1.20**	1.04–1.38	1.14	0.95–1.37
Lower body pain	1.22**	1.05–1.43	1.12	0.92–1.35
Eye problem	1.29**	1.10–1.51	1.14	0.94–1.37
Injury/illness	1.31***	1.13–1.53	1.15	0.95–1.40
Summary health indicators				
Fair/poor health	1.19*	1.04–1.37	1.19 <sup>†</sup>	0.99–1.44
One or more problems	1.16*	1.00–1.34	1.22 <sup>†</sup>	0.98–1.52
Musculoskeletal problem	1.20*	1.03–1.39	1.16	0.94–1.43

<sup>†</sup> $P < 0.10$ , \* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$  (two-tailed).

<sup>a</sup>Retaliatory supervision is modeled as a continuous exposure; consequently, odds ratios are interpreted as the increased odds of the outcome for every one-unit (SD) increase in exposure. Odds ratios are adjusted for depressive symptoms to account for reporting biases introduced by mood at the time of interview, as well as length of time in the US to account for acculturation.



unpleasant jobs. Latinos, in contrast, always get the ones that are harder and more unpleasant.

“...They treat us badly. Contrarily, the American aren't treated badly. The Americans were always given the easier jobs and the Latinos were given the harder ones. If, for example, you worked in packing where the trays are placed, you would find American women there. You would never see a Latina there. The Latinos are always where there is blood, where everything is the worst.” J-4 11-23-04

Packing occurs at the end of the dis-assembly line, where workers fit cut pieces of cleaned, chilled chicken into Styrofoam trays and wrap them for retail sales. In contrast, the earlier stations on the dis-assembly lines (e.g., evisceration, pulling livers) require workers to come into contact with the warm, just slaughtered chickens and to work removing the entrails and separating livers, gizzards and other organs from them.

Once on the job, Latinos are pushed to work harder. Workers perceive that is because of racism, or, as this worker states, a continuation of slavery.

“For example, in [this company], there are easy jobs, but those are for the people of the same race as [the American managers]. The hardest jobs are for the Hispanics because we are the mules. For example, an easy job which [Americans] are given is the one where they pick up chicken which has fallen on the floor with a metal stick with a point on it. They put the chicken on a tray, take it to be washed, and then, return it to the line. I've never seen a Latino do that. I've seen that there's a preference and that's what I've heard other people say. I think [the differences in treatment are] something historic which comes from slavery. Besides, I don't think slavery has changed. It's just different because you do a job and you are paid a check, but for them to be checking your production time, I think that's slavery. They are not beating you with a whip on your back, but they are checking your time so that you will produce faster.” J-13 1-31-05

One of the reasons Latino workers say they are given harder jobs is that the American supervisors know they will work harder and faster than Americans. If Americans are asked “to do a hard job, in an hour, they are complaining that they can't do it, that their back hurts, that their hands hurt, that they don't like that job. What [the supervisors] do is move [the Americans] again and leave us working alone” J-9 01-26-05.

Although asked to work harder, Latino workers are given less training and threatened with firing when they make mistakes.

“When you first start, [supervisors] don't try to help you. Sometimes, you ask someone how something is supposed to be done and they won't help you. All they tell you is, “Do this job.” They know [you] need the job and even though they humiliate [you], [you] will still stay. That's the ugliest thing that can occur to a Hispanic. Since they need the job, even though [supervisors] discriminate against them and humiliate them, they will still do the job. [Supervisors] yell at them as if they weren't human beings. The supervisor explains the job to the worker and [the worker] does it because he needs his job, but sometimes, he can't do his job right because they don't explain it well, or because he doesn't understand English. It's hard not knowing English and people ask them, “Why did you come to this country if you don't know English? You have to speak English here because you are in this country.” But I say to myself, “Let them go to Mexico not knowing Spanish and see how they well they do there.” It's the same thing. We came here to work. We're not being given anything for free here.” J-12 02-07-05

Deficits in training coupled with humiliation and pressure to work are a potential cause of injuries and illnesses.

Being allowed to take breaks on the dis-assembly line is a contentious issue for workers and a source of organizational injustice. They are often humiliated in the course of getting a bathroom break. Latinos perceived that American workers are given greater leniency with work breaks.

“[I]f we want to go to the bathroom, they won't let us. If an American asks to go to the bathroom, they let them go quickly. And besides that, the Americans don't mind leaving the line. And if they do, they don't say anything to them and they do to us.” J-10 02-02-05

Workers on the line have to ask a supervisor before taking bathroom breaks. The supervisor takes the worker's place to keep production running or assigns a “floater” to take the worker's place until he or she returns. If no one is available to fill in, the worker cannot leave the line. Although workers are supposedly guaranteed breaks, Latino workers report an unfair pattern of breaks such that they are allowed fewer breaks than the American workers. Having to ask for bathroom breaks is a source of humiliation to the Latino workers. “You have to speak to the supervisor and



sometimes, they like for you to beg them when you want to go to the bathroom” J-10 02-20-05. One worker (J-5) reported that the supervisor blocked the bathroom door from the inside so workers could not go to the bathroom. Even when allowed to take a break, Latinos feel they are more frequently reprimanded for taking too long. Many workers recount stories of workers, particularly women, who have been forced to go without breaks to the point that they soil themselves or simply leave the line and risk the repercussions. In contrast, they see American workers being given longer breaks and no consequences if they are later returning to the line.

Ethnicity also plays a part in how workers are treated if they fall sick on the job or are injured. Not being allowed to leave the line, even if the source of illness is non-occupational, can put workers at risk for injury due to being distracted in a dangerous work environment.

“There is discrimination because [the supervisor] treats the Latinos differently. If it’s an American, she’ll even take them and let them lie down on a cot that’s [in the infirmary]. If they feel dizzy and tell the supervisor, they carry them out in their arms and put them on a cot. And with Mexicans they don’t. If a Mexican falls down, he just lies there. They really don’t treat us the same.” J-7 01-10-05

“You can see it in the way the supervisors treat us because you realize that they give Americans more preference than they do Hispanics. If an American gets sick and she wants to leave, they give her permission. But when we are sick or we tell them that we feel bad and we ask them to let us go home, they tell us we can’t. Even if they see that we are dying, they don’t want to let us leave, but they will let an American leave quickly. One day when I felt really bad, I told my supervisor and he could tell that I was really sick, but he didn’t even want to let me go to the infirmary. But I went to the infirmary anyway and the nurse called him and told him that I couldn’t work and that I needed to go home. He got very angry with the nurse.” J-20 02-14-05

Latinos also reported unjust practices in organizational responses to worker sickness and injury. Latinos indicated that Americans are given more leeway to be sick or injured, while Latinos are expected to work through their injuries or illnesses. Injuries or illness in the plants should be reported to a nurse. In most cases, the nurse speaks little Spanish, and workers report that she gives them a pill and sends them back to work, whereas Americans are sent to the hospital or given time off.

## **Immigration status**

Immigration status was recognized as a major source of power for potential abuse and exploitation by supervisors and other workers. Many workers live in a constant state of anxiety, fearing they will be deported and lose everything, perhaps even their children. Supervisors, both Latinos and Americans, can force workers to work beyond their normal duties. For example, supervisors make workers stay an extra 5 or 10 min without compensation. Alternatively, if two people are doing a job and one of them has to leave, the supervisors make the Latino worker who is left do the job by himself or herself rather than assigning another worker. The supervisors are believed to exploit undocumented Latino workers; they know that the undocumented workers will not complain because they are afraid of losing their jobs or having their documentation status exposed.

“[Undocumented workers] don’t talk because they are afraid that the supervisor will tell them that if they don’t want to work, they need to go home. . . . I know he does that because he knows that they don’t have papers. . . .” J-7 01-10-05

Threatening the workers with firing is one of the main ways the supervisors use their power. For workers who are undocumented, finding a steady job is very difficult. They are afraid of losing the job they already have, and the supervisors know it. Many must support themselves in this country, and they have families in their countries of origin that they support as well. Supervisors know that workers will put up with exploitation and injustice in order to keep the job. “When [supervisors] see a needy person, they want to walk all over that person because they know that he needs the job and they take advantage of him. That’s why they abuse [workers]” J-12 02-07-05.

Workers who are undocumented have a harder time doing their job because they may not have the proper equipment. One worker, who is documented, contrasted his situation with that of others. He and his co-workers work in clean-up and need machines to mix chemicals properly. The machines break down and the supervisors resist having them fixed. He reports that:

“ . . . They fix my stuff because I talk. Other workers don’t because they are afraid that the supervisors will tell them that if they don’t want to work, they need to go home. . . . They don’t have any [papers]. That’s why [the supervisors] treat them like that, but they don’t do it to me. The [undocumented workers] don’t talk because they are afraid that the supervisor will tell them that if they don’t want to work, they need to go home. . . . I know [the supervisor] does that because he knows that they don’t have papers. . . .” J-7 01-10-05



Documented workers have more courage to speak up about problems, including safety issues because supervisors cannot threaten them with deportation.

### **Job rank**

While a power differential between workers and supervisors is to be expected, workers consistently describe this relationship as difficult. Supervisors are reluctant to allow workers any leeway (e.g., bathroom breaks) that might compromise reaching production goals. The situation appears to be particularly bad for workers when the supervisor is Latino. Latinos feel that other Latinos who have a small amount of power in the company abuse this power by mistreating them.

“Especially Hispanics... they are meaner to us. They tell us, “Hurry!” or they check the time to see how many breasts or legs you are doing. And if you don’t do them quickly, they tell you to go home. The ones who climb to better positions, for example, lead persons, have to know how to gossip. That’s why they get to those positions. ...There was another man called [XXXX]. He was a horrible person. It was a horrible experience working with him. He would get behind us with a clock and would give us seconds to do a job. ...Sometimes, when we went to take a break and for some reason we returned a minute late, he would send us to the office.” J-4 11-23-04

Some workers suspect that Latino supervisors are hard on Latinos to demonstrate their loyalty to the company and a lack of favoritism toward their ethnic peers. “[The Latino supervisors] are going to stand with the big bosses and not with the simple worker because they want to maintain their position.” J-13 01-31-05. Most supervisors have moved up through the ranks, and Latinos seem to feel particularly betrayed when one of their own begins to treat them badly.

Supervisors, regardless of ethnicity, use their power to maintain the hierarchy. Workers report, for example, being forced to do (or being threatened with having to do) jobs beyond their physical capabilities. One worker related an incident in which she and other women were told to hang chickens. This job, near the beginning of the dis-assembly line where just-slaughtered whole chickens are hung from hooks overhead, is typically done by men, as women are generally too short and lack the upper body strength to repeatedly and rapidly lift chicken carcasses onto hooks. By forcing the women to take a shift on this job, or even threatening it, the supervisor reinforces his power to make their jobs difficult if they step out of line.

### **Kinship and gender**

Two factors that modify the power relationships are kinship and gender. A relative who is a supervisor is more likely to favor a relative than a non-relative.

“Where I’m working, there are supervisors who have siblings and cousins working there. We don’t agree with how they treat them compared to how they treat us. They treat their siblings and cousins well, but they treat the rest of us badly. There are two [pregnant] women working there who are the supervisor’s sisters-in-law and two [pregnant women] who are not. The four of them do the same job. The women who are members of the supervisor’s family asked to be transferred from where they were working because their bodies were hurting. They were transferred, but the other two women who weren’t his family members begged the supervisor to move them because in that job you have to move your arm constantly which is very tiring because it is twenty-two chickens per minute and the line doesn’t stop until break time. Those women were never moved.” J-6 12-20-04

Kinship also plays a role in workers trying to gain advantage by sabotaging others. Workers report instances where one worker tries to make another lose his or her job, perhaps by reporting a lack of documents, so a relative can take the vacant job.

Workers are sometimes given advantages by supervisors because of gender. Younger women are reported to be favored by supervisors.

“If you’re a young girl and flirt and smile at the supervisor, and then he will give you permission to go to the bathroom or to the doctor. You don’t have to beg too much to get what you want. For example, getting a job that you want or not doing certain jobs because your hands hurt. That doesn’t seem right to me. Just because other ladies and I aren’t young girls doesn’t mean that we aren’t workers like everyone else... If you are their girlfriend, family, sister, lover, then you get preferential treatment.” J-26 04-09-05

Favoritism because of gender extends to males, as well.

“If my shoulder is swollen and I go and tell [the nurse] that my arm hurts because it’s swollen, she will tell me to have my husband massage it... However, if a man goes to her, she will [massage his arm herself].” J-6 12-20-04



Favoritism by gender places the person who is discriminated against at a disadvantage that may affect his or her health.

## DISCUSSION

Previous research has suggested that aspects of worker supervision may lead to greater injury and disability [Turner et al., 2007]. In particular, abusive supervisory practices such as using dangerous or undesirable job tasks as a mode of punishment put workers in situations where they may be injured or experience symptoms. The literature on organizational justice has demonstrated that injustice has health implications (e.g., absences due to sickness, exhaustion) through psychosocial stressors [Elovainio et al., 2002; Moliner et al., 2005]. However, there has been no systematic investigation of the physical health effects of abusive supervision to establish a pathway from supervision to injury. The research reported here extends this literature in two ways. First, it demonstrates that abusive supervision may have direct effects on physical health. Like studies of psychosocial stressors [e.g., Moliner et al., 2005], there may be gender differences in the health effects of abusive supervisory practices or other forms of organizational injustice. Second, this study extends the research to an immigrant work force in a particularly dangerous industry. This is significant because physical injuries may not be apparent in the less dangerous jobs of hospital, office, and hotel workers that have been the focus of earlier work on organizational justice.

This study documents multiple layers of power relations in the social environment of poultry processing plants, which raise the potential for exploitation of immigrant Latino workers through abusive supervision and other forms of organizational injustice. The findings suggest that, besides the normal workplace hierarchy of supervisors and workers, racial or ethnic discrimination and sexism are operating. The pressures applied by supervisors (e.g., to work faster, to forego breaks) are consistent with the poultry industry's highly competitive nature with low profit margins. The intensive processing of chickens requires a large workforce, and the high turnover in workers creates a demand for more workers than are present in rural communities [Grey, 1997; Kay, 1997a,b]. Pressure for increased production filters down through management and results in line supervisors having to meet goals with as few workers as possible [Striffler, 2002].

Two factors differentiate the power relations seen here from that in other workplaces. The first is the role of documentation status. Because the poultry processing industry has come to rely more and more on immigrant workers, the fact—or even the chance—that a worker lacks proper papers to be in the United States legally can be held over his or her head. Workers believe that documentation

status is used to coerce workers to perform without complaint tasks to which they might otherwise object. This includes performing difficult or unsavory tasks when their seniority or abilities might place them in different jobs. It also includes unpaid overtime or other forms of exploitation. The median length of time in the United States is 10 years in this sample. Some have purchased homes, bought vehicles, and started businesses, all using false documentation. They have established families here and, like other Latinos [Coronado, 2004], are sending money back to parents, children, and siblings in the country of origin. Should they lose their jobs or be deported, they could lose everything for which they have worked. Rumors and news reports of undocumented workers being arrested at work and imprisoned or deported without their young children are particularly frightening.

A second factor differentiating power relations is the focus on kinship. Certainly family ties link workers in worksites in many industries. However, the familism that characterizes Latinos has been described as particularly strong and is considered a core value of Latino culture [Lugo Streidel and Contreras, 2003]. Established aspects of familism are reported by workers in the current study (e.g., expectation that individual activities will be used for the achievement of family goals, and that family members will feel that they belong, first and foremost, to the family, with all others being outsiders). This includes willingness to rally when one member is the victim of outsiders and the assumption that money and material goods are family property [Burgess et al., 1963; Lugo Streidel and Contreras, 2003]. Previous research has shown that Latinos exhibit significantly higher scores on familism measures than non-Latinos [Sabogal et al., 1987]. While some aspects of familism wane with acculturation, aspects related to family support—that a person should help parents and siblings in times of need and expect to rely on family if in need—remain strong or become stronger with acculturation. With the strong Latino focus on familism, it is not surprising that workers perceive favoritism shown by Latino supervisors to their family members.

This study provides evidence that the various forms of abusive supervision revealed in the qualitative interviews may place workers in situations where physical symptoms of occupational injuries are likely. Reported supervisory practices such as refusing to let workers take breaks, refusing requests of less physically demanding jobs, making workers work sick, and placing workers in jobs beyond their abilities or training have the potential to result in injuries. Job rotation and breaks have been recommended to reduce the likelihood of carpal tunnel and other musculoskeletal injuries associated with manufacturing jobs such as poultry processing [Jorgensen et al., 2005]; such administrative actions were part of the recently rescinded Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) Ergonomics Program [OSHA, 2004]. Our findings suggest that pressure from supervisors is



associated with greater experience of symptoms, and that this is particularly a problem for women. For reasons possibly related to smaller body size and joint structure, women are especially likely to experience musculoskeletal injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome [Tanaka et al., 1997; Moghtaderi et al., 2005]. Exploitation by supervisors, such as forcing women to work hanging chickens, may increase the likelihood of injury.

These results must be interpreted in light of the study limitations. Because of the nature of the population and the requirements of qualitative research, the in-depth and survey interviews were conducted with non-random samples of workers. While every effort was made to recruit representative samples [Quandt et al., 2006] based on strategies developed previously [Arcury and Quandt, 1999], biases may exist in the samples. The sample size for the qualitative research was small, but the content reached saturation (no new ideas being presented), which is typically an indicator of adequate sample size [Arcury and Quandt, 1998]. This research was conducted in an eight county area of North Carolina. Although these plants share many characteristics of the national poultry processing industry, different findings might be obtained in other areas and with workers of other ethnic backgrounds. Finally, this research relied on worker self-reports of both organizational injustice and injuries. Although some measures were taken to prevent workers from over-reporting injuries (e.g., placing questions about injuries in the survey before those on retaliatory supervision), workers may have over-reported. The fact that detailed reports of abusive supervision occurred in the in-depth interviews lends credence to the survey data. Future studies should confirm self-reported injuries with physical examinations. While ethnicity, documentation status, and rank appear to be dimensions along which abusive supervision operates, it is not possible to compare experiences or outcomes by these dimensions. Data collection focused on Latino workers on the dis-assembly line. To facilitate community entrée and avoid suspicion, documentation status (though sometimes disclosed by the worker) was not routinely asked. Additional research is needed to test the associations between organizational injustice and worker injuries with stronger measures (e.g., observations and physical examinations) of relevant variables. Nonetheless, the evidence presented here strongly suggests a link.

Poultry processing is an industry dependent on workers who are largely minority, often female, and without access to better paying or safer employment [Striffler, 2002; Lipscomb et al., 2005, 2007a]. As currently structured with no collective voice for workers, there is little chance for the situation to improve without outside intervention. Practices such as greater OSHA enforcement of health and safety provisions in this industry to improve working conditions are needed to provide these workers with adequate protection to make a living without injury.

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