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Un Salario Digno and Subjective Social Status

Three years ago, an alliance between American college students, an international clothing manufacturer, and workers in the Dominican Republic led to the launch of the developing world’s first living wage, unionized apparel factory. This factory opened at a time of incredible need for the residents of Villa Altagracia, a city of ~150,000 people an hour outside the Dominican capital of Santo Domingo. Over the past 15 years, two of the city’s largest employers — a paper mill and a clothing factory — both closed. By late 2009, local unemployment rates were sky high, and as the global economic meltdown continued to wreak havoc on international markets, it seemed unlikely that new factories would be opening any time soon. In spite of this, the Alta Gracia factory opened in February 2010. It pays a living wage 3.5 times greater than the prevailing wage in apparel factories to its approximately 130 workers; *un salario digno* is a point of great pride for all involved in the Alta Gracia factory. In addition, the factory’s management works closely with the worker’s union to address concerns related to everything from the organization of the factory floor to work hours. Today, Alta Gracia produces clothes sold in over 600 college stores around the country, including on campus at UC Berkeley.

Given its ambitious new approach, it is no surprise that during its three years of operation, Alta Gracia has attracted widespread attention. Workers, activists, and business leaders from around the world closely follow its progress at carving a niche in the cutthroat garment industry. Just as importantly, academics have been studying the effects of this new model on the workers, their families, and their communities. Political scientists at Georgetown have studied the economic impacts of Alta Gracia on the lives of the workers’ children and on local businesses that have benefited from the workers’ increased spending power.

For the past two years, I’ve been working with a team led by UC Berkeley’s Lia Fernald to analyze survey data from the workers of Alta Gracia in order to better understand the model’s effects on the lifestyles and health of the workers. Our analyses have been far-reaching, exploring the workers savings and borrowing habits, how they are spending their wages, and the changes in various physical and mental health outcomes. A series of forthcoming papers will describe the results of these studies.

One particularly interesting measure that we are studying is “subjective social status.” An individual’s subjective social status reflects their perception of their social standing in their community. By gauging the individual’s own perception of his or her status, we gauge not only the traditional measures of socioeconomic status (income, education, etc.), but also the personal experience of stratification that are hard to pinpoint with more objective measures. Subjective social status is a powerful predictor of chronic health outcomes, ranging from cardiopulmonary disease to cancer. As a result, by tracking subjective social status, we can have a better sense of general trends in long-term chronic health for the Villa Altagracia community.

This summer, with the support of a Tinker Field Research Grant, I traveled to the Dominican Republic to gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of the living wage on the workers’ subjective social status. I conducted a series of interviews and meetings with workers and their families to elucidate their beliefs about status and stress, concepts the definitions of which are extremely culturally dependent. The capstone of our time at Alta Gracia was presenting the preliminary results of our study to over 60 workers, and receiving their feedback and questions, all of which will be invaluable in future publications on this project.

By spending this time in Villa Altagracia, I gained a more personal perspective of how the Alta Gracia factory has affected the lives of the workers. Perhaps most poignantly, one worker described the changes from her previous life, when she was barely able to afford one meal of rice and beans per day for her four children, to today, when her children attend private school and eat three meals each day. Alta Gracia factory workers spend almost all of their money within Villa Altagracia, which has led to companies from banks to bakeries opening in town. Each new business means more jobs for residents of Villa Altagracia, providing tangible evidence for the ripple effect of un salario digno. It is unsurprising, then, that workers “feel so much pride” when they walk around town; they represent a glimmer of hope for the future of Villa Altagracia.

Last year, an Alta Gracia t-shirt was the single best-selling item in stores operated by Barnes & Noble College, a division of the major bookseller. It is clear that Alta Gracia represents a viable new model for the apparel industry. Perhaps even more importantly, it has provided a rare opportunity for partnership between business leaders, activists, workers, and policymakers to be both pro-business and pro-development. I hope that this partnership can be strengthened by including public health advocates, something which will depend on research such as that funded this summer by the Tinker Grant.