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# Looking Beyond "Mow, Blow and Go": A Case Study of Mexican Immigrant Gardeners in Los Angeles

Alvaro Huerta

## Abstract

Recent research on Mexican immigrants focuses on the working conditions of farm workers, garment workers, janitors and day laborers. This coincides with successful efforts by organized labor and immigrant advocacy groups to organize these marginalized workforces. Little attention, however, has been given to Mexican paid gardeners. As part of the household service economy, paid gardeners represent a difficult labor sector to organize and research because they typically operate as independent contractors in the informal economy. This paper seeks to provide a more holistic picture of this dynamic workforce. Drawing primarily upon ethnographic techniques, the paper documents how this industry operates and its social organization. Based on research conducted in Los Angeles, the paper also demonstrates how a select group of self-employed, Mexican gardeners function as petty-entrepreneurs, benefiting in the informal economy by successfully utilizing their social capital and social networks.

## Introduction

*The first requisite of a good servant is that he should conspicuously know his place.*

– Thorstein Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption* (2006)<sup>1</sup>

In a front-page *Los Angeles Times* article, "Perils in the Palms," Sam Quinones reports on the tragic death of a 19-year-old gardener, Gregory Rodriguez, who fell to his death while trimming a palm tree in East Los Angeles. Rodriguez's death sheds light on the many underreported dangers Mexican immigrants (both documented and undocumented) face while working in this country. Not protected by governmental

regulations and labor codes, paid gardeners—similar to day laborers (Valenzuela 1999, 2001, 2003) and domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Mattingly 1999, 2001)—mostly operate within America's informal economy. While much has been written about Mexican immigrant farm workers, garment workers and janitors (Cameron 2000; Milkman 2000; Milkman and Voss 2004), especially given organized labor's successful efforts to organize these workforces throughout the late 1900s, little research has been conducted on Mexican paid gardeners. To fill this gap, I explore how this industry works, its social organization, and how Mexican gardeners view themselves and their trade in the informal economy. This study also demonstrates how a select group of self-employed, Mexican gardeners utilize their social capital and social networks to benefit from Los Angeles's unregulated landscape industry.

The purpose of this single-case study is to conduct an in-depth inquiry on the social and organizational structure of the paid gardening trade, focusing on the experiences and views of self-employed, Mexican gardeners in the informal industry. In addition, this critical case study (Yin 2003) aims to test the theoretical frameworks of social capital, social networks, and informality to determine their relevance in explaining how Mexican gardeners navigate this unregulated market.

The paper is organized as follows: the first section is a literature review that discusses the existing literature on Mexican gardeners and reviews the three theoretical frameworks addressed in the case study: social capital, social networks, and informality. The second section provides an outline of the research methodology and issues inherent in this type of ethnographic case study. The bulk of the research findings are presented in section three, which describes the workforce characteristics of paid gardeners in Los Angeles. Section four outlines the theoretical framework I found to be most useful in the case study: social networks. Finally, I conclude with recognizing the positive contributions of Mexican gardeners to individual clients and society in general through their labor by providing us with greener and cleaner environments. In addition, I pose several questions to policy makers, planning scholars and practitioners, as we better understand this relatively unknown workforce.

## Literature Review

The scholarly literature on Mexican immigrant gardeners in the U.S. is scant (Cameron 2000; Pisani and Yoskowitz 2005, 2006; Steinberg 2006). In the first study of its kind, Pisani and Yoskowitz's (2005) article on contract gardeners in South Texas sheds light on this relatively unknown Mexican dominated workforce. Based on a survey of 244 individuals (122

gardeners and 122 employers), the authors' study investigates the nature of this occupation, the nature of the relationship between the gardener and employer and the status of gardeners in this industry.

The preliminary findings on contract gardeners in South Texas generally coincide with the known employment characteristics of Mexican gardeners in Los Angeles, as documented by this case study and other sources (Cameron 2000; del Olmo 1997; Huerta 2006a, 2006b; Medina 1998; Pulgar 1995; Quinones 2006). However, due to the socioeconomic and demographic differences, including migration patterns, between the small borderland city, Laredo, Texas, and the nation's second-largest municipality, Los Angeles, California, more research (both quantitative and qualitative) is required on this service sector to establish conclusive similarities and differences between the two regions.

In their study, Pisani and Yoskowitz (2005, 235-6) found that Laredo gardeners were mostly male, Mexican, Spanish speaking and heads of households. The authors add:

.. gardeners tend to be married, Mexican by birth and nationality, work full time as a gardener (though a large portion, 45 percent, work as a gardener part time), middle aged, and possess a middle school education. Three-quarters of gardeners are able to work year around in the trade and have been doing so on average for more than 12 years.

In addition to these traits, the authors also reported on the level of skill needed to enter the trade, and the reasons workers become gardeners:

Gardening is a low-skill occupation that attracts a concomitant employee skill set. This was evident when we asked gardeners why they chose their occupation. Economic necessity, ease of entry, and lack of education or higher-level skills accounted for the bulk (69.5 percent) of the responses.

Apart from the ease of entry into this industry, familial and friendship network ties also play an important role for workers entering this occupation (Tsukashima 1995/1996). Of the fourteen personal interviews conducted by this author with Los Angeles gardeners, seven of the gardeners attributed their current employment status as gardeners to a family member or friend. For instance, in a personal interview I conducted on March 29, 2006, Guadalupe<sup>3</sup> – a gardener from Zacatecas, Mexico, with over 30 years in the industry – primarily attributes his employment in this industry to his kinship network ties:

I learned from my family. My father and brother were gardeners. That is how I got started. My father was a gardener and my

brother first came to the U.S. to help him. I was twenty-one years old when I started working as a gardener.

In addition, Pisani and Yoskowitz (2005, 237) also investigated gardener wages in the informal sector, finding that gardeners on average fared better than minimum-wage workers in the formal sector:

...full-time gardeners are able, for the most part, to work five days a week, averaging about 40 hours per week year around, with weekly earnings of about \$300. This wage rate—about half of the time dictated by the employer [home-owner], a fifth of the time by the gardener, and one-third of the time through negotiation—clearly exceeds the minimum wage in south Texas (\$5.15 at the time of the study) and ranks above the reported formal sector wage in the industry of \$7.55 in Laredo using either the calculated or self-reported hourly wage rates.

However, while gardeners in the informal economy earn more than those in the formal economy, the authors found that informal workers lacked access to most government programs, such as Social Security, worksite protection and other benefits enjoyed by legal U.S. workers. Since most of the gardeners surveyed in this study worked in the informal economy, their lack of access to basic government services and protections, including workers' compensation and medical insurance, makes them vulnerable workers (Flaming et al. 2005; Hamilton 1999).

Additionally, according to Pisani and Yoskowitz (2005), over 40 percent of the 122 gardeners surveyed lacked proper documentation to work legally in this country. While gardeners without proper legal status in this country benefit from employment in the informal sector, these workers—like day laborers (Valenzuela 1999, 2001; Valenzuela et al. 2006) and domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Mattingly 1999, 2001)—experience the constant threat of deportation and abuse by unscrupulous employers and enforcement authorities.

In the following section, I outline some of the basic theoretical concepts of social capital, social network, and informality in order to test their relevance for Latino, paid gardeners in Los Angeles's unregulated market.

### **Social Capital Theory**

In this section, I draw from the social capital literature to determine its applicability to this case study. The following, however, represents only a few characteristics of social capital.

Focusing on social capital as an *individual good*, Briggs (2004,152) relates how this resource helps individuals to both solve problems and deal with everyday life by "drawing on norms of trust and reciprocity and other social bonds through which so much of our lives are informally organized." In general, individuals may benefit from this social resource for a wide variety of daily activities, ranging from borrowing money or a cup of sugar from a friend to getting a ride to work or school from a neighbor. Like many immigrants in this country (Zolniski 1994), Mexican gardeners draw on their social capital on a daily basis for securing employment and other basic needs. For example, instead of hiring someone off the streets (e.g., a day laborer or placing a classified ad in the local paper), a self-employed gardener typically draws from his social capital to meet his business needs, e.g., hiring a relative or close member from their country of origin.

In addition, by differentiating between *social support* and *social leverage*, Briggs (2004,152) demonstrates how the former helps individuals to "get by or cope with particular challenges" without escaping the "regular calamities that drain us," while the latter assists individuals to "get ahead" in life. In this case study, we can clearly see how individual gardeners in the informal economy can benefit from both aspects of social capital. For example, if a recently arrived immigrant with limited work skills and education wants to "get by," he can get an entry-level job as a gardener, working long hours with little pay, through a family member or friend. In a different situation, if an ambitious gardener, who has several years of experience in the trade, wants to "get ahead," he can request support from his current employer (or another established gardener, such as a relative) to help him initiate his own business.

## **Social Networks**

In his classic article on social networks, "The Strength of Weak Ties," Granovetter (1973, 1378) argues the importance of weak ties (social connections between different groups) "as indispensable to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities." While not dismissing the importance of strong ties (social connections within a cohesive group), Granovetter (1973,1360) emphasizes the importance of weak ties:

Most network models deal, implicitly, with strong ties, thus continuing their applicability to small, well defined groups. Emphasis on weak ties lends itself to discussion between groups and to analysis of segments of social structures not easily defined in terms of primary groups.

In short, Granovetter (1973) demonstrates that while strong ties (e.g., kinship, friends and co-ethnics from cohesive group) can be beneficial to individuals of a cohesive community, they can also be counterproductive, since these groups tend to isolate themselves and form cliques whereby preventing effective community action outside of their group. Meanwhile, the author argues that weak ties (e.g., employers, elected officials, nonprofit organizations and members outside of cohesive group) provide positive bridges between different groups.

In her study of Latina domestic workers (*domesticas*) in the San Francisco Bay Area, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) draws on Granovetter's (1973) research on social networks to highlight how Latina immigrant workers (both novice and veteran) utilize their strong and weak ties in this informal trade.

As part of her study, the author documents how novice Latina immigrants access their strong ties to secure employment as *domesticas*. However, while this employment opportunity represents a positive aspect of strong ties, the novice *domestica*, who works for a veteran *domestica* with an established client base, may also experience the negative aspects of strong ties by working long hours for little pay. Thus, the novice *domestica's* strong ties represent both positive (employment) and negative (low- wages) outcomes.

On the other hand, the author also demonstrates how the veteran *domestica* also benefits from her strong ties with the novice *domestica*. Instead of placing an ad in the classifieds or hiring a stranger from a temporary employment agency, for example, the veteran *domestica* accesses her strong ties to hire a trustworthy assistant. The veteran *domestica*, however, mostly benefits from her weak ties with her employer contacts. By establishing good working relations with her employers—mostly middle-class women—the veteran *domestica* obtains referrals from her weak ties to expand her client base and business opportunities. "For the Latina women in this study," Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994, 55) documents, "employer referrals were used to develop and maintain a weekly or biweekly route of employers."

Strikingly similar to domestic work, from my study of Mexican immigrant gardeners in Los Angeles, I also found common social network patterns between novice and veteran gardeners. In addition to the pros and cons of both weak and strong ties between gardeners, I will discuss how veteran gardeners (and also some novice gardeners) benefit from their weak ties with their employers.

## Navigating the Informal Economy

Once considered primary features of underdeveloped economies, scholars during the past two decades have documented the existence and vitality of the informal economy in advanced countries (Portes et al. 1989; Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987; Sassen 1994). Debunking the notion that the informal economy will wither away with the rise of advanced capitalism, Sassen (1994, 2289) argues that the informal sector cannot be separated from the formal economies of highly developed countries:

As I shall employ the term, the 'informal economy' refers to those income-generating activities occurring outside the state's regulatory framework that have analogs within that framework. The scope and character of the informal economy are defined by the very regulatory framework it evades. For this reason, it can only be understood in terms of its relationship to the formal economy—that is, regulated income-generating activity.

In an earlier study, Castells and Portes (1989, 12), provide a related definition of the informal economy, emphasizing the unregulated characteristics of this sector:

The informal economy [is] a process of income-generation characterized by one central feature: *it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated* [authors' emphasis].

It is primarily in this unregulated context that self-employed Mexican gardeners conduct their business throughout the greater Los Angeles area and beyond (Flaming, Haydamack, and Joassart 2005; Pisani and Yoskowitz 2005,2006).

In a recently released study, "Hopeful Workers, Marginal Jobs: LA's Off-the-Books Labor Force," Flaming, Haydamack, and Joassart (2005) provide a snapshot of workers in Los Angeles's informal sector, including the landscaping service industry. Since the U.S. Census Bureau does not have data specifically on self-employed gardeners, the authors of this study used the U.S. Census Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) combined with other sources such as the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to report on landscaping service workers, including both contract gardeners and workers employed for a licensed landscaping company.

Overall, the authors found a significant number of workers in Los Angeles's informal sector (Flaming, Haydamack, and Joassart 2005,1):

Our best estimate is that on a typical day in 2004 there were 679,000 informal workers in the county and 303,800 in the city. These workers are estimated to account for 15 percent of the county labor force and 16 percent of the city's labor force. Undocumented workers are estimated to make up 61 percent of the informal labor force for the county and 65 percent for the city.

Given the nature of this sector, the informal sector does not offer the same legal protections that most workers in the formal economy enjoy, such as minimum wage, occupational safety rules and prohibitions against discrimination. Nevertheless, for those who lack legal employment documents or viable employment opportunities in the formal economy this sector provides a means of survival for many workers.

## Research Methods

The present study on Mexican gardeners represents one of the few studies conducted on this workforce in this country. Given the scant scholarly literature on this trade, I conducted an exploratory study of this trade. In addition, as a critical case study this research aims to test existing theories of social capital, social networks and informality.

Based primarily on qualitative methods, my research consists of an in-depth study of a particular subject: the paid gardening trade in Los Angeles's informal economy. By conducting a holistic study, the study establishes a better understanding of this informal trade. More specifically, I explore the social organization and structure of this trade, focusing on the views of Mexican gardeners and their perspective of this unregulated industry.

Through ethnographic research during the 2004 to 2007 time period, I conducted about one hundred informal conversations with Mexican gardener in the Los Angeles area, fourteen open-ended personal interviews, several focus groups and participant observations. In addition, I analyzed current and archival documentation to complement my field research. This included analyzing extant research on Japanese- American gardeners, who dominated this industry in California from the late 1800s through most of the 1900s (Hirahara 2000, Kobashigawa 1988, Tsuchida 1984, Tsukashima 1991,1995/1996,1998).

My interview sample consisted of self-employed, Mexican immigrant gardeners. My informants represent men in their mid 30s to late 60s who have been working as gardeners in this country for several years. I obtained

access to my seven key informants through my organizational contacts, as noted below. Focusing on the social networks of my informants, I also conducted "snowball sampling" techniques to double my informant sample size. According to Cornelius (1982, 392), "snowball sampling" among undocumented Mexican immigrants plays an important role in securing low refusal rates for this vulnerable subpopulation:

I and other researchers who have used the technique of "snowball sampling" among kinship /friendship networks of Mexican *indocumentados* [undocumented] have found it to be generally successful in keeping refusal rates low and facilitating the conduct of the interview.

### **Organizing Gardeners and "Insider / Outsider" Status**

Researchers commonly experience tremendous obstacles when accessing and studying vulnerable populations, such as marginalized Mexican immigrants and other racialized minority groups in this country. In her study of West Indian immigrants and poor African Americans in New York, for example, Harvard sociologist Mary C. Waters (1999) expressed concerns about her status as a white, privileged researcher studying marginalized, minority groups. To deal with some of her field research concerns, she hired African American researchers to help with some of the interviews at an inner-city public school. Discussing her methodology, Waters (1999,357) writes:

The question of trust and access was a very serious one in this research [i.e., fieldwork in New York, inner-city schools]. Would young black students answer honestly my probing questions about their family life, their racial identity, their behaviors, and their beliefs about touchy issues like race relations and weapons in school? I had hired an African America student from Harvard to do interviews for me because I was worried that my race, gender, and age would make it difficult for students to trust me.

Unlike Waters, however, I had already established a level of trust and access with my key informants prior to embarking on this research project. From 1996 through 2004, I served as the lead organizer for the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA). Through ALAGLA, I had the opportunity to work directly with hundreds of Mexican gardeners on an organizational level against the City of Los Angeles's efforts to ban gasoline-powered leaf blowers—an important tool of their trade—within 500 feet of residential areas (Boyarsky 1997; del Olmo 1997; Huerta 2006a, 2006b; Orlov 1996).<sup>5</sup> Not only did I

establish a professional relationship based on trust and reciprocity with hundreds of gardeners, but I also established long-term friendships with many gardeners that afforded me, as a researcher, access to this subpopulation.

In addition, as a son of poor Mexican immigrants embedded in the culture (Mexican) and language (Spanish), I overcame many of the common ethnographic obstacles faced by most researchers who study Mexican immigrants and their cultural norms, work habits, and daily practices. However, given my own privileged position as a researcher from a prestigious university, I am still considered an outsider. As a result, while I feel very confident in my abilities to translate and interpret my data set from the perspective of someone within the culture, as someone who is far removed from the hardships and labor-intensive aspects of this workforce I cannot completely negate my outsider bias in this research project. To accommodate my limitations as an outsider, I provided my key informants with interview transcripts and drafts of my research to check for errors in translation and obtain feedback concerning my portrayal and findings of their informal industry.

## **Workforce Characteristics of Paid Gardeners in Los Angeles**

On any given morning in Los Angeles, Mexican immigrant gardeners can be seen working the lawns of middle income to affluent communities. Primarily dominated by men (Flaming, Haydamack, and Joassart 2005; Pisani and Yoskowitz 2005, 2006), the age of a gardener varies from a worker in his early teens—usually the son of a gardener—to a worker in his 60s and, occasionally, past retirement age. In their study of 112 gardeners in South Texas, Pisani and Yoskowitz (2005) found the mean age of gardeners to be about 40. Further research is needed in order to get more representative data on this population.

## **Labor Dynamics, Structure and Internal Hierarchy**

Gardeners, for the most part, are independent contractors who negotiate lawn maintenance agreements with homeowners or renters on an individual basis. Instead of formal, legally binding contracts, the gardener (commonly the owner of the business) and client strike oral agreements based on the size of the lot, type of work requested (e.g., mow lawn, water plants, trim and remove brushes), frequency of visits and, overall estimated time to complete the job. Gardeners typically charge from \$80 to a few hundred dollars per month; however, due to an abundance of cheap labor and fierce competition among gardeners for clients, prices

can go as low as \$50 per month for a homeowner (Boxall 1998; *Los Angeles Business Journal* 1999).

Gardeners organize themselves in small crews that in turn depend on the size of the business. The crews usually consist of the owner and several workers, who are often nuclear family member or from the extended family, hometown associates, temporary day laborers, and/or hired help from the available immigrant labor pool.

The owner manages all aspects of the crew and business operations. This individual, who will heretofore be referred to as the *patron* (boss), owns all the tools, truck(s) and equipment (e.g., leaf blower, lawn mover and weed trimmer) and has direct contact and oral agreements with all the clients. The *patron* is also responsible for covering all operational and personnel costs, such as equipment maintenance, auto payments and insurance, gasoline and oil.

The worker, who will heretofore be referred to here as the *trabajador*, is paid for his services like most hired help in any micro-enterprise. Contrary to the formal economy, however, most *trabajadores* get paid by the day, from \$50 to \$75 along with a lunch. Since many *trabajadores* may not have a bank account due to their legal status, they usually get paid in cash on a weekly basis.

#### Figure 1. Basic Gardener Crew Structure

In addition to the *patron* and *trabajador* position, crews also include *manejadores* (drivers). Apart from performing their driving duties, the *manejador* also takes on similar work responsibilities of a *trabajador*. Given that undocumented workers cannot legally obtain driver licenses in California, the *manejador* has become an important part of the basic crew structure (see Figure 1). As a result, due to the high demand for workers with driver licenses, *manejadores* command higher wages, ranging from \$75 to \$100 per day, compared to *trabajadores*.

Although the *patron* and the *trabajador* often times work together at the job sites, there is a clear hierarchy between them. The *patron* dictates everything from work pace to work hours to breaks. There is a mutually beneficial relationship between the *patron* and the *trabajador*, since it benefits both parties to maintain a harmonious, albeit unequal

relationship. On the one hand, it benefits the *patron* to establish a good working relationship with his *trabajadores* in order to operate an effective and efficient business. Since the *patron* may have more than one truck operating at the same time, it is very important for him to ensure that his *trabajadores* will be working diligently without his presence.

Apart from concern that his *trabajadores* are not being productive at the work sites, the *patron* must also contend with the possibility that his *trabajadores* may steal his clients or equipment. It is very common for an ambitious *trabajador* to offer a client a cheaper monthly rate, luring the clients away from the *patron*. For example, the *trabajador* may approach the client and ask him or her how much they are being charged monthly and subsequently offer a lower price, where the *trabajador* will do the work on his off time.

On the other hand, the *trabajador* stands to benefit from having a good relationship with the *patron*. Apart from earning a wage and learning the trade from the *patron*, the *trabajador* may save enough money to eventually establish his own gardening business with the help of the *patron*, as noted below. In addition, the *trabajador's* employment options may be limited to the informal economy due to lack of legal status in this country.

### *La Ruta* (the **Route**)

The success of these small businesses primarily depends on the number of homes the gardeners' service on a regular basis. Referred to as *rutas* by gardeners, this network of homes represents the *patrones'* principle asset. A successful *ruta* usually takes years to develop. As a result, successful self-employed gardeners tend to be long-term residents compared to recently arrived immigrants.

Also, given that *patrones* typically entered into the workforce as *trabajadores*, this trade provides upward mobility opportunities for ambitious, hard working individuals. Unlike many jobs available to recent immigrants in the formal economy (e.g., dish washers, janitors, car wash workers, farm workers and factory work), paid gardening allows for *trabajadores* to acquire their own *rutas*, thereby initiating their own business ventures. For example, prior to establishing his own gardening business, Jaime—a successful gardener from Zacatecas, Mexico, with over 15 years in the industry—worked at a warehouse without any prospects of upward mobility given his lack of formal education and limited English skills:

I enjoyed my job at the factory, but it paid too little and I didn't see any chances of becoming a supervisor. In Mexico I attended school up to the sixth grade since I had to work in the fields to help support my family. I probably would have still been working at the factory if it weren't for my father-in-law who had his own [gardening] business. I worked for him as a helper. Later he had some extra houses on Saturday's that he passed on to me. This is how I got started in this business.

If the *trabajador* aspires to have his own *ruta*, for example, he can purchase a *ruta* from the *patron*. *Rutas*, depending on their size and the amount of revenue they generate on a monthly basis, commonly sell for thousands of dollars. In many circumstances, the *patron* and the *trabajador* are part of the same extended family network, where the *patron* provides the *trabajador* (e.g., son, brother, brother in-law or cousin) with a *ruta* either free of cost, as noted above in the case of Jaime, or below market value. The *patron* may also gift a *ruta* to a *trabajador* as a token of appreciation for the *trabajador's* hard work and dedication.

As a result, we can clearly see how the *ruta*, has exchange-value. That is, like commodities in the formal economy, *rutas* can be exchanged for cash, traded for other commodities, or gifted. According to Marx (1994, 243), exchange-value represents the important characteristic of a commodity:

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.

Unlike the formal economy, however, *rutas* are exchanged in the informal market without government regulations, sanctions or issues of taxation. Since gardeners mostly operate in a cash economy, neither the seller nor buyer of the *ruta* pays any taxes on this business transaction. Nevertheless, the *ruta* serves as a vital asset for a select group of Mexican immigrant gardeners to succeed in the informal economy.

### **Working Conditions**

While the *patrones* and *trabajadores* are constantly trying to improve their business ventures and individual opportunities, respectively, the gardeners put in extremely long hours, working long days, up to seven days a week, including holidays (Hanrahan 1996; Pulgar 1995).

Coming mostly from poor rural communities in Mexico, many of these gardeners are accustomed to long, arduous hours for little pay. According to many of the gardeners I have spoken to over the past ten years and those interviewed for this research project, they are willing to work long hours and on weekends, without complaining, so that their children in the United States have a better future. Also, many of them put in long hours in order to send money to relatives in Mexico.

In addition to the long hours and labor intensive work associated with this industry, gardeners in the informal sector, like day laborers (Valenzuela 1999,2001,2003; Valenzuela et al 2006) and domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Mattingly 1999, 2001), do not receive the legal protections and benefits afforded to most workers in the United States, such as minimum wages, workers' compensation coverage, work safety rules and health insurance. On September 13, 1999, for example, a *Los Angeles Times* article labeled contract gardening one of the most hazardous jobs in the country (Hamilton 1999, S4):

The most common gardener complaint is lower back pain due to repetitive bending, lifting and stooping. Gardeners typically visit 15 to 20 homes a day and each time, they haul equipment weighing about 50 pounds in and out of their trucks \_\_\_\_ Falling out of trees and becoming sick from herbicides are also concerns.

In addition to the disadvantages associated with this unregulated industry, paid gardeners do not qualify for Social Security benefits upon retirement. As a result, many gardeners work beyond retirement-age years without a financial safety net available to most Americans since the New Deal.

Moreover, gardeners face a host of other work related hazards and problems not experienced by most American workers. Commonly reported problems include: not receiving payment by the client for services rendered, being harassed by police and city officials for lack of proper permits and leaf blower violations (only in cities with regulations or bans), and, similar to day laborers, they are assaulted and robbed by thieves on the job (Valenzuela 1999,2001,2003; Valenzuela et al. 2006).

Since most gardeners drive to their work sites with their equipment and supplies in the back of their trucks, they are easy targets for thieves. Of the fourteen gardeners interviewed for this research project, all of them claimed to have been robbed at their job sites. In a personal interview that I conducted on April 1, 2006, Guadalupe described the times he has been robbed:

I have been robbed about two to three times. One time I had a weeder stolen. I put it in my truck and I think that I forgot to lock

it up and someone passed by the truck and took it. This other time some African Americans put a gun to my stomach to steal my things, but they only ended up taking my wallet.

## **Social Networks: Weak and Strong Ties at the Work Place**

Similar to domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Mattingly 1999, 2001), paid gardeners predominantly rely on their social networks to navigate the informal economy. Instead of accessing classified ads to meet his labor needs, the *patron* typically resorts to strong ties like an extended family network, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and individuals from the same hometown to hire a *trabajador*. This situation not only saves the *patron* time and money, but it also provides him with a trustworthy and loyal workforce. By hiring his sibling or brother-in-law, the *patron* does not have to be constantly worried about the *trabajador* stealing his equipment or clients.

While there are problems associated with hiring a family member - it is more difficult to fire a sibling versus a stranger if he or she is not working out - given that gardeners operate in the informal economy. According to my informants the benefits of hiring a family member usually outweigh the costs. In his ground breaking study on social capital, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," Coleman (1988,99), for instance, uses the example of a close-knit, Jewish community in New York's diamond market to demonstrate how these entrepreneurs, like Mexican gardeners, benefit from accessing their strong ties to facilitate their trade:

Observation of the wholesale diamond market indicates that these close ties, through family, community, and religious affiliation, provide insurance that is necessary to facilitate the transactions in the market. If any member of this community defected through substituting other stones or through stealing stones in his temporary possession, he would lose family, religious and community ties. The strength of these ties makes possible the transactions in which trustworthiness is taken for granted and trade can occur with ease.

By accessing his strong ties, the *patron* also benefits from having a hardworking crew to keep up with a busy and arduous daily work schedule. Crews with large *rutas* of 100 clients or more, for instance, service between 10 to 15 homes per day. While the *patron* may accompany the crew to maintain an effective and efficient work pace at the job sites, the *patron* relies on a self-motivated, independent crew to remain competitive in this industry, especially if he has more than one truck

operating simultaneously. This situation inherently limits the size of the business operation, since the *patron* needs to be able to manage both his *trabajadores* and keep his clients satisfied at the same time. The *patron* incurs stress in maintaining a balance between his existing *ruta* and the need to expand it without losing control.

For the *trabajador*, strong ties may represent both positive (employment) and negative (work-related exploitation) outcomes. On the one hand, the *trabajador's* strong ties with the *patron* allows for the *trabajador* to enter the labor market, especially if he lacks legal documentation to work in this country. On the other hand, these same strong ties may represent constraints on the *trabajador*, who work long hours and weekends with low pay. Cameron (2000, 1090) vividly summarizes the plight of the average *trabajador*:

Tending the front and back yards of the landed gentry in Los Angeles is primarily the work of as many as 65,000 Latina/o immigrants, nearly all of whom are men. By any measure, their work does not pay well. The average crew consists of two to three men, charges \$15 to \$25 per yard and works ten to twenty yards per day. At these piecework rates, the average gardener [*trabajador*] earns \$250 per week, \$1000 per month, and \$12,000 per year. He works eight to twelve hours a day, six days a week, and all without overtime, paid vacation, or health insurance. If he does not work, then he does not get paid.

Apart from benefiting from his strong ties with the *trabajador*, the *patron* also receives positive outcomes from his weak ties with his clients. The relationship between the *patron* and the client represents an excellent example of Granovetter's (1973) argument for the strength of weak ties. This asymmetrical relationship between two different groups—the *patron* (Mexican immigrant entrepreneurs) and client (White middle-class homeowners)—generates benefits for both parties. For the *patron*, the established client not only represents a source of monthly income but also represents an avenue for new referrals. It is very common for a satisfied client to tap into his or her social networks to refer "their gardener" to a family member, friend, co-worker or neighbor. By taking advantage of the client's social network, the *patron* is able to expand his *ruta* and business operations to increase his monthly profits.

The client benefits from this unequal relationship by taking advantage of a cheap labor source to service and maintain his or her yard. Given the tremendous competition in this unregulated industry, the *patron* must keep his prices low to ward off other *patrones* (or their own *trabajadores*) from stealing his client. Middle-class clients in particular benefit from the

low cost services provided by paid gardeners, since they (especially men) can pursue other opportunities in lieu of doing yard work. Traditionally considered the responsibility of the man of the house (Jenkins 1994), for example, yard work can now be performed by Mexican immigrant gardeners for a cheap rate while the male homeowner can enjoy leisure time, play with his kids or pursue other economic opportunities.

This situation can also be applied to middle-class households who employ domestic workers, where the clients (especially women) free themselves of domestic work like cleaning their home or caring for their children at a relatively low cost to pursue other opportunities (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994,2001; Mattingly 1999,2001).

### **Life History: Joaquin's Success Story**

Like many immigrants from underdeveloped countries, Joaquin entered the labor market at a very young age in Sinaloa, Mexico. Joaquin, 85/ learned the hard lessons of manual labor as a temporary farmer worker in the United States during the Bracero Program<sup>8</sup> of the mid-1900s, before immigrating to the United States in the early 1960s.

During the early 1970s, Joaquin moved to West Los Angeles (WLA) and entered the paid gardening trade with the support of his wife, who worked as a domestic worker. After purchasing a truck and a few tools, Joaquin gradually established his own gardening business. Thanks to referrals from his first clients (weak ties), Joaquin's business operations expanded. As a result, he hired a few *trabajadores* and had two crews operating simultaneously throughout the WLA area.

Once established as a successful entrepreneur, Joaquin's monthly cash flow and his wife's income allowed for his family to enjoy a comfortable life in a rent-controlled part of Santa Monica. Through his successful business, Joaquin frequently took his family on vacations to Mexico. He was also able to help his extended family members both in the U.S. and in Mexico with money and a place to stay. Furthermore, Joaquin and his wife also managed to send their three children to parochial schools. Eventually, they all attended major universities, including UCLA, Harvard, UCLA Law School and Stanford Law School.

While Joaquin can be credited with establishing a successful business without formal education and limited English skills, his entire family contributed to his success. Not only did his wife work on weekends so he could purchase his first work truck, she also prepared his meals, washed his clothes and nurtured him when ill. In addition, his oldest son worked

as his assistant (*trabajador*) during the weekends and summer breaks. Lastly, in addition to helping their father with his business invoices, all three children served as translators between Joaquin and his clients.

Shortly before retiring, Joaquin took on a full time job as a gardener for an exclusive residential colony in WLA in order to qualify for Social Security and other retirement benefits. While he maintained his *ruta* to supplement his income for several years, Joaquin eventually gifted his *ruta* to his *trabajador* as a gesture of appreciation for many years of hard work and dedication.

Although Joaquin is representative of only a select group of successful, self-employed gardeners, his story is important since it illustrates how an individual with a lack of formal education and limited English skills can succeed in the U.S. by accessing his social capital and social networks in the informal economy. Like many successful gardeners, Joaquin relied on his family and co-ethnic friends (strong ties) to help build his gardening business. By hiring trustworthy *trabajadores* from his hometown region in Mexico, for example, Joaquin was able to enjoy family vacations to Mexico without the fear of someone stealing his clients. Also, the fact that he established a good rapport with his clients (weak ties) enabled Joaquin to expand his business operations and provide his children with educational opportunities he never enjoyed while working at a very young age in Mexico.

## Conclusion

Mexican gardeners represent a vital workforce in Los Angeles's informal economy. While stereotyped in network television, Hollywood movies, and mainstream media as ignorant, second-class citizens, Mexican gardeners provide a valuable service not only to individual homeowners and other clients but also to the general public by contributing to a greener and cleaner environment.

Moreover, by looking beyond the surface, we can see how these individuals represent sophisticated workers and entrepreneurs who managed to carve a niche for themselves in an unregulated market. By accessing their social capital and social networks, successful Mexican gardeners generate opportunities for themselves that are not available in the formal market. Despite lacking formal education and fluent English skills, someone like Joaquin, with the support of his wife and children, can achieve the American Dream.

There are, however, important questions that policy makers, planning scholars and practitioners need to consider when exploring the plight

of immigrant workers in this country's informal economy. Are poor Mexican immigrants and other marginalized groups better off in the informal economy versus the formal market given their limited educational background and English language skills? How can planners intervene in this trade to protect novice gardeners like Gregory Rodriguez, as reported by Los Angeles Times (Quinones 2006), who died while trimming a tree without proper protection and training? Should the property owner be held responsible for hiring someone without proper permits and training? By intervening in this informal market, however, will policy makers and planners only create obstacles for Mexican gardeners by implementing strict governmental regulations and restrictions in this trade that limit the gardeners' employment options and upward mobility opportunities?

These questions point to a need to better understand this trade in order to deal with the important issues that policy makers, planning scholars and practitioners need to seriously consider. This is especially true in the current environment where honest, hard-working immigrants have been demonized and blamed for America's woes.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Thorstein Veblen. 2006. *Conspicuous Consumption*. New York: Penguin Books, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> According to U.S. Census data for 2000, Laredo had a total population of 156,576 and a median household income of \$29,108. Latinos represent over 75 percent of the total population. In contrast, Los Angeles had a total population of 3,694,820 and median household income of \$36,687. Unlike Laredo's majority Mexican population, Mexicans represented over 30 percent of Los Angeles' total population, (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>) (accessed April 8, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of my informants, I will only use pseudonyms in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Absent a similar study in Los Angeles, it is difficult to determine whether gardeners in Los Angeles' informal sector fair better than minimum-wage workers at \$6.75 per hour in the formal sector. According to some of the gardeners I interviewed for this paper, for example, the daily wages paid to a gardener (worker) ranges from \$65 - \$75 per day. However, since gardeners in this sector may work anywhere from eight to twelve hours per day, it is difficult to compare the wages earned by gardeners in the informal economy versus minimum-wage workers in Los Angeles' formal economy.

<sup>5</sup> Proposed penalties by the city for violators of the leaf blower ban passed on December 3, 1996, included a misdemeanor charge, \$1,000 fine and up to six months in jail (Orlov 1996).

<sup>6</sup> A *rut a* can include other places, such as businesses, apartment buildings and parks.

<sup>7</sup> He retired as a gardener when he turned 80 years-old.

<sup>8</sup> In 1942, according to Gomez-Quinones (1994), the United States and the "Mexican government signed an agreement for the importation of fifty thousand Mexican workers" to primarily remedy agricultural labor shortages (p. 157).

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