

Ann Beutel (CY Publications Committee Member) interviewed **Emir Estrada** for the Spring 2015 CY newsletter's "Meet the Scholar Interview." Emir Estrada received her B.A. in Sociology and Chicana/o Studies from UCLA in 2005, her M.A. in Sociology from USC in 2012, and her Ph.D. in Sociology from USC in 2012. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Cal State University-Long Beach. In the fall, she will begin a position as Assistant Professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. Emir has observed and interviewed immigrants from Mexico and Central America working in the Los Angeles area as street vendors and in other unregulated or semi-regulated jobs in the informal sector. More specifically, she has been researching the children of immigrant workers and the role they play in the family's economic survival.

Below is the complete version of the CY interview with Emir (an abbreviated version appears in the Spring 2015 CY newsletter)

**Ann: How did you become interested in studying youth? What are the youth-related aspects of your research? How has your own immigrant experience influenced your research?**

**Emir:** My own childhood and immigration experience shaped my research interests and continue to do so after graduate school. As a young girl, I grew up working side by side with my parents, more specifically with my mother. We were a typical transnational family where my father worked and lived in California for the majority of the year. I lived with my mother and three older brothers in a small town called Tepechitlan in the state of Zacatecas in Mexico. My father sent remittances to my mother, but the money he sent was not enough to make ends meet and sometimes he would go long periods without sending us money. My mother worked part time as a teacher in our hometown, but she made less as a teacher in Mexico than my father did as a parking attendant in the U.S. In order to supplement our income, my mother saved up money to open a small grocery store (*tienda de abarrotes*). My brothers and I worked at the store. Early on, I learned that all family members had to work in the family business in order to contribute to the family economy. By 1990, my two older brothers had moved to the U.S. with my father. My mother, my younger brother and I stayed behind.

Six months before I graduated from high school, my father made the decision to return to live with us in Mexico. He arrived early December like he did every year, a few days before my birthday on December 4. I have a clear memory of him arriving at our house in Mexico at 3:00 a.m. The metal clinking of the large metal gate of our house and the roaring sound of a pickup truck woke me up. The glaring lights of the unfamiliar truck illuminated our large back yard patio directly underneath my bedroom. My mother did not own a car. We did all of our errands by foot so the glaring lights and the motor sound of this vehicle only meant that my dad was home. I ran down the stairs to the back patio to find my mother embracing my father. She had not seen him for a year. We had not seen him for a year and we missed him so much. He wore a big warm jacket, jeans and new shoes. He looked like most *norteños* do when they come back

from the *norte*. The back of his truck was full of luggage, some furniture, and gifts for us. This joyous moment was short lived. On December 11, a few days after he had returned, he suffered a stroke and was rushed to the hospital in Guadalajara (a hospital located 3 hours away from our small rural town). He was hospitalized in a private and very expensive hospital. We spent most of our savings trying to save him, but he died 11 days later on December 22. The following June, my brother and I graduated high school. Having exhausted our savings account and after contemplating the educational and work options available for us in our small town, we decided to join my two older brother in the U.S.

Once in the U.S, it was difficult to adjust to the culture, the language and the community. Once again, we all worked in order to contribute to the household expenses. Eventually, all of my brothers got married and two of them moved to Georgia, where there is an established community of immigrants from our hometown. My older brother remained in California. My mother and I worked to make ends meet. My mother took on a variety of immigrant jobs. She worked as a dishwasher, a cook, a domestic worker and then she landed a job at a factory refurbishing computers. She has worked for this company for 17 years.

My educational journey in the U.S. was accidental. I decided to enroll in my local community college in order to learn English a year after we immigrated to the U.S. I decided to enroll in ESL classes after my employer ridiculed me in front of our customers for not understanding her instructions in English. That same day, I found another job at the mall and before the end of the week I was a student at Long Beach City College. I took all the ESL classes imaginable. Eventually I started taking college courses thanks to the guidance of an Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) counselor. At LBCC I took my first sociology class and I wrote my final paper on the topic of children and work. I still have that essay. In this essay, I cited the work of UCLA professor Orellana, who is a dear friend now and has done extensive work on Latino children as language brokers. I was intrigued by this topic because the stories in Orellana's work resonated with my own experiences working with my mother.

In 2002, I transferred to UCLA and majored in Sociology and minored in Chicana/o studies. While at UCLA, I read *Domestica* by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo. Reading this book gave me a sense of belonging at UCLA. In a way it validated the experience of my mother who worked as a domestic worker for a period of time before she landed the job at the factory. However, it wasn't until three years after I graduated from UCLA that I had the opportunity to meet Pierrette in person. After working in the area of education for three years, I decided to apply to graduate school in 2007. Through a mutual friend, I met a graduate student at USC who introduced me to Pierrette. I shared my immigration experience with Pierrette and I expressed my interest in exploring further the experience of children who worked with their parents. I expressed my concerns given that this was a topic so close to my personal experience. I feared that my scholarship would not be taken seriously due to my "insider" status. Pierrette smiled and encouraged me to apply to USC to study what I was passionate about.

In 2007 I started my graduate education at USC working under the mentorship of the woman who years earlier had reassured me, through her scholarship, that my story was important and that I too could produce and share similar stories in the field of sociology. While the topic of children and work had always intrigued me, the challenge was to find the site that would enable me to conduct my ethnographic study.

At the time, I decided to sell my car in order to afford my graduate education. By L.A. standards this was a huge sacrifice. I used the bus and the metro during my first year of graduate school. This experience exposed me to different parts of Los Angeles I was not too familiar with. Yet the unfamiliarity of the space was compensated with the familiarity of the social interactions in those spaces. Near bus and metro stops, I met and interacted with street vendors who sold a variety of cultural food such as *tamales* and *champurrado* in the morning and fruit, *raspados* and other snacks during my afternoon commute. I became a customer of these L.A. street vendors and then I began to notice that the children of these vendors were intricately involved in the family street vending business. They helped with cash transactions, prepared food and ran errands for their parents when they needed extra napkins from the grocery store around the corner. I mostly saw these family work interactions in the afternoon when children were out of school. I had discovered my research site! After reviewing the literature on street vending I found a gap in the literature where the experience of children in street vending makers had been overlooked. Street vending gave me the opportunity to fill an important gap in the street vending literature by taking a child centered approach to understanding their work experience in this informal and illegal occupation that has been racialized as an immigrant occupation. Most of the children I studied were born in the U.S., spoke English, were in school, and were familiar with popular culture and technology. These children did not fit the characteristics of the street vendors scholars had written about. Equally as important, street vending families and street vending sites gave me the opportunity to explore Latino family and work relations with a specific focus on the labor contribution of children.

**Ann: What advice do you have for studying immigrant youth?**

**Emir:** I would give the same advice that my advisor once gave to me when I started my research project in 2008. Study what you are passionate about even if you are accused of not being “objective” or too distant from your “subjects”. As researchers we bring a set of skills and experiences that can enable us to establish rapport with our respondents. I had to overcome many challenges during the beginning stages of my study. First, getting IRB approval took about six months. Later, I struggled to recruit my participants. Street vendors did not trust me. They thought I was a police officer, a health inspector, a social worker looking for instances of child labor and in some cases they also thought I was trying to learn their trade to open my own street vending stand. It took me a long time to establish rapport with the 66 people I interviewed. I shared my personal immigrant story of working with my family, I brought my mother and my daughter to my research site and we bought a lot of food. I also spoke fluent Spanish and

answered any questions they had about me, my family, my personal life and my school. My “insider” status enabled me to establish rapport with these families who are constantly harassed by local authorities and community members.

**Ann: You just started as an assistant professor last fall. What advice do you have for advanced graduate students and new assistant professors?**

**Emir:** I graduated with my Ph.D. from USC in 2012 with a job offer from the University of Connecticut. I accepted the job offer and less than a month before relocating, I was unable to get custody of my daughter (she was 6 years old in 2012). I could not leave my daughter behind. She is my *compañerita* (my little partner) and I made the decision to decline an amazing job offer. The following semester, instead of having a comfortable salary and a two class teaching load, I was left without a fellowship and without a job. This was a tough moment in my life. I actively applied for all the local academic openings in the Los Angeles area. The regional restrictions limited the positions I could apply to. The following semester I worked as an adjunct at three different universities. For two semesters, I taught five classes each semester and continued applying for tenure track positions. This experience was demoralizing, but I knew I could not give up so I continued applying to tenure track positions in Sociology. In 2014, CSULB made me a job offer and I started working at CSULB in August of 2014. I am very grateful for this opportunity. However, it has been difficult to balance my teaching and research responsibilities. Nonetheless, I have found a great support system at CSULB with my peers. We formed a writing group and we meet on Fridays to co-write. This kind of peer support has helped all of us move our research agendas forward.

A few months after I started working as an Assistant Professor at CSULB, I was offered a tenure track job at Arizona State University (ASU) in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change (SHESC). A few months ago, I accepted the position and I will be a new Assistant Professor at ASU in SHESC as of August 17, 2015.

My colleagues at CSULB have been very supportive and I am grateful for the opportunity they gave me last year. Teaching at CSULB has been a great experience. My colleagues are doing great work with their scholarship, with our students and with the community. I will miss them and the students very much. However, I am also excited for the new opportunities that are waiting for my daughter and for me in Arizona. I am happy to share that I have won my daughter’s custody and I will be able to relocate to Arizona with my *companionerita* (my little companion).

I have been blessed with great mentors and friends in academia who have believed in me and in the importance of my research. I am a scholar, a sociologist, a teacher, a researcher, a single mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend and all of these roles are very important to me. Professional women are constantly told that we have to choose and give up certain roles. When I was interviewing attorneys for my move-away case, a female attorney told me that I did not have

a chance at winning the move-away case and that unfortunately I had to choose between my daughter and my career. I am glad I did not listen to her comment and that I found an attorney that fought for my rights. I no longer have to choose between being a mother and having a fulfilling career.

**Ann: Could you describe some of your works that are in progress?**

**Emir:** In my current study I examine an understudied population, Latino children working in a racialized and gendered informal occupation in Los Angeles—street vending. This research examines the diverse ways in which children (ages 10-18) working with their parents in public and highly visible spaces experience street vending and in turn we come to understand this informal occupation in a more complex manner. My research illuminates the immigration experience by focusing on how adults and children together negotiate processes of economic incorporation in the United States. As this study shows, children are not merely “baggage” that adult immigrants simply bring along. In the case of street vendors, they are also active contributors to family processes and household resources.

During Fall 2014 I revised a chapter from my dissertation for a journal submission. This article builds on the ethnic entrepreneurship literature that has predominantly focused on an educated and professional class of Asian immigrants engaged in ethnic entrepreneurship. That rich body of literature has shown that the advantage of the second generation is based on the individual (human capital), group (ethnic or social capital), and structural opportunities (entrepreneurial activity) of their parents. On the other hand, the Latino families in this study experienced many blocked pathways towards upward mobility. In this article I examine family entrepreneurship of street vendors as they peddle around Los Angeles selling cultural foods such as *tamales*, *pozole*, *pupusas*, *champurrado* and more. This study found that interdependent social locations rooted in unauthorized status, informal work, and unpaid family labor, create a different set of opportunities that lead to different life chances via entrepreneurship. Street vending as an economic strategy offers these families few opportunities for intra-generational mobility, yet, it sets the stage for children to develop a maturity level at an early age due to working in the family economy and the realization of their parent’s position of oppression. I call this *economic empathy*; it is a relationship that develops among the children that work with their parents and are intricately involved in the family economy.

Simultaneously, I have been working on another chapter from my dissertation for a journal submission in one of the top ranked journals in the field of sociology. This article demonstrates that the work that girls and boys do as street vendors both perpetuates and challenges gendered expectations among Latino families. On the one hand, girls are performing a type of work that has been gendered as feminine (preparation of food); on the other, they are doing this gendered work on the street, a space that has been gendered as masculine and inappropriate for *señoritas* (virginal women). While the street is more appropriate for males, in this context, the boys have reported more instances of violence from gang members and their

peers. Thus an unintended opportunity is created for street vending women, young and old, to exercise what I call *capital socio-femenino*. The social, political, economic and cultural context in which street vending takes place creates a paradigm shift where the presence of women in street vending markets of L.A. serves as a protective mechanism for male street vendors of all ages. This in turn provides social, economic and life enhancing opportunities for women.

**Ann: What projects are you looking forward to working on in the future?**

**Emir:** My next goal is to submit a book proposal in June. I would like to submit my book proposal in June in hopes that the editors will have the reviews back in time before the American Sociological Association (ASA) meeting. My dream is to see the stories of the young street vendors and the families I interviewed published in a book manuscript. I owe this book to them. Whenever I see them, they ask about the book and wonder when it will be published. I am getting more pressure from them to publish my book than from my department chair and Pierrette combined.

I have also started working on my next research project on return migration. For my next research project, I will conduct an ethnographic study with Mexicans who are 65 and older and are retiring from work in the U.S. and deciding to move back to Mexico. I also plan on interviewing their children (the second generation) and their grandchildren (third generation). This intergenerational study will help us understand how the decision to return to Mexico is made. I am interested in seeing how the second and third generation are involved and affected by this decision. Equally as important, I am interested in seeing how the family and social attachments as well as the economic resources post retirement have an impact in their return migration destination and plans. I am at the beginning stages of this study. I am currently reviewing the literature to situate my study theoretically.

**Ann: Do you have any hobbies or other interests that you would like to share with the ASA Children and Youth (CY) newsletter readers?**

**Emir:** I love to dance salsa and bachata. I enjoy running and taking long walks on the beach boardwalk near my house in Long Beach. Sometimes I take these long walks at ten or at midnight (when I find a brave soul to accompany me and when I do not have teach the next day). At the end a two-mile walk, I buy a coffee and I drink my coffee during my two-mile walk back home. I find this very gratifying.

I love to do art projects with my daughter. I am currently teaching her how to do *repujado* (metal edging). I learned this type of art form in Mexico and she has expressed interest in learning this type of art in addition to oil and water painting. In general I love teaching my daughter new things (from swimming, riding a bike, skating, painting, cooking, playing the guitar etc. etc. etc.) My daughter is very curious and constantly motivates me to try and learn

new things. I also love to travel alone and with my daughter. I like to take road trips in the U.S. when possible. We enjoy going to national parks.

I enjoy reading non-sociological books as well. I am currently reading many books on personal finances and investment opportunities. I also enjoy practicing yoga on the beach or at local parks. I do not like doing yoga in a studio. I like to be out in the open when possible given that I spend a great deal of time in my office, in the classroom, at home or in a coffee house writing, prepping classes or grading papers.

**Ann: Is there anything else about yourself and your research that you would like to share with the CY newsletter readers?**

**Emir:** I can't thank you enough for giving me the opportunity to share my story with the CY newsletter readers. This is an honor and I am very grateful for this opportunity.