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The work-wellbeing Paradox: Exploring the emotional and bodily dimensions of intersectional capitalism among Latinx immigrants in the U.S.☆

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ABSTRACT

Latinx immigrants in the United States are disproportionately affected by precarious work and unemployment, which negatively impact their physical and mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, leading to increased exploitation, work uncertainty/exclusion, and dimensions of precarity tied to bodily integrity. In this paper, we aim to situate Latinx immigrants' experiences within the broader systems that shape these challenges and embodied realities through analysis of qualitative interviews with 52 Latinx immigrant adults across four timepoints of the Immigrant Wellbeing Project, a 5-year community-based participatory research study. Our findings reveal a paradox in the lives of Latinx immigrants wherein work simultaneously provides the means for self-determination and emotional and bodily subjugation. Structural exclusion conditioned work experiences by limiting stable employment and hindering socioeconomic mobility. Despite these structural constraints, neoliberal perceptions of upward mobility shaped the meaning of work, such that hopes for a better future for themselves and their families took precedence over immigrants' physical and emotional wellbeing. Building on the theory of intersectional capitalism and sociocultural analyses of bodily dimensions of structural inequality, we contend this work-wellbeing paradox reflects the diverse sociopolitical locations of marginalized Latinx immigrants within a hierarchized U.S. economy. Further, we argue these harmful impacts on emotions and bodies should be understood as embodied products of intersectional capitalism.

1. Introduction

Latinx immigrants disproportionately experience difficult, precarious working conditions and unemployment, including low wages, lack of compensation, lack of worker protections, unpredictable work schedules, and exposure to unfair or authoritarian treatment, while living in the United States (U.S.) (Canales and Pérez, 2007; Kreshpaj et al., 2020). This precarity and unemployment have adverse impacts on Latinx immigrant physical and mental wellbeing (Disney, 2021; Gray et al., 2021). Limited research, however, has leveraged the insights of critical intersectional scholars to situate the wellbeing and work experiences of Latinx immigrants in the U.S. within the broader systems that condition their embodied realities.

To address this gap, we analyzed interview data from the Immigrant Wellbeing Project (IWP), a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project based in New Mexico (NM). We find that participants' experiences of work before and during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect how an extractive capitalist system perpetuates at individual and family levels by exploiting immigrant labor and restricting socioeconomic mobility. Additionally, we find that participants' accounts of work and wellbeing reveal a paradox wherein work provides the means for survival as well as inflicts emotional and bodily subjugation. Building on

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the theory of intersectional capitalism and sociocultural analyses of bodily dimensions of structural inequality and violence, we contend that this paradox is by design, and its impacts should be understood as embodied manifestations of intersectional capitalism.

1.1. Intersectional capitalism and Latinx immigrant labor

Critical race scholars have long theorized about the roots of socioeconomic disparities in the U.S. Racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983) describes how the emergence and structuring of capitalism are rooted in cultural logics of racial domination, such that capital accumulation and racialized exploitation were and continue to be mutually reinforcing. Theorizations of racial capitalism have since expanded to explicitly include the relationship of capital to other social structures (Gurusami, 2017; Russell and Malhotra, 2002). Most notably, Gurusami (2017) presents the idea of intersectional capitalism to draw attention to intersecting forms of domination, namely race, gender, and sexuality, and their role in structuring and perpetuating capitalism. Using the case of Latinx immigrant labor, we build on this idea by demonstrating how (non)citizenship and (dis)ability work alongside structures of race, ethnicity, and gender to co-constitute and sustain intersectional capitalism. They operate as intended and in tandem to funnel marginalized Latinx immigrants into precarious labor and restrict upward mobility.

Since the late 19th century, exclusionary citizenship policies, created by federal immigration law, have sorted racialized, albeit able-bodied, immigrants into various sectors of unskilled, cheap, and otherwise precarious labor (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014; Glenn, 1992; Gomberg-Muñoz, 2012; Ngai, 2004); and have excluded sick and disabled immigrants from the labor force altogether (Molina, 2011; Perez, 2019). Scholars have demonstrated these simultaneous dynamics of inclusion and exclusion through their analyses of historic policies, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Bracero Program (1942–1964), which lured racialized immigrants to the U.S. with the promise of better working opportunities but later subjected them to cheap, hazardous work that compromised their health and xenophobia that constructed them as perpetually foreign and unwelcome (Bhatnagar, 2022; Garcia, 1995). The U.S. immigration regime has thus been instrumental in preserving and furthering the interests of intersectional capitalism throughout time by constructing racialized, gendered, and ableist ideals of 'deservingness' and disparately subjecting immigrant individuals to an extractive labor economy.

The landscape of the U.S. labor force today captures the legacies and present of intersectional capitalism. Specifically, Latinx immigrants account for nearly one-half (47.6 %) of the immigrant labor force and are more likely than native-born workers to be employed in service and maintenance occupations, natural resources, construction, and production, transportation, and material moving occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Inclusive of these sectors, Latinx immigrants often find themselves overrepresented in precarious work due to structural barriers such as legal status, limited English proficiency, and restricted access to social safety nets and training—with undocumented Latinx immigrant workers being especially prone to experience wage theft, dangerous working conditions, and limited employment opportunities and earning potential (Ayón et al., 2023; Flores et al., 2011; Hajat et al., 2023). Because of this increased exposure to precariousness, it is no surprise that Latinx immigrants are also likely to experience high unemployment rates compared to other racial and ethnic immigrant groups (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

Similarly, though the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted the work of many across the U.S., Latinx immigrants were disproportionately impacted. Between February and April 2020, one in five Latinx workers lost their jobs, and though many began to see employment recovery by the end of June 2020, Latinx workers still faced a larger deficit compared to White, non-Latinx workers, with Latina immigrant workers overrepresented in caregiving sectors being particularly affected (Gould et al., 2020). Additionally, racialized and gendered patterns among workers were evident among those labeled 'essential' and forced to risk their lives to maintain food, health, and sanitation services for White, privileged elites (D. J. Lee and Wang, 2024). As a result, many Latinx immigrants faced new precarity tied to bodily integrity (Loustaunau et al., 2021). Limited ability to social distance in low-wage, essential jobs heightened the risk of COVID-19 infection and death (McNamara et al., 2021). These risks were intensified for some by a lack of employee benefits and paid time off, along with lingering confusion and fear around punitive legislation, such as the 2017 Public Charge Rule, and exclusion from emergency federal aid for many undocumented and mixed-status families (Garcini et al., 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Makhlouf and Sandhu, 2020).

Latinx immigrant workers' experiences with precarity and unemployment reflect an extractive U.S. state and economy: one that values Latinx immigrant labor yet undervalues Latinx immigrant lives. As a result, many marginalized Latinx immigrants find themselves restricted to survival jobs that compromise and diminish their overall health. As a key organizing system in U.S. society, intersectional capitalism vis-à-vis (non)citizenship and (dis)ability should be identified and examined in the relationship between work and Latinx immigrant wellbeing.

1.2. The emotional and bodily dimensions of intersectional capitalism

Post-colonial and feminist scholars have highlighted the importance of centering the body and emotions as knowledge and of analyzing social inequality through the lens of the self, the mind, and corporeality to unveil ethical and political insights that may otherwise be hidden by traditional methodological approaches (Fanon, 1986; Smith, 1992). Paul Farmer's (1996, 1999) work in Haiti built on these conceptualizations to link bodily suffering to social structures. Specifically, he considers social forces as embodied in individual experiences and argues that individual and community suffering must be understood as forms of structural violence shaped by systemic inequities in access to healthcare and social protections. We contend that this lens of the body and embodiment offers new avenues for understanding the relationship between work and wellbeing, supplementing extant research on this topic.

Social determinants of health researchers posit health outcomes of Latinx immigrants as products of structural inequality (Ayón, 2020; Bhatnagar, 2022). For example, inequitable and discriminatory federal/state/local policies related to healthcare coverage, food and housing assistance, education access (financial aid), language (bilingual programs), legal status, and detention result in disparate stressors, uncertainty, and mental health outcomes among Latinx immigrants (Consoli et al., 2012; Crookes et al., 2022; Letiecq et al., 2014). This literature has also illuminated how unfavorable work conditions are important determinants for the mental and physical wellbeing of Latinx immigrants in the U.S. Chronic financial pressure and low socioeconomic status resulting from job precarity as well as workplace discrimination and abuse, increase the risk of poor physical and mental health among Latinx immigrants (Ahonen et al., 2007; Hege et al., 2015; Organista et al., 2019). These injustices also worsen psychological distress not just for immigrant workers, but for their families, collectively limiting economic mobility and opportunities (Okechukwu et al., 2014).

Though this literature has been instrumental in informing interventions that address disparate health outcomes, there is a need to expand the understanding of the relationship between work and wellbeing. Specifically, it is critical to articulate the relationship between structural work inequality and health as one that operates under the larger extractive system of intersectional capitalism (Homan et al., 2021). Scholars have only begun to explicitly draw connections between the wellbeing of racialized communities and intersectional capitalism (DeAngelis, 2024; Taiwo et al., 2021), including how these manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic (Laster Pirtle and Wright, 2021). Less research has drawn these connections by centering the accounts of work and describing the bodily and emotional experiences of marginalized Latinx immigrants, as Holmes (2013) demonstrates through his

ethnographic work with Triqui migrant laborers, where he bridges the physical suffering of an indigenous people of Mexico with structural and symbolic violence. Thus, we seek to address this gap by illuminating how inequitable structures under intersectional capitalism manifest and shape embodied realities before, during, and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

In exploring the emotional and bodily impacts of intersectional capitalism, we aim to both illuminate the knowledge of the body and problematize the root causes of human suffering. We move beyond individualistic understandings of health and consider how extractive capitalist systems enact suffering not only felt at the individual level but also across families and communities. In this paper, we draw on data from the Immigrant Wellbeing Project (IWP) to explore Latinx immigrants' perceptions and experiences of work and wellbeing, asking: How do Latinx immigrants understand the relationship between work and their wellbeing? How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact their experiences? Our analysis shows Latinx immigrants' understandings of work and wellbeing are shaped by neoliberal ideals and constrained by structural barriers—dynamics that intensified and persisted during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore how these tensions reveal immigrants as both essential and expendable, and how workers' accounts reflect the lived realities and embodiments of intersectional capitalism for themselves and their families.

2. Data and methods

2.1. The Immigrant Wellbeing project

The Immigrant Well-being Project (IWP) is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) study initiated in 2016 as one of two core research projects within the University of New Mexico's (UNM) Transdisciplinary Research, Equity and Engagement (TREE) Center for Advancing Behavioral Health (U54MD004811) to better understand and promote Latinx immigrant mental health at multiple levels. The IWP leverages a sustainable and replicable partnership model between university faculty, students, and staff and representatives from four immigrant-focused community-based organizations (CBOs)—Centro Sávila, Encuentro, New Mexico Dream Team, and New Mexico Immigrant Law Center. The IWP brings together the essential work of these university resources and organizations to collaboratively address the goals of increasing Latinx immigrant belonging, mental health, and access to resources through collective community change efforts and the adaptation of a community-based, advocacy, learning, and social support intervention originally developed with refugees (Refugee Wellbeing Project; RWP). The intervention is administered by university students enrolled in a two-semester course, and has two elements: 1) Learning Circles, which involve cultural exchange and one-on-one learning opportunities, and 2) Advocacy, which involves collaborative efforts to mobilize community resources related to health, housing, employment, education, and legal issues (see Goodkind, 2005, 2006; Goodkind et al., 2020 for further description of the RWP intervention and outcomes). The 5-year IWP study employed a mixed-methods longitudinal design to investigate the feasibility and acceptability of the adapted intervention. It also tested the quality of the CBPR partnership and impact of the intervention on Latinx immigrant mental health and on organizational and government changes in policies and practices impacting immigrant mental health. IWP was approved by the UNM Institutional Review Board and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.2. CBPR processes

As a state with a large Spanish-speaking immigrant population, several immigrant-focused CBOs had a long history of providing legal, educational, and health support within the community. The senior corresponding author approached the four CBO partners in this study in 2016 to discuss collaboratively adapting the RWP model for Spanish-speaking immigrants. Consistent with CBPR principles (Wallerstein et al., 2018), staff from each CBO partner were members of the research team, which met twice monthly and made decisions on all aspects of the study, including finalizing survey questions and interview guides, refining data collection methods, interpreting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data, and dissemination. In these research team meetings, members spoke in whatever language they were comfortable (i.e., Spanish and/or English), and interpretation was provided by other team members when necessary, because we recognize the importance of language and the power it dictates. In addition to CBO staff research team members, 4 CBO directors (one from each partner organization) and 6–8 CBO participants/clients participated in the community advisory council (CAC) that provided broader input and guidance at 3–4 meetings per year. Finally, we presented at academic and practitioner conferences as a team that included faculty, staff, students, and community partners to provide more meaningful presentations for audiences and invaluable team experiences that strengthened our relationships through intensive time together. CBO staff were paid through subawards. CAC members who were not CBO staff received an honorarium of $100 per meeting.

2.3. Data and participants

To track the impacts of the multilevel intervention, we used a mixed-method approach that consisted of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews at 4 timepoints over 12 months with 53 Latinx immigrant adults who participated in the IWP intervention. Intervention participants were recruited and participated in the intervention, surveys, and interviews in a series of 3 cohorts (2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021) with help from CBO partners to embed the project within existing CBOs and strengthen the IWP partnership. Staff from each CBO identified potential participants, and pairs of bilingual UNM and CBO staff met with interested people to explain the study, obtain informed consent, and conduct interviews. Potential participants included any immigrant adult (18+) born in a Latin American country (length of time living in the U.S. was unrestricted). For the qualitative strand of the study—which provided the data for this paper—semi-structured pre-interviews were completed with all participants across the three cohorts. For subsequent timepoints (mid, post, follow-up), a purposefully selected subset of 10 participants in each cohort was invited to complete qualitative interviews. Overall, there were 52 qualitative participants, of whom 29 participated in three or more interviews (see Table 1). Total number of qualitative interviews conducted across all timepoints was 136. Participants were compensated for their time ($40, $40, $50, and $50 for time points 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively).

Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, with two participants preferring English. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed by a professional transcription service. The study spanned pre-COVID through the height of the COVID pandemic. Qualitative interviews included questions about participants' physical and mental wellbeing, their migratory histories, experiences with discrimination, level of comfort in the study city, access to healthcare and other resources, and the impact of the intervention on their lives. At the start of the pandemic, the research partnership rapidly adapted to an all-remote format using Zoom and over-the-phone communication to conduct all recruitment, data collection, and intervention activities. The survey and interview protocols were adapted to include COVID-related questions assessing newcomers' pandemic-related challenges and strengths and the effects of IWP in addressing newcomers' difficulties and supporting their wellbeing during this time.

2.4. Analysis

All interview transcripts were checked for accuracy, formatted, anonymized, and imported into NVivo 12 (Lumivero, 2017). All

Table 1
Participant demographics (N = 52).

	Mean (Range)	N (%)
Age	39 (18–60)	
Gender		
Man		8 (15.4)
Woman		44 (84.6)
Marital Status		
Single		14 (26.9)
Married		27 (51.9)
Cohabitating		4 (7.7)
Divorced		6 (11.5)
No response		1 (1.9)
Number of Children		
none		3 (5.8)
one		9 (17.3)
two		12 (23.1)
three		13 (25.0)
four		10 (19.2)
five		3 (5.8)
six		1 (1.9)
seven		1 (1.9)
Years Living in the U.S.	3.62 (0.5–44)	
Country of Origin		
Mexico		45 (86.5)
Venezuela		2 (3.8)
El Salvador		1 (1.9)
Guatemala		1 (1.9)
Peru		1 (1.9)
Honduras		1 (1.9)
No response		1 (1.9)
Education		
Less than high school		13 (25.0)
High school grad/GED		20 (38.5)
Associate's degree (2-year)		3 (5.8)
Trade school graduate		2 (3.8)
Bachelor's degree (4-year)		4 (7.7)
Some college (no degree)		4 (7.7)
Graduate or professional degree		3 (5.8)
No response		3 (5.8)
Employment Status (past 2 months)		
Yes		29 (55.8)
No		21 (40.4)
No response		2 (3.8)
Employment Type		
Cleaning/Housekeeping/Domestic Work		9 (17.3)
Community worker		1 (1.9)
Caregiving (childcare and eldercare)		3 (5.8)
Restaurant (line cook, dishwasher, kitchen manager)		7 (13.5)
Construction and Extraction Occupations		2 (3.8)
Automotive Service Technician		1 (1.9)
Office work		1 (1.9)
Grounds maintenance worker		1 (1.9)
No response		4 (7.7)

participant names are pseudonyms, which were selected by a research team member. The university research team members coded by question domain. For example, all questions related to COVID-19 were identified and coded independently by two coders using a bilingual code book that was collaboratively created by the university members of the research team throughout the duration of all three cohorts. Though codes were largely descriptive (e.g. "Trabajo, Work"), they also included emotion-based codes (e.g., "Triste, Sad") and values coding (e.g., "Dependencia, Dependence").

The analysis for this paper was informed by a constructivist grounded theory method, which uses a combined inductive and deductive approach and recognizes that participants and researchers 'co-construct' data (Charmaz, 2012). Because data were collected as part of an intervention study, the number of interviews conducted was not determined by data saturation. We determined the adequacy of our data by ascertaining *information power* (Malterud et al., 2021) and reflecting on its richness and ability to meet the requirements of the IWP study. However, during analyses, the team determined that data saturation had occurred within the key study themes.

Our team engaged in an iterative data analysis process, which began with the examination of specific codes and co-occurrence of codes—in this case, related to work—to develop thematic categories. These were then reduced and consolidated through further analyses, including memo writing, discussions with qualitative team colleagues, and feedback sessions with CBO team members and former participants. Categories were refined at each stage, until we were satisfied that no new thematic categories related to our inquiry remained in the dataset. Investigator triangulation (Carter et al., 2014) took place as other qualitative team members working on separate, but overlapping research questions, analyzed the same dataset, creating queries and writing memos that offered additional insights that complicated or expanded thematic categories as they were developed.

Five of the seven authors are Latinx immigrants or children of Latinx immigrants, and six of the seven are fluent in Spanish and English. This enabled us to effectively fulfill IWP's goal of prioritizing data analysis in participants' native language to retain the meanings of their experiences as well as involving community research team members in coding, analysis, and interpretation of data (Hess et al., 2022).

3. Findings

Our analysis developed three themes: 1) work (im)mobility and (in) security as products of intersectional capitalism, 2) work and its complex relationships with wellbeing, and 3) work, wellbeing, and the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. We leverage these themes to demonstrate the diverse locations of Latinx immigrants within a hierarchized U.S. economy that situates their labor as necessary and their bodies as expendable. Further, we argue that the impacts of work on immigrants' emotional and bodily health must be understood as embodied manifestations of intersectional capitalism. Throughout these sections, we draw on the accounts of one participant, Marco, to highlight the IWP longitudinal design and offer one perspective on the shifting and compounding nature of labor precarity and immigrant wellbeing across time and his social roles as a worker, husband, and father.

3.1. Work (Im)Mobility and (In)Security as products of intersectional capitalism

Structural barriers related to language, professionalization support, and legal status condition the ability of immigrants to work, limiting their access to safe working conditions, fair salaries, and feasible career development opportunities. Driven by logics of (non)citizenship, these barriers constrain life chances as evidenced by the experiences of Marisela's 51-year-old husband:

> My husband is a lawyer in our country, but here he is not, and he sees it as even sadder because he tells me, well, with the English barrier, he's … much further behind … He's 51 years old, so we have to think about finding other jobs, right? Or about him being able to study, I tell him, but unfortunately, work doesn't give him the chance to study.

To make ends meet, Marisela's husband was forced to become a driver—a position that prevented him from dedicating time to studying English. As a result, he now finds himself sad, struggling to reconcile with his new reality. For new arrivals with previous professional careers, navigating the U.S. labor market can be a challenge, especially in instances when certifications are not transferable and limited job and professionalization opportunities hinder their advancement in a new country. Further, this restricted mobility within the labor market induces emotional turmoil and negative self-perceptions that are detrimental to mental wellbeing, as Marisela's account demonstrates.

Immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for longer face similar challenges finding dignified work. When asked about her goals for the

future, Agueda, a 32-year-old secretary, stated, "… *If I had a [Social Security] Number, I could work in what I like.*" Lack of documentation constricts the possibilities available to immigrants and often relegates immigrants to working undesirable or unfavorable jobs for the sake of achieving a semblance of economic security. In his pre-interview, Marco recounted losing his previous job, in which he had been working for over 20 years, due to his undocumented status. Though saddened, he described how he quickly found a new job in landscaping and felt grateful for it. At the same time, he felt nervous over having to start all over at 47 years old and worried about being able to pay his expenses since he took a $1000 per month pay cut at the new job. Marco's work experiences demonstrate how structural barriers condition the work experiences of marginalized immigrants and their wellbeing as a result. Though able to find a job quickly, it came at the expense of Marco's paycheck.

Legal status also shapes marginalized immigrants' fear and concerns around violent work circumstances. Naceily shared one of her goals for the future was to get her papers so she could work. However, when asked where she would like to work, she clarified she did not care where she worked, rather that she wanted her papers so she would not have to live in fear of being deported. She recalled when she first arrived in the U.S., she saw local coverage of ICE conducting work raids in which some of her friends were detained. Consequently, she decided to forgo working altogether to avoid the possibility of being detained. She remembered, "… *they would show up at workplaces and take people … And from then on, I didn't want to work anymore. I said: No. Why should I work, just for them to come and take me?"* On one hand, leaving an abusive workplace environment can be viewed as an act of resistance as it provides temporary safety. In Naceily's case, unemployment is a better alternative to experiencing violence in the workplace—an alternative that is not a viable option for all, but that was temporarily possible thanks to her husband's support. On the other hand, however, the economic and emotional uncertainty that accompanies unemployment can place immigrants in vulnerable positions that deteriorate their wellbeing in the long-term. These accounts reveal how exclusionary systems require that immigrants negotiate between notions of dignified labor and socioeconomic mobility.

Even in instances when immigrants obtain 'high-skilled' or white-collar employment by acquiring temporary legal documentation, the nature of (non)citizenship means that job security is altogether precarious. For example, Analisa was asked about what her adult children, who are recipients of DACA, would need to achieve their goals. She explained:

> [T]hey have their documents … they've studied multiple careers, they have good jobs, but they're still missing that sense of not being in limbo. Because that also causes them stress—constantly thinking that at any moment, their work permit could expire. And that's what holds them back the most right now. Well, it doesn't stop them because they keep working, right? But losing their work permit, for example, would put their goals on hold.

As these examples demonstrate, the (im)mobility and (in)security participants experience is driven by intersectional capitalism. The structural barriers they are faced with continue to place marginalized immigrants into volatile and precarious positions that hinder their chances at achieving long-term economic stability and oftentimes further restrict their mobility within the labor market. These conditions also erode mental wellbeing as individuals internalize feelings of unworthiness, stagnation, and fear and are forced to face the limitations of their mobility.

3.2. Work and its complex relationships with individual and collective wellbeing

The relationship between work and the wellbeing of marginalized immigrants and their families is complex. While work is essential for survival, it is also a site where racialized, gendered, and ableist forms of exploitation under intersectional capitalism are concentrated. Many characterized 'having work' as a stress management strategy, because it provided a sense of economic stability and peace of mind. However, for some, this peace of mind came at the expense of physical and emotional wellbeing. Following a car accident, 50-year-old Isabel recalled spending so much time at home during recovery that it almost drove her 'crazy.' Thus, she was compelled to return to her previous place of employment, a restaurant. She shared:

> And since there was no space in the kitchen, which is my job as a cook, they put me as a dishwasher. And I had to accept the job so I wouldn't spend so much time at home, because I was already going crazy. So right now, I'm a dishwasher. But as I mentioned, I don't think I'll be in that job for long because it's not good for what I have.

As an undocumented worker, her original position was not secure while she took time to recover. So, upon her return, she reluctantly accepted a demotion from cook to dishwasher to stay busy. This shift illustrates how immigrants with precarious immigration status are particularly vulnerable to labor insecurity, and how even temporary disability can lead to downward mobility. Though the dishwasher position provided her with a short-lived reprieve, she conceded that she would not be able to maintain the job for much longer as it impeded her physical recovery. In addition to creating precarious conditions around work, intersectional capitalism imposes an impossible standard of hyper-productivity that able-bodied immigrant workers must meet to survive and be perceived as 'deserving'. As a result, for those temporarily unable to work due to illness or other disabilities, such as Isabel, the physical inability to work at the capacity to which they are accustomed can be especially costly to their emotional wellbeing. Violeta recounted precarious working conditions, including long hours with little to no breaks, at her previous place of employment (dry-cleaning business). Though Violeta said her boss would often acknowledge the quality of her work, she would tell Violeta that quality was not the most beneficial for the business. Instead, "*cantidad*", or quantity, was expected. For these reasons, Violeta decided to quit, explaining that she had dignity and thus felt she did not need to endure such exploitative working conditions. Unfortunately, this decision left her unemployed. Though she mentions having dignity, she later shared that being unemployed was difficult, "*Yes, well, I have dignity, but right now I'm struggling a bit*"—echoing others' sentiments about the trade-offs immigrant workers navigate between emotional wellbeing, bodily safety, and financial survival.

For parents, 'having work' provides the means for a better future, not only for themselves but also for their children. Several parents described working multiple jobs and tiresome work circumstances as sacrifices they were making for the betterment of future generations. They hoped that by working multiple jobs, they could provide for their family so their children could aspire to and achieve greater socioeconomic security. As Cynthia shared, "*My wish is for them to be able to become whatever they want to be, even if I have to work two or three jobs.*" While previously discussed in the context of structural insecurity, Marco's account also sheds light on the collective toll of overwork and sacrifice. During his midpoint interview, he shared that he and his wife worked multiple jobs for the sake of their children's futures: "*Once they graduate or have a good job, then we can finally slow down a bit with work.*" Parents are willing to overwork themselves and their bodies for the sake of their children's wellbeing—a sacrifice that also comes at the price of life beyond work by diminishing quality time that parents spend with their families.

In other instances, work is the means through which the entire family unit can improve its socioeconomic standing. Having their children reach an age where they could contribute towards paying the bills led to an increased sense of support and relief among some parents. For example, for Marisela, having her children work and contribute towards the betterment of the family meant the dream of owning a house was something that could be realized. At the same time, however, parents

worried about how work would interfere with their children's chances of achieving socioeconomic mobility. More specifically, many worried that the jobs their children had to support themselves and their family while pursuing higher education were consuming so much time that they inhibited studying. Parents hoped their children would be able to find better work that allowed them to focus on school, but facing persistent structural barriers meant these parents had no choice but to rely on their children for support. Instances such as these force entire families to prioritize work as the means through which they can not only survive but also achieve mobility. Thus, neoliberal ideals about mobility and productivity are transmitted across generations, such that the effects of intersectional capitalism are experienced collectively. These ideals are defined by a willingness to be servile and hard-working despite the bodily and emotional subjugation this might entail; ideals which have been normalized and expected as part of the migration process itself.

3.3. Work, wellbeing, and the case of the COVID-19 pandemic

The various work-related challenges immigrants faced at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic reflect the workings of intersectional capitalism. For example, many immigrant women were employed in caregiving positions, such as childcare and caring for the elderly, before the pandemic—a symptom of intersectional capitalism (Glenn, 1992). As a result, they were at higher risk of COVID exposure and severe job loss related to mitigating exposure risk. Isla recalled her previous employment caring for the elderly and described the dangers of continuing to care for them as the reason for her unemployment. She said, "*It is very dangerous both for the elderly and for me as their caregiver because it is dangerous for both of us*." However, several months later, Isla remained unemployed, describing the difficulty of overcoming the initial job loss. Specifically, she noted that her inability to work was exacerbated by the state of the economy and a lack of paid caregiving opportunities throughout the pandemic: "*It's just that right now there are very few opportunities, very few*," highlighting the racialized and gendered impacts of a public health crisis.

Unemployment throughout the pandemic created feelings of insecurity and distress due to exacerbated economic pressures plus barriers to advancement. In discussing the responsibilities of her newly purchased home, America worried about her new unemployed status interfering with her house payments. She said, "… *well, yes, you do worry that if there's no work, how are we going to manage?*" Moreover, many navigating unemployment were forced to put their aspirations on hold through business ventures and volunteer work. Parents shared concerns over the aspirations and wellbeing of their children. Marco worried about his oldest son, who, despite being undocumented, had recently graduated from an undergraduate program and was having difficulty finding a job, saying, "*Sometimes he gets a little depressed. He gets sad because he can't find a job, and he already wants to work."* Because most federal emergency assistance did not include support for undocumented immigrants, many undocumented and mixed-status families found themselves in especially precarious circumstances. The ability to acquire and maintain basic needs such as housing and food was a distressing challenge for many marginalized immigrants.

Meanwhile, immigrants who remained employed during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic navigated a precarious cycle of business openings and closures. The extent to which they worked was often subject to shifting public health protocols. As a result, many employed participants were forced to navigate precarious conditions such as decreased work hours and income, which led to distress around making ends meet. When asked about challenging aspects of his life at the post-interview, Marco said:

> Well, there is work— I mean, there is work, but a little less. My wife also had her hours reduced a bit. So it has been a little tough financially to cover all the expenses we have.

Yet, in the same interview, Marco shares that despite this stressor, the decreased hours and the stay-at-home orders at the beginning of the pandemic were in some ways a welcome change. They had enabled him to spend more time with his family—something that was previously impossible due to the necessity of work.

Some participants found themselves temporarily with more work than before. For example, 37-year-old Julian found himself working more hours at the height of the pandemic as an inventory specialist for a bodega. He said, "… *before I worked twice as much, today I work three times as much*." However, this led to the placing of certain aspirations on hold. Though he described being grateful for the opportunity to work, Julian later discussed how his schedule interfered with learning English. He shared,

> … At the job where I am, we work 12-hour shifts. From 7:00 in the morning to 7:00 at night. And well, it's a bit difficult to study at a pace that requires more intense dedication. Because by the time you get home after 7:00, you're already exhausted.

While Julian was able to work more hours and make more money, he was immobilized by the little time he could dedicate to learn English, a skill that would provide him with better prospects in the job market.

In addition to shifting conditions, precarious employment during the pandemic was also characterized by a sacrifice of personal safety in the form of heightened risk of COVID-19 exposure for some participants. Working remotely was rarely an accessible option for marginalized immigrants. For example, Alberto felt he was required by his employer to return to work in person far too soon. When asked about his preference on this matter, he said, "*Well, I would have preferred not to because I would need to feel sure that there are no more infections in order to feel that we can all be together safely.*" However, he later revealed his concerns were not considered before this decision was made. He recalled, "*They just told us that we were all going to be together, and … that was it.*"

The risk of contracting COVID-19 was far too high for many marginalized immigrants and especially for those with pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes and asthma. The pandemic heightened bodily dimensions of precarity for marginalized immigrants who have been and continue to be relegated to poor working conditions in high-exposure sectors. As a result, many participants who were still employed were faced with impossible decisions over whether to risk their and their family's bodily safety or their homes and livelihoods.

Discussion

We build on theories of intersectional capitalism and body/embodiment to examine the relationships between work and individual and collective wellbeing among Latinx immigrants. We find that work simultaneously provides the means for self-determination and survival, and emotional and bodily subjugation. Even in instances of precarity, the ability and access to work can ease feelings of stress, offer a sense of economic stability, and enable visions of a better future. It is no surprise, then, that the inability to work and unemployment create feelings of insecurity and distress due to exacerbated economic pressures and barriers to advancement. However, given that work was often precarious and exploitative, Latinx immigrants reported worsening mental and physical health and disability as well as exposure to or fear of work-place abuses. We contend that the accounts of work and its relationship to bodies and emotions reflect the diverse sociopolitical locations of Latinx immigrants within a hierarchized U.S. economy that simultaneously includes and excludes their labor and treats their bodies as expendable vis a vis (non)citizenship and (dis)ability. Further, we argue these paradoxical impacts of work on individual and collective wellbeing should be understood as embodied products of intersectional capitalism.

The emotional and physical impacts of work experiences underscore how intersectional capitalism is embodied at the levels of the individual and family. Scholars have illuminated the bodily consequences of precarious labor on immigrant workers (Moyce and Schenker, 2017) particularly the negative health outcomes that result from physically

demanding work, linking them to extractive systems that hypervalue the productivity of racialized immigrant bodies (Holmes, 2013). Our research expands on these findings by showcasing how immigrants' perceptions and experiences of work reveal not only physical evidence but also emotional evidence of these extractive and disabling systems. Latinx immigrants shared accounts of bodily exhaustion and injury as well as feelings of restlessness and distress when unable to work due to injury or structural barriers tied to legal status and limited training opportunities. Both forms of evidence underscore the embodied toll of hyperproductivity imposed on marginalized immigrant laborers within U.S. capitalist structures. Moreover, it highlights the central role of ableism in valuing productive bodies and dismissing those who, because of physical impediments, constrained choices, or self-determination, do not embody the productive immigrant stereotype—leading to negative consequences that compromise their wellbeing.

These accounts also demonstrate how intersectional capitalism impacts not only individual wellbeing but has spillovers into family life. Parents navigated complicated feelings of fulfillment and exploitation, sharing how hopes for upward mobility and a better future for their families motivated them to bear precarious working conditions. Others relied on their children as additional sources of support to achieve economic and housing stability. Their hope may be viewed as resistance—dignified accounts of resiliency whilst living under a violent, oppressive system. However, while honoring these accounts, the naturalization of neoliberal perceptions of work can also enable exploitative conditions that further constrain and funnel communities into precarity and implicate individual and collective wellbeing. In line with other scholars, we argue that this naturalization of neoliberal ideals is a byproduct of Eurocentric colonialism, which historically stratified labor through racial and gender discrimination within and beyond U.S. borders and continues today through intersectional capitalism and globalization, shaping contemporary work and migratory aspirations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Quijano, 2000).

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened and exacerbated experiences with and bodily dimensions of precarity and exploitation for marginalized Latinx immigrants. These working conditions forced many immigrant workers to sacrifice their safety, emotional wellbeing, relationships, and prosperity on behalf of privileged employers and consumers. Though these hardships were experienced across the U.S., intersectional capitalism was evidenced in the exacerbated stratification of Latinx immigrant workers and the fluctuating positions of their labor and bodies as (un)necessary. For instance, immigrant women's overrepresented caregiving labor, which was deemed necessary before COVID-19, was disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 job losses (Bruhn, 2023; S. Lee et al., 2022). At the same time, workers previously viewed as nonessential, such as migrant farm workers, were characterized as essential to maintain basic services, exposing them to higher in already precarious job sectors (Gwynn, 2021; Liebman et al., 2021). Our findings from the height of the pandemic underscore the persisting labor apartheid experienced by marginalized Latinx immigrants under intersectional capitalism—one that offers no exit from a stratified labor system and sustains barriers to alternatives/opportunities and long-term access to social safety nets (Reina and Lee, 2023).

As academic scholarship enters a 'post'-COVID-19 pandemic period, we recommend future research continue to investigate the structural inequalities exposed by COVID-19. After our data collection period ended, the Healthy Workplaces Act of 2021 went into effect in NM which required private employers to provide paid sick leave, offering many Latinx immigrants in the state unprecedented support (Labor Relations Division, 2023). Further research should assess the short- and long-term health impacts of local and state-level legislation that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, given the rise of xenophobic rhetoric and violent immigration policies (Menjívar et al., 2018), we urge future research to center the experiences of diverse Latinx immigrant communities and foster coalitions across marginalized communities to underscore and problematize the root causes of health inequality—one of which is the extractive system of intersectional capitalism.

This study highlights a work-wellbeing paradox engendered by intersectional capitalism, exacerbated during a time of crisis, and embodied in the physical and emotional wellbeing of immigrant individuals and families. These findings are consistent with other research investigating the radiating impacts of discrimination and oppression on the mental health of the children of immigrants and immigrant families (Rodriguez et al., 2023). Our goal was to illuminate the structural foundations of a paradox and its intentionality, which are often rendered invisible, particularly to immigrants themselves who are experiencing these inhumane conditions and to those who oppose immigration for what they perceive to be economic reasons. Although we argue that participants' experiences are shared by other newcomers and marginalized workers in the U.S. and that our findings are broadly generalizable, it is important to note that our study involved interview data from a specific immigrant group situated within a particular geographical location and points in time. In addition, although we believe that analyzing and presenting the data in the language of participants (predominantly Spanish) is a key strength that enables us to better understand their experiences, we present our analyses in English, which involves translation of language and meaning. Most authors have newcomer experiences themselves or within their families, but with varying degrees of privilege that create further distance from participants' lived experiences. However, we hope that our participatory processes not only contribute to the rigor of the research and validity of our findings but also ensure that the impacts of our study are not confined to academic audiences.

4.1. Conclusion

Examining adverse health outcomes from disproportionate experiences with precarious work and unemployment as the embodied effects of an extractive capitalist system counters conceptualizations of disparate suffering as disembodied economic struggles. And though we center the experiences of a sample of Latinx immigrants in this paper, we all belong to and participate in intersectional capitalism. Moving forward, we hope that scholarship leverage the body and embodiment in analyses of work and wellbeing because there is much that can be learned about structural inequality, work, positionality, and wellbeing from diverse experiences of work and its impacts on bodies and emotions, including our own. In doing so, we move beyond individual and essentializing conceptualizations of health toward understandings of wellbeing that problematize and address the root causes of adverse health.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Bianca Ruiz-Negrón: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Alejandra Lemus:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Susana Echeverri Herrera:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Alejandro Tovar:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Aurora Arreola:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Julia M. Hess:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jessica R. Goodkind:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Ethics approval statement

Our study was approved by the University of New Mexico Institutional Review Board (UNM IRB Reference # 22217, Original Approval Date: January 17, 2018). All procedures were performed in compliance

with relevant laws and UNM IRB guidelines. The privacy rights of human participants were observed and protected and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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