

Between Two Worlds: The Role of Bilingual Call Centers in Navigating Post-Deportation Identity among Mexican Returnees

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Abstract. This paper explores the intricacies of identity negotiation and reconfiguration among 30 deported Mexicans who were expelled under Title 42 during and after the pandemic, resettling in Tijuana and Juarez. While considerable research has documented the socio-economic adversities faced by returnees, there is a knowledge gap when it comes to the emotional and psychological ramifications of their post-deportation lives. Drawing on in-depth interviews, this research examines the multifaceted narratives of participants who grapple with a bifurcated existence — one foot in their past American lives and the other in their current Mexican context. Intriguingly, bilingual call centers emerge as pivotal in this narrative. These centers act not solely as sources of livelihood but also as socio-cultural sanctuaries, providing a space that mitigates the emotional void and cultural dissonance induced by deportation.

Keywords: *transnational identities, post-deportation, emotional mediators, bilingual call centers, deportation*

Introduction

Navigating the challenges and opportunities of a post-deportation life requires understanding within the broader backdrop of identity negotiation. The literature surrounding the migration experience has long touched upon the dynamics associated with border crossings, the complexities of settling in host nations, and the subsequent impacts on identity formation.¹² But there is less attention given to the return, especially the forced return, of migrants to their

¹ Linda Bosniak, "Multiple nationality and the postnational transformation of citizenship." In *Rights and Duties of Dual Nationals*, pp. 27-48. Brill Nijhoff, 2003.

² Cecilia Menjívar, "Immigrant criminalization in law and the media: Effects on Latino immigrant workers' identities in Arizona." *American Behavioral Scientist* 60, no. 5-6 (2016): 597-616.

countries of origin. In a world increasingly characterized by transnationalism, where individuals maintain affiliations with multiple nations, the return to the homeland often entails a profound reconfiguration of identity.³⁴

The process of identity renegotiation post-deportation requires a reconceptualization of oneself within an environment that has often changed significantly since one's departure. Furthermore, the individual's perception of 'home' may have shifted, influenced by their experiences abroad. Consequently, upon return, the individual may feel like a stranger in their own land, contending with feelings of alienation and estrangement.⁵ In this regard, the stories of the Mexican returnees expelled under Title 42 form an essential chapter in the broader narrative of global migration.

The pandemic's onset and the subsequent implementation of Title 42 have resulted in the expulsion of individuals who, in many instances, had built significant portions of their lives in the U.S. These are not mere numbers but individuals with families, jobs, communities, and aspirations, all of which have been upended by the rapid and often unexpected process of deportation.⁶ The abruptness of this experience can be emotionally taxing, and the subsequent identity crisis they encounter is heightened by the need to reintegrate into a country which may seem foreign in many respects.

Bilingual call centers sit at the intersection of the deportees' dual identities. On the one hand, these centers harness the returnees' bilingualism — a skill honed during their time in the U.S. — to serve an American clientele. This offers a semblance of familiarity and connection to their past lives.⁷ On the other hand, these centers are embedded within the Mexican socio-economic structure, thereby anchoring the returnees in their present realities.⁸ Such dynamics create a unique space where returnees can, albeit gradually, negotiate and reconcile their bifurcated identities. Although said process is not without its challenges, especially when the

³ Steven Vertovec, "Transnationalism and identity." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 573-582.

⁴ Bernadette Jaworsky et al., "New perspectives on immigrant contexts of reception: The cultural armature of cities." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 2, no. 1 (2012): 78.

⁵ Bridget Anderson, Matthew J. Gibney, and Emanuela Paoletti. "Citizenship, deportation and the boundaries of belonging." *Citizenship studies* 15, no. 5 (2011): 547-563.

⁶ Sarah Sherman-Stokes, "Public health and the power to exclude: Immigrant expulsions at the border." *Geo. Immigr. LJ* 36 (2021): 261.

⁷ Amado Alarcón and Josiah Heyman, "Bilingual call centers at the US-Mexico border: Location and linguistic markers of exploitability." *Language in Society* 42, no. 1 (2013): 1-21.

⁸ Rafael Alarcón and Blanca Cordero. "Deportación y trabajadores transnacionales en la industria de los call centers en México." *Tla-melaua: revista de ciencias sociales* 13, no. 1 (2019): 120-142.

frequent interaction with U.S. clients can serve as a painful reminder of the lives they left behind, and the sometimes hostile interactions can further erode their self-worth. This constant oscillation between familiarity and estrangement within the confines of call centers complicates the identity negotiation process, making it essential to understand the nuanced role these centers play in shaping returnees' experiences.

The broader discourse on migration rarely engages deeply with the return migration phenomenon, especially the post-deportation experience. This oversight is particularly glaring given the emotional, psychological, and socio-economic complexities associated with forced return.⁹ By shedding light on the lived experiences of returnees and emphasizing the role of bilingual call centers, this study seeks to address this gap, thereby enriching our understanding of contemporary migration dynamics.

In light of the complexities of the post-deportation experience, a focus on bilingual call centers provides a unique vantage point. These institutions represent a microcosm of broader socio-cultural dynamics that these returnees confront. Historically, call centers in Mexico were instituted to tap into the country's bilingual resource pool, thereby serving the dual function of economic development and cultural connection to the North.¹⁰ In the wake of the large-scale deportations under Title 42, their role has been amplified, becoming crucial nodes for reintegration.

Understanding the dynamics of identity formation and negotiation requires a foray into the theories of identity itself. Identity is not a fixed, immutable construct. Instead, it is fluid, shaped and reshaped by our experiences, interactions, and external environments. For the returnees, the process of deportation represents a profound rupture in their life narratives, forcing them to confront questions of belonging, acceptance, and self-worth.^{11,12} The linguistic and cultural familiarity that the call centers provide can be seen as a balm, momentarily easing the pain of this rupture. Yet, they are also sites of memory, where interactions with U.S. clientele evoke past lives, sometimes with a tinge of nostalgia and at other times with pangs

⁹ Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi. "Deportation stigma and re-migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 41, no. 4 (2015): 635-652.

¹⁰ Jesús Enríquez and Kelvin, "La vida de aquellos que fueron expulsados. El curso migración-deportación de mexicanos laborando en Call Centers en Hermosillo, Sonora." *Huellas de la Migración* 6, no. 12 (2022): 67-103.

¹¹ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism*. Routledge, 2009.

¹² Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz. "The deportation regime." *Sovereignty, space, and the freedom of movement*. Durham, NC (2010).

of loss.

The notion of 'liminality' as introduced by Turner offers a conceptual framework to unpack these experiences. Liminality refers to the state of being 'in-between' — a phase of ambiguity, of being neither here nor there.¹³ Many returnees, in their post-deportation phase, find themselves in this liminal space, grappling with a sense of rootlessness. The call centers, with their unique positioning, exacerbate this liminality. They offer a bridge to the past, while also anchoring returnees to their present, often in paradoxical ways.

Another layer of complexity arises from the inherent challenges of working in call centers. While they offer immediate employment, the job itself is not devoid of stressors. Long hours, the pressure of maintaining performance metrics, and, at times, the hostility of clients can take a toll on the mental well-being of employees.¹⁴ For the returnees, these stressors are compounded by their recent experiences of deportation and the subsequent emotional and psychological upheavals.¹⁵ Consequently, understanding the call centers' role requires a multidimensional approach, one that recognizes their potential as spaces of healing, but also as sites of stress and tension.

Beyond the theoretical implications, these findings also hold considerable significance for policy formulation. As Mexico grapples with the challenge of reintegrating large numbers of returnees, understanding the roles and potentials of institutions like bilingual call centers becomes imperative. Such insights can inform strategies that maximize the positive contributions of these centers, while also addressing their inherent challenges.

Methodology

Rooted in a qualitative framework, this study acknowledges the intricate layers of identity renegotiation following deportation events. Such a qualitative approach aligns with the perspective proposed by Schuster and Majidi that post-deportation phenomena are best elucidated using research methods that delve deep

¹³ Victor Turner, 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

¹⁴ Jesús Enríquez and Kelvin Monge. "La vida de aquellos que fueron expulsados. El curso migración-deportación de mexicanos laborando en Call Centers en Hermosillo, Sonora." *Huellas de la Migración* 6, no. 12 (2022): 67-103.

¹⁵ Erin Hamilton, Pedro Orraca and Eunice Vargas. "Legal Status, Deportation, and the Health of Returned Migrants from the USA to Mexico." *Population Research and Policy Review* 42, no. 2 (2023): 16.

into the personal and socio-cultural aspects of returnees' experiences.¹⁶

The investigation was situated in Tijuana and Juarez, two prominent Mexican border cities. Owing to their geographical closeness to the U.S., these locations witness a significant influx of returnees. Furthermore, these cities house a thriving bilingual call center industry primarily serving English-speaking clients, as pointed out by Alarcón & Heyman.¹⁷

The research methodology comprised two principal arms: ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews. Given the stringent visitor regulations of call centers, our team conducted observational visits to the vicinity of various bilingual call centers and the surrounding communities over a four-month span. These non-participant observations offered valuable insights into the layout, employee dynamics, and the larger working atmosphere. The broader local community dynamics and available resources for returnees were also under scrutiny. An integral aspect worth highlighting is the prior experience of one of the authors in the bilingual call center sector. This background not only illuminated our understanding of workspace dynamics but also played a crucial role during the data gathering phase, particularly during the snowball sampling approach and building a rapport during interviews.

In total, thirty semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals affected by Title 42 expulsion during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. The interview guide shed light on their pre, mid, and post-deportation episodes, zooming in on their experiences in the call centers. All interviews were bilingual (English and Spanish), ensuring a comfortable and open dialogue. Interviews usually spanned 60 to 90 minutes.

Upon transcription, a thorough reading of the interview content was undertaken. Using Clarke and Braun's thematic analysis process as a guide, the content underwent initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme naming, and report drafting.¹⁸ AtlasTi software facilitated data organization and analysis.

¹⁶ Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi. "What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans." *Migration studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): 221-240.

¹⁷ Amado Alarcón and Josiah Heyman. "Bilingual call centers at the US-Mexico border: Location and linguistic markers of exploitability." *Language in Society* 42, no. 1 (2013): 1-21.

¹⁸ Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun. "Thematic analysis: a practical guide." *Thematic Analysis* (2021): 1-100.

Ensuring research rigor, the study incorporated multiple validation measures. Ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews provided a triangulated view of the phenomena. Preliminary findings were shared with participants (member checking) to authenticate our interpretations.

Participants' rights and well-being remained paramount. They were thoroughly informed about the research objectives, their voluntary role, the confidentiality of their responses, and their withdrawal rights. Prior to each interview, informed consent was duly obtained. For participant selection, a purposeful sampling strategy was employed. Initial contacts were identified via pre-existing networks and then, using a snowball sampling approach, further participants were roped in.

The team was acutely aware of its academic positioning vis-a-vis the participants, leading to regular introspection on assumptions, biases, and potential influences during data gathering and analysis. The commitment to participant privacy led to data anonymization. Unique identifiers replaced real names, and specifics that might identify a call center were replaced with general terms.

It is important to emphasize that restricting the study to Tijuana and Juarez means the findings do not not universally apply across Mexico. Similarly, since the participants were primarily employed in bilingual call centers, the narratives of those outside this sector will substantially vary.

Post-Deportation Identity Reconfiguration

The bilingual call center environment, often viewed through the lens of its economic and linguistic functions, emerges as a microcosm teeming with stories of identity, resilience, and transformation when scrutinized through the lived experiences of deportees. Our interpretive analysis of the interview data unearths a myriad of themes, each shedding light on a distinct facet of this multifaceted environment and its profound impact on those navigating the tumultuous waters of post-deportation reintegration.

Each theme, from the ambivalent perceptions of call centers to the intricate dance of community formation and solidarity, paints a nuanced picture of the call center experience. The struggles with mental health, challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of adult education, and the clarion calls for policy reforms further deepen our understanding of this environment. Yet, among these

themes, the process of Post-Deportation Identity Reconfiguration emerges as particularly poignant, capturing the crux of individual and collective experiences of those contending with the dual realities of their past in the U.S. and their present in Mexico.

While all identified themes merit academic exploration and possess undeniable significance, our focal point will be on post-deportation identity reconfiguration. Selected interview excerpts will be woven throughout the text to enrich our exploration, ensuring that the voices of our participants resonate unadulterated, lending authenticity and depth to our discourse. This targeted focus aims to shed light on the intricate dance of identity renegotiation, a process both personal and collective, that stands emblematic of broader narratives of displacement, belonging, and reclamation in the transnational realm.

It's essential to underscore that this reconfiguration process is often rooted in a complex amalgamation of emotional, socio-cultural, and practical challenges. Such identity transitions are not merely cognitive exercises; they're deeply emotional endeavors, rife with a mix of nostalgia, grief, resilience, and reclamation.

Layers of Disconnection and Reconnection

For many, the process of reconfiguration began with a profound sense of disconnection. While the physical displacement by deportation is abrupt, the emotional and psychological disentanglement from one's life in the U.S. is a protracted journey. Many participants highlighted the poignant memories of their previous lives, replete with established social connections, familiar routines, and a sense of belonging. Upon their return to Mexico, these memories persisted as haunting reminders of what once was, juxtaposed against the immediate challenges of reintegration into a society that felt oddly unfamiliar.

"I had spent more than half my life in the U.S., and suddenly I was here, and everything seemed out of place (...) each morning up there, I'd walk my daughter to school. I knew every crack on the pavement, every corner store along the way. I had friends, people I'd BBQ with on weekends. There was this little diner where I'd grab my morning coffee, and they knew my order by heart. Coming back to Mexico, all that felt like a dream. Like I'd woken up and couldn't tell which part was real. The memories, man, they just cling to you, they tug at your heart every day. It's this constant mental tug-of-war, being physically present here, but emotionally stuck there (...) starting work at the call center was like living on a bridge between two

worlds. I'd speak English for hours, help people from the U.S. with their issues, and for a brief moment, it felt familiar. But then the call would end, and I'd step out into the streets, and the disconnection would hit me all over again. It's like you're neither here nor there. Like you're floating in limbo (...) Don't get me wrong. I've been trying to find my roots, reconnect with the culture and traditions here. But it's been a journey, man. It's hard when your heart is divided between two places. You got one foot in the past and the other trying to find stable ground in the present. It's this constant balancing act of remembering and trying to forget, of embracing the new while mourning what's left behind."¹⁹

However, as time elapsed, threads of reconnection started to weave into their narratives. For some, this reconnection was facilitated by finding solace in the familiar – perhaps a childhood memory, a cultural ritual, or a familial bond that had endured the test of time and distance. For others, the reconnection was an intentional pursuit, manifested through deliberate efforts to engage with their cultural roots, rediscover their heritage, or re-establish connections with distant family members or friends.²⁰

"At first, the disorientation was so overpowering (...) I stumbled upon this old family photo (...) . It was a picture of one of our family gatherings from when I was little. The smiles, the warmth – it was like a bolt of lightning (...) I began to lean into those memories more, pulling threads from the past to stitch together my present (...) I started going out, something I hadn't done probably since I was a kid (...) the familiar rhythms of the music, the taste of churros and tamales, the laughter and chatter of people around me began to dissolve the walls I felt were separating me from this place (...) I began to reach out, attending weekly family dinners at my until then strangled aunt's place, relishing stories of our family's past (...) the more I listened, the more I saw myself as part of these lives both here and beyond the border (...) I was introduced by a friend from work to this community group where a lot of people like me gather, share stories and whatnot (...) I won't deny that there are still moments of longing, moments where I feel torn. But every day, with every new-old memory I rediscover, every song I sing, every story I hear, I find a piece of myself I thought was lost. It's a journey, and each step brings me closer to feeling whole again."²¹

The Call Center as a Double-Edged Sword

In the process of identity reconfiguration, bilingual call centers emerged as

¹⁹ TJ1, personal communication, April 2023.

²⁰ Steven Vertovec. *Transnationalism*. Routledge, 2009.

²¹ JZ1, personal communication, July 2023.

powerful, albeit double-edged, symbols. On the one hand, they serve as a tangible link to their past lives in the U.S. The daily engagement with English-speaking clients evokes a spectrum of emotions, from nostalgia and longing to anger and resentment. The mere act of conversing in English, navigating American cultural references, or addressing concerns rooted in U.S. socio-cultural contexts continually reminds them of their transnational identities.²²

"When I first stepped foot into the call center, it felt like I had entered a strange dimension. The walls, draped with American advertisements, seemed both comforting and jarring. Suddenly, I was in this space that whispered of my past life, and yet, I was very much in Mexico. Each call was like opening a door to the U.S., albeit briefly. Hearing the familiar American accents, discussing things like Thanksgiving plans or Fourth of July celebrations, would often tug at my heart. There were days when this connection made me smile, reminiscing about barbecues with friends or the feel of cold snow during winters in Chicago. But then, there were times it twisted into a sharp pain, a stark reminder of the life I had unwillingly left behind (...) I remember talking to a lady from Arizona about a product, and she mentioned how it was 'just like the ones in old Mexican markets.' I felt a sudden surge of pride and sadness. I wanted to tell her, 'Yes, I know those markets. I've walked their aisles, smelled their scents.' But I just responded with the required professionalism."²³

"The first week at the call center was the hardest. The constant juggle of speaking English, while surrounded by the sights and sounds of Mexico, was an emotional whirlwind. Every 'How can I help you today?' or 'Have a good day!' would sometimes come out choked, each word layered with memories of my life across the border (...) I recall this one instance when I was assisting a customer from Nevada. She started talking about a local festival she was excited about, one I used to attend. My heart clenched, a mixture of fond memories and a sense of loss. I wanted to jump in, share my memories, but had to stick to the script, keeping my personal history hidden behind a professional mask (...) funny how later on conversations during lunch breaks weren't just about the calls or the customers. They were almost like therapy sessions, filled with stories of lives like mine."²⁴

On the other hand, these call centers also amplify the participants' sense of being 'in-between' – neither fully here nor there. Many expressed feeling like they were suspended in a liminal space, where they were engaging with U.S. clients and cultures daily, yet were physically rooted in Mexico, with all its attendant socio-cultural and economic realities. This duality presented both challenges and opportunities. Challenges, in the sense of continually confronting the emotional

²² Tanya Golash-Boza. "Punishment beyond the deportee: The collateral consequences of deportation." *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 9 (2019): 1331-1349.

²³ TJ2, personal communication, April 2023.

²⁴ JZ2, personal communication, July 2023.

scars of deportation, and opportunities, in the sense of leveraging their bilingual and bicultural skills to carve a niche for themselves in the Mexican labor market.²⁵

"Every morning when I log in to my workstation, I find myself transported. It's like I'm floating between two realities, tethered by a headset. On one side, there's the America I left behind, present in every call I take, every customer I help. And then there's the undeniable truth of the Mexico around me, visible every time I look away from my computer screen or hear my colleagues chatting in Spanish during breaks. This in-betweenness, it's hard to explain. One moment, I'm helping a customer from Texas with their internet issues, and in the background, I hear my colleagues discussing which bar we'll go to after work. It's something that's both comforting and disconcerting. I often feel like I'm living trapped in a kind of purgatory. It's like being in two places at once, but belonging to neither (...) sometimes I also feel that my background also gives me an edge: my familiarity with American slang, my understanding of U.S. holidays, even my knowledge about American sports. It's a weird sort of pride, knowing that my past, which sometimes feels like a burden, can also be an asset."²⁶

Fluidity of Identity

One of the compelling takeaways from the interviews is the concept of identity fluidity. Traditional notions of identity often hinge on fixed categories and clear demarcations. However, the narratives of our participants underscore that identity is far more fluid, evolving, and multifaceted. Post-deportation, many grapple with a duality of identity, continually oscillating between their Americanized selves and their re-emerging Mexican selves. Over time, however, many participants articulated a nuanced synthesis of these dual identities, creating a hybrid identity that draws from both their American and Mexican experiences. This identity fluidity, while challenging, also endows them with a unique perspective, enabling them to navigate both worlds with a heightened sense of empathy and understanding.²⁷

"At first I felt like I was leading a double life. When I talked to people back in the U.S., I'd slip into my 'American' persona – the accent, the slang, the humor (...) It was as if I was constantly switching between two personas, never feeling wholly authentic (...) as the months went by, I began to see that they weren't separate or opposed, almost as if they were layers of the same fabric (...) there are times I lead with my American self, other times with my Mexican self, but most times, it's a

²⁵ Jesús Enríquez and Kelvin Monge. "La vida de aquellos que fueron expulsados. El curso migración-deportación de mexicanos laborando en Call Centers en Hermosillo, Sonora." *Huellas de la Migración* 6, no. 12 (2022): 67-103.

²⁶ TJ7, personal communication, April 2023.

²⁷ Linda Bosniak, "Multiple nationality and the postnational transformation of citizenship." In *Rights and Duties of Dual Nationals*, pp. 27-48. Brill Nijhoff, 2003.

delicate dance of both. It's not without its challenges, but it's also empowering (...) I've learned to embrace this fluid identity (...) It gives me an edge, an ability to understand and empathize."²⁸

Navigating Prejudice and Stigma

Another dimension of post-deportation identity reconfiguration is the challenge of navigating societal prejudice and stigma. Returnees often confront negative perceptions, based on stereotypes or misconceptions associated with being deported. Such stigma can further complicate their reintegration journey, making them feel marginalized or ostracized in their communities. The call centers, in some cases, offer a sanctuary from this external prejudice, as they become spaces where shared experiences of deportation create an environment of mutual understanding and support.²⁹

"When I first came back to Tijuana, it felt like everyone had a label ready for me – 'pinche deportado.' It was whispered behind my back, sometimes even to my face. People I'd known from childhood suddenly looked at me differently, like I had this mark of shame. Every conversation seemed tinged with an unspoken question, 'Why was he deported?' It's exhausting, you know? Constantly feeling the weight of other people's judgments, especially when they don't know the whole story (...) I thought finding a job would be a way out, but even employers saw that 'deportado' label before they saw my skills or experience. That's until I found the call center. It was a revelation. Walking in, I realized most of us had that shared history. We'd all been through the wringer, faced the same skepticism and prejudice. But inside those walls, we weren't just 'deportados.' We were skilled bilingual professionals, valued for our ability to bridge two worlds (...) The call center became more than a job; it was a haven. We'd swap stories during breaks, offer advice, or just listen. Because we understood. We knew the sting of judgment, the isolation of being cast out. But in that shared experience, we found solidarity. A bond that goes beyond just work. It's like a second family. Outside, the world might see us with prejudice. But inside, we have each other's backs, and that makes all the difference."³⁰

"At first, I tried to integrate, to blend in. I reconnected with old friends, frequented familiar spots, and even tried my hand at local jobs. But the undertone was always there, this prevailing notion that being deported was synonymous with failure or

²⁸ JZ12, personal communication, July 2023.

²⁹ Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi. "Deportation stigma and re-migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 41, no. 4 (2015): 635-652.

³⁰ TJ13, personal communication, May 2023.

criminality (...) Then I started at the call center. The word 'deportation' transformed. Here, it wasn't a mark of shame but a badge of resilience. In the shared anecdotes over lunch breaks or the mutual nods of understanding when a U.S. customer mentioned a familiar place or event, there was a profound bond. Each of us was grappling with our bifurcated identities, and the call center became this in-between space. Here, the chatter in both English and Spanish wasn't just about assisting clients; it was a testament to our lived experiences on both sides of the border."³¹

Implications for Transnationalism and Diaspora Studies

The themes surfacing from these interviews contribute significantly to broader academic conversations around transnationalism and diaspora. Transnationalism, at its core, captures the lived experiences of individuals who traverse and maintain connections across national borders.³² The returnees in our study embody this concept, not merely in the physical sense but in the intricate mesh of emotions, memories, and aspirations that span two distinct geographical and cultural territories.

"It felt like I was ripped from a page of one story and pasted awkwardly onto another. Everything felt disjointed (...) the memories, tastes, and sounds of the U.S. were still fresh. It's hard to explain, but I felt both 'here' and 'there' simultaneously (...) And then I joined the call center, which, in an unexpected twist, became a tether to both worlds (...) It was as if I was leading this dual life – physically in Juarez, but emotionally and mentally oscillating between both countries (...) I did feel that something changed over the months though (...) something started drawing me in more to Mexico, and the bonds with my acquaintances here grew stronger (...) It's like being part of two worlds."³³

The call centers play a pivotal role in reinforcing these transnational connections. Every interaction with an English-speaking client is a bridge to their past lives in the U.S., a tangible link that keeps their transnational identities alive. Over time, however, a subtle shift becomes apparent in the narratives. While the initial phases of reintegration are dominated by feelings of nostalgia and longing for the U.S., with time, there emerges a renewed appreciation for Mexican cultural and social landscapes. This oscillation between two cultural moorings is reminiscent of diaspora communities globally, who navigate the delicate balance of retaining their roots while assimilating into new socio-cultural milieus.³⁴

³¹ TJ15, personal communication, May 2023.

³² Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism*. Routledge, 2009.

³³ JZ15, personal communication, July 2023.

³⁴ Avatar Brah. *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Routledge, 2005.

Negotiating Dual Affinities

The phenomenon of dual affinities, as unearthed from our data, highlights the profound complexity of human adaptation to abrupt socio-cultural shifts. This negotiation of affections and resentments towards two nations is not merely a matter of reconciling memories or past experiences; rather, it illustrates the deeply embedded cognitive and emotional processes that shape one's sense of self and belonging. Deportation, in essence, is not just a geographical dislocation but a dislodging of one's identity from its familiar terrains. Participants in our study did not view their affinities for the U.S. and Mexico as binary oppositions. Instead, these affinities were layered, sometimes overlapping, and at other times, distinct. For many, the U.S. represented formative experiences, opportunities, personal growth, and significant life milestones. Mexico, on the other hand, evoked foundational cultural roots, familial bonds, early memories, and a shared collective history.

“When I think of the U.S., it's like thinking of my youth, my first job, my college days, my friends. It's where I grew (...) it molded much of who I am. But its abrupt departure from my life left a void that I'm still grappling with. It feels like a part of me was amputated (...) Mexico, on the other hand, is like an old song that brings back memories (...) the stories my abuelo told, the flavors of my childhood. It's where my roots are. Yet, when I returned here it felt... different. Like some pages were missing (...) People think it's black and white, that you either belong here or there. But it's not that simple.”³⁵

Enríquez and Monge³⁶ aptly highlight how individuals in transnational spaces often engage in adaptive strategies to foster a sense of belonging. Within our study's context, these adaptive strategies are multifaceted. For instance, some participants leaned into nostalgic reminiscence of their time in the U.S. to maintain a semblance of connection, while others actively sought out and rekindled bonds with local communities in Mexico to ground themselves in their present reality.

"It's a daily dance, you know? At first, when I got here, all I could do was think about my life in the U.S. I'd remember the Sunday barbecues, my old neighborhood, the way the air felt during fall. Those memories kept me connected to a life that felt abruptly ripped away from me (...) with time, I realized that living entirely in the past

³⁵ TJ8, personal communication, May 2023.

³⁶ Jesús Enríquez and Kelvin Monge. "La vida de aquellos que fueron expulsados. El curso migración-deportación de mexicanos laborando en Call Centers en Hermosillo, Sonora." *Huellas de la Migración* 6, no. 12 (2022): 67-103.

was eating away at my present. I couldn't keep myself in that headspace forever (...) I started to reconnect with my roots here in Mexico and thank God for my colleagues that underwent a similar thing, being with them really helped me to come to terms with my situation (...) those connections, they grounded me. It became a blend, you know? The memories of the U.S. gave me comfort, but the bonds I was creating here, they gave me strength and purpose. Both are a part of me, both shape my sense of belonging."³⁷

Furthermore, the presence of resentment towards both nations is notable. It underscores the broader sociopolitical dimensions at play. While the U.S. might be a source of resentment due to the trauma of deportation and perceived rejection, Mexico could evoke similar feelings due to challenges faced during reintegration, societal stigma, or perceived gaps in institutional support.

"I mean, in the U.S., I built a life, had dreams, aspirations then, suddenly, that was all taken away. The deportation felt like a direct rejection, like being told you don't belong to a place you've called home for so long (...) yeah, there's resentment towards the States, not just for the act itself but for the whole system that allowed it (...) Mexico wasn't the homecoming I'd imagined obviously. People looked at me differently, like I was a foreigner in my own land. And the challenges of reintegrating... sometimes it felt like the system here wasn't designed to accept or support people like us. So, there's resentment here too. It's like being caught between two worlds, both pushing you away."³⁸

The dual affinities articulated by our participants serve as poignant reminders of the resilience and fluidity of human identity. Even when faced with the profound disruption of deportation, individuals find ways to anchor themselves, drawing strength and solace from connections to both their native and host societies. This complex interplay between memory, identity, and belonging provides rich terrain for further exploration in migration studies, offering insights into the adaptive capacities of individuals in transnational contexts.

Towards a Hybrid Identity

The phenomenon of identity fluidity within transnational contexts presents an area of interest as central to our findings is the emergence of a hybrid identity, which, rather than subscribing solely to the traditional cultural paradigms of either country, seems to integrate elements from both. This synthesized identity does not merely represent a composite of its constituent cultures. Instead, it emerges as a

³⁷ TJ6, personal communication, April 2023.

³⁸ JZ5, personal communication, July 2023.

distinct construct, indicative of the adaptive strategies individuals deploy in response to their multifaceted lived experiences. Bilingual call centers emerge as crucial arenas where this hybrid identity is continually negotiated. Interactions with English-speaking clientele may momentarily anchor participants to their experiences and associations with the U.S., even as the immediate contextual realities of working within Mexico influence their daily routines and professional conduct.

"Every time I take a call jeez it's like I'm back in the States, talking to someone from a place I used to know. But then once it ends, I'm right back here in Juárez, with all its sounds and sights. It's like living in two worlds at the same time (...) I don't feel fully American or fully Mexican anymore. It's like I'm a mix of both now. I've got memories and experiences from both places that shape who I am (...) The call center? It's kinda like that, too. Talking to customers in English takes me back, but my coworkers, our jokes, our lunch breaks – that's all Mexico."³⁹

Hall's discourse on cultural identity underscores its evolutionary nature, suggesting identity as 'becoming' rather than a fixed 'being'.⁴⁰ This perspective resonates with the observations made within this study. Each professional encounter or challenge offers participants an opportunity for introspection, potentially leading to shifts in their identity constructs.

"Every call I take, every problem I solve, it makes me think. Makes me think about who I was (...) sometimes, it's the English I speak, the way I handle a client – it feels like the me from the States. But then, when I'm joking with my mates here or stepping out for a quick bite, it's the Mexican in me that shines (...) Life's thrown me here, but maybe it's giving me a chance to find out who I really am, in between all these changes, you know?"⁴¹

This exploration of identity within the microcosm of bilingual call centers emphasizes the interplay of culture within commercial sectors, as they stand, beyond their primary commercial functions, as sites where global forces converge, offering insights into the evolving narratives of self, community, and intercultural interactions in a globally connected era.

Relevance to Policy and Practice

The findings of our study also illuminate critical facets of post-deportation identity reconfiguration, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences of

³⁹ JZ8, personal communication, July 2023.

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222-237. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

⁴¹ TJ3, personal communication, April 2023.

deportees as they navigate the complexities of their new reality. These insights bear significant relevance to policy and program development. As governments and organizations deliberate on strategies for reintegration, an informed understanding of the lived experiences of deportees is paramount. By recognizing the complex dynamics at play, policies can be crafted with greater empathy and precision.

“Man, you know, when I got deported, I thought that was it for me. I felt lost. But being part of this study, it's like someone's finally trying to get what we're going through. We ain't just numbers or problems to be dealt with; we've got stories, feelings, dreams. I hope the people up there making decisions can really understand what it's like for folks like us. If they get our experiences, maybe they can make things better for us, ya know? Make policies that help us fit back in, instead of feeling like outsiders in our own land. We just want a fair shot. We've been through a lot, and all we want is a little understanding and a chance to build our lives again.”⁴²

The role of bilingual call centers in this equation is particularly noteworthy. These establishments serve as both a professional platform and a socio-emotional anchor for many returnees. Thus, there exists an opportunity to design industry-specific interventions that are attuned to the unique needs of this demographic. For example, incorporating training modules that delve beyond mere skill enhancement to address the psychological intricacies of transnational living can be beneficial.

“Working at the call center, it's been a lifeline for me since coming back. It's more than just a job; it's like a bridge between my two worlds, you get me? I'm here in Mexico, but every day I'm talking to folks from the U.S., dealing with their issues. It's wild, man. But it's not just about speaking English or handling customer complaints. We carry a lot of feelings and memories with us, you know? It would be cool if the folks running these places understood that. Maybe they could give us some training, not just on the job stuff but also on handling all the emotions and memories we got. If they did that, man, it would help a lot of us out, make us feel seen and valued, you know?”⁴³

Moreover, creating environments within these centers that foster community and support can further augment the reintegration process. Spaces dedicated to storytelling, peer-to-peer exchanges, or access to counseling services can serve dual purposes: they can be a source of emotional solace, and they can also act as a crucible where shared experiences catalyze collective coping strategies, ensuring that returnees not only reintegrate professionally but also find avenues to heal, adapt, and thrive in their evolving contexts.

⁴² TJ14, personal communication, May 2023.

⁴³ JZ10, personal communication, July 2023.

Conclusions

Central to our findings is the phenomenon of identity fluidity within the transnational contexts. As previously discussed, identity is a continuous process of 'becoming'.⁴⁴ Deportees, ensconced in their dual affinities to both their native and host nations, often find themselves negotiating a maze of emotions and associations. Rather than adhering strictly to the cultural paradigms of either nation, many participants revealed the emergence of a hybrid identity. This newly formed identity does not simply stand as a composite of its parent cultures but emerges as a unique construct borne out of individual and collective adaptive strategies.⁴⁵

Bilingual call centers have been observed as pivotal in this identity formation process.⁴⁶ These centers, while primarily serving as professional establishments, also function as socio-emotional anchors. Every interaction with an English-speaking client not only demands professional competency but also brings to the fore a plethora of emotions, memories, and reflections that contribute to an evolving sense of self.

Our findings also emphasize the need for impactful policy interventions. Understanding the multifaceted experiences of deportees is not merely an academic endeavor but holds profound implications for crafting effective and empathetic reintegration policies. An informed comprehension of deportee experiences, especially the emotional and psychological nuances, can guide governments and organizations in designing strategies that resonate with the actual needs of this demographic. The unique role of bilingual call centers offers an opportunity to design industry-specific interventions. These establishments can benefit from training programs that traverse beyond mere professional development. By incorporating modules that address the psychological intricacies of transnational living, such as the challenges of identity negotiation and the impact of past traumas, there's potential for more holistic employee development.

Furthermore, given the observed significance of these call centers as socio-emotional anchors, it becomes imperative to foster environments that cater to the

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222-237. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

⁴⁵ Steven Vertovec. *Transnationalism*. Routledge, 2009.

⁴⁶ Jesús Enríquez and Kelvin Monge. "La vida de aquellos que fueron expulsados. El curso migración-deportación de mexicanos laborando en Call Centers en Hermosillo, Sonora." *Huellas de la Migración* 6, no. 12 (2022): 67-103.

emotional well-being of the employees. Spaces within these centers dedicated to peer support, counseling services, or even platforms for sharing stories can be instrumental in addressing the deeper psychological challenges faced by returnees. By addressing these challenges, the industry can not only enhance the well-being of its employees but potentially improve retention and overall job satisfaction.

On the other hand, resentment, as expressed by some participants, emerges as a salient theme and underscores broader sociopolitical dimensions. The sources of this resentment are multifaceted. While some trace it back to the trauma of deportation and the subsequent perceived rejection by the U.S., others associate it with the challenges of reintegration in Mexico. The presence of such sentiments highlights the need for policies to be crafted with a nuanced understanding of these underlying feelings. Recognizing the sociopolitical undertones also emphasizes the importance of facilitating platforms for open dialogue. Engaging returnees in policy-making discussions can pave the way for more inclusive and grounded strategies. Additionally, fostering community programs that focus on sensitizing the public about the complexities of deportation can play a role in reducing societal stigma.

Collaboration emerges as a keyword when contemplating the successful reintegration of deportees. Government agencies, private sector organizations, and civil society must come together to address the multifaceted challenges that returnees face. Given the pivotal role that bilingual call centers play, partnerships with these establishments can yield synergistic outcomes.

By aligning the objectives of call centers with broader reintegration initiatives, it becomes feasible to craft a seamless support ecosystem for returnees. Moreover, there's a profound opportunity for academic institutions to contribute. Through research, curriculum development, and community engagement programs, universities and colleges can actively participate in enriching the discourse around deportation and transnational identities. By facilitating platforms where empirical research meets real-world challenges, academic entities can contribute significantly to both policy formulation and effective ground-level interventions.

Our study also unveils several avenues for future research. Exploring the long-term impacts of working in bilingual call centers on the identity formation of deportees could provide deeper insights into the permanence or fluidity of these evolving identities. Additionally, comparative studies across different professional sectors might illuminate if the observed phenomena are unique to call centers or if they resonate across various employment landscapes. Lastly, the role of family



dynamics, especially in the context of split families due to deportation, emerges as an area warranting deeper exploration. How do familial bonds, especially with members still residing in the U.S., influence the identity negotiations and reintegration experiences of returnees?

It is essential to recognize that the journey of each deportee is deeply personal, shaped by a myriad of experiences, emotions, and external influences. While our study provides a macroscopic view of the trends and patterns, the micro-narratives remain pivotal in truly understanding the depth and breadth of the phenomena at hand. The adaptive strategies, the oscillation between dual affinities, and the quest for belonging provide a poignant reminder of the human spirit's resilience. As societies evolve and migration patterns continue to shift, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that the narratives of those caught in these transnational fluxes are not only heard but also actively integrated into broader socio-political and economic discourses. In the realm of ever-evolving global dynamics, understanding, empathy, and actionable insights remain our most potent tools to foster inclusive societies that celebrate diversity while nurturing a sense of belonging for all its members.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have conducted this research in the absence of any commercial, financial, or personal relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest. All stages of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript writing were performed with integrity, objectivity, and transparency.

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