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## **From the Field: Culture and Risk Communication. A Report about the Farmworker Association of Florida**

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**Abstract:** In this field report, I give an account of my research trip to the Farmworker Association of Florida in Central Florida near the area of Lake Apopka (U.S.). This non-governmental association works to empower and improve farmworkers' living and working conditions. The field trip is embedded in my research on risk communication with a special focus on the risks of herbicides. This issue is closely linked to political, cultural and racial factors. Hence, I argue, risk communication must consider culture as a contextual key factor and should embrace a critical perspective. Such a perspective is culturally appropriate and addresses issues of race and language as well as socio-economic status.

**Keywords:** risk communication, herbicides, culture, farmworkers, agriculture, racism, United States of America

"Got Food? Thank a Farmworker." [Farmworkerawareness.org](http://Farmworkerawareness.org)

### **Context: Risk Communication with Focus on the Use of Herbicides**

Risk communication along with crisis communication is a growing research field within communication studies. The number of publications coming from this field seems to prove this notion. There is a range of handbooks on risk communication (exemplary cf. Lundgren & McMakin 2013; Schwarz, Seeger & Auer 2016; Sellnow et al. 2009). The existence of a variety of handbooks seems to indicate that a certain research scope is not emerging, but established. Furthermore, this claim might be justified by the existence of a temporary working group within the European Communication Research and Education Association, which focuses on crisis and risk communication solely (ECREA 2017). Scanning our discipline, risk communication is, thus, a research field which is still evolving but yet offers a range of studies, models and concepts (Heath & O'Hair 2009). In communication studies, a frequently applied definition of risk communication derives originally from the National Research Council of the U.S. (NRC). With respect to democratic societies, the NRC defines risk communication as

“an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management” (NRC 1989, p. 21, emphasis in original).

This implies a kind of communication process, in which the relevant agents have equally access to information and expression of opinion. In this report, I will discuss if this holds true for the case at hand. Often risk communication focuses on public health concerns, biotechnology or food safety (Heath & O’Hair 2009; Renn et al. 2011). An issue connected to food safety is agriculture. In this context, researchers in risk communication are typically interested in genetically modified food or chemicals in food (Sellnow et al. 2009; Renn et al. 2011; Lofstedt 2013). A special focus on herbicides<sup>1</sup> is less common (Hunka et al. 2013). That is surprising, as the use of herbicides is rising globally, with herbicides containing glyphosate leading the way (Benbrook 2016). While most stakeholders agree about the impact herbicides have on biodiversity, their direct risks for human health are subject of controversial public debates (Kuhnhehn 2018). However, the risk for human health has to be distinguished insofar as the question is: whose health is put at risk? In the public debate in Germany, that is my observation, the health risk for the general public is the focal question. This might be applied to chemical residues of glyphosate in food in general or to residues in certain products, such as beer (Weber 2016).

It should be clear, however, that people working with herbicides are much more likely to suffer from health risks as they are exposed to the toxics in an occupational setting and likely at levels, concentrations and frequency many times higher than the general public. This would thus put farmers and farmworkers in a special risk-group concerning herbicides. Yet, risk communication is hardly focusing on these two groups. In this report I draw special attention to migrant farmworkers as they work and live in highly precarious conditions and their access to the process of risk communication seems particularly arguable. When addressing the question of migrants’ working conditions in the U.S., for both legal and illegal workers, one cannot simply ignore the fact that these workers are embedded within a system marked by strong ethnic components. Namely, that workers distribution, compensation and overall treatment are influenced in no small manner by racial considerations. The U.S. is certainly not unique in that regard, but here I focus squarely on the US-American context. I will establish that the modern agriculture in the U.S. not only is built on slavery, but still exploits migrants. Thus, the heteronomic conditions wherein these workers, especially illegal workers, find themselves are the following: they have hardly any access to social facilities, might not speak English, and they are highly dependent on their employer. This situation of low self-determination increases the severity of risk in migrant’s farm work (and life). As the United States of America is an important exporter of agricultural products, ap-

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the difference between herbicide and pesticide. The former refers to the control of weeds (c. f. «herbs»), whereas the latter is a superordinate of herbicide. In this report, I use the terms as synonyms.

plying a global perspective to this problem is vital. I will expound these issues in the following chapters by first of all giving an overview of agriculture in the United States of America, paying special attention to migrants in this sector. Secondly, I will focus on a special case, which is the Farmworker Association of Florida – a non-governmental organization focusing on farmworker’s rights. And, finally, I will discuss this case in the context of risk communication. To start with, I will state my interest in this topic.

Within my research project on risk communication about glyphosate, I was searching for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide that are focusing on the risks for people that have to handle herbicides regularly. There are several reasons for this interest. First, herbicides as an issue of risk communication have to be understood and analyzed from a global perspective, as they are used globally and likewise have harms on an international scale. Second, researching and writing about risk communication concerning herbicides has to include multiple foci. There are many stakeholders and interest groups, such as industry, farmers, NGOs, politicians, the media, the public – and farmworkers.<sup>2</sup> Third, as mentioned above, farmworkers are not the core aspect of the corresponding research in risk communication, although they are a fundamental part of agriculture and the food system. In this report, I clarify the context, work and focus of the Farmworker Association of Florida. In order to do so, an overview of the agricultural situation in the U.S. is necessary.

## **Agriculture in the United States of America**

The United States of America is one of the leading agricultural exporters. Only the European Union as an association of states exports more agricultural products than the U.S. In 2016, the U.S. exported agricultural products worth 165 US billion dollars and therewith increased its exports by three percent. The U.S. is also one of the leading exporters of food. In 2016, the U.S. shared 10 percent in world exports; likewise did the European Union, whereas China shared 4.9 percent (WTO 2017). According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the agricultural sector is highly important for the economy in the U.S.: “U.S. agricultural exports have been larger than U.S. agricultural imports since 1960, generating a surplus in U.S. agricultural trade. This surplus helps counter the persistent deficit in nonagricultural U.S. merchandise trade” (USDA 2017a, n. p.).

There are an estimated one million hired farmworkers working in the U.S. agricultural sector. It is important to make the distinction between farmworkers and farmers. “Farmers” refers to the individuals, families and entities that own and op-

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<sup>2</sup> As in the case of glyphosate, there is a contentious debate going on considering its carcinogenic risk for human beings. While some stakeholders suggest that glyphosate is “probably carcinogenic to humans” (IARC 2015), other authorities do not confirm such a risk. For instance, the European Food Safety Authority does not consider glyphosate as carcinogenic to humans (EFSA 2015). For more information, see also Kuhnhehn 2018.

erate agricultural operations. Those in higher supervisory positions are often also referred to as the farmers. Farmworkers, on the other hand, are the laborers who work in the fields, forests, nurseries, groves, orchards and ferneries, who do the manual work of such activities as hoeing, planting, weeding, harvesting and packing agricultural products. Farmworkers, as a “class” in the United States, are largely from low-income, minority communities and are considered among the most vulnerable of populations in the country. A number of factors further threaten farmworkers’ health and safety, including language barriers, fear of employer retaliation/job loss, lack of access to hand-washing and toilet facilities, low wages, inadequate access to health care, and substandard farmworker housing and transportation. Farmworkers and laborers working in field crops, in grove and orchards, in nurseries, and greenhouses earn an average hourly wage of 9.62 US dollars. Since 1999, the share of hired crop farmworkers who were not legally authorized to work in the U.S. is about 50 percent. Most farmworkers are Hispanics, many of them coming from Mexico, Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador) and Haiti (USDA 2017b, n. p.). Increasingly, immigrants coming from other countries to do farmwork are from indigenous communities in their home countries where Spanish is not their first language, and who may be more comfortable speaking only in their indigenous tongue. Historically, the first farmworkers in the southern United States were enslaved Africans brought to the country through the slave trade (Demny 2001). The demographics changed through time, but the agricultural system has consistently depended upon a work force willing to work hard, for low pay, under very difficult and dangerous conditions, and who had little to no political, social or economic power or standing. Understanding the accumulation of these various factors concerning farm workers (e.g. half of all farmworkers are undocumented in the U.S., many are non-native English speakers), health education and health care are a great challenge. This holds also true for farmworkers in Florida.

### **The Farmworker Association of Florida – La Asociación Campesina de Florida**

Within the U.S., Florida is one of the agriculturally important states. According to the latest numbers by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) concerning cash receipts by commodity, Florida was ranked 18th amongst all 50 states in 2016 (USDA 2017c, n. p.). Concerning the cultivation of oranges, Florida is the leading state (USDA 2017d, n. p.). The recent Hurricane Irma destroyed 70-80 percent of 2017’s orange crop in Florida that will have both short term and long term consequences to the industry in the state, according to a representative from the Farmworker Association of Florida. The importance of oranges is reflected in the name of Orange County which is in the focus of my investigation. However, oranges are not cultivated anymore in Orange County in any significant number, but the industry has been robust in other counties further south in the state central Florida. Apopka is a small town in Orange County and home to the headquarters of

the Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF). The Farmworker Association of Florida is a non-governmental association whose objective is to empower farmworkers. In their vision and mission statement it says:

“FWAF’s long-standing mission is to build power among farmworker and rural low-income communities to respond to and gain control over the social, political, workplace, economic, health, and environmental justice issues that impact their lives. FWAF’s guiding vision is a social environment where farmworkers’ contribution, dignity, and worth is acknowledged, appreciated, and respected through economic, social, and environmental justice. This vision includes farmworkers being treated as equals, and not exploited and discriminated against based on race, ethnicity, immigrant status, or socioeconomic status” (FWAF 2017, n. p.).

I visited the Association in September 2017. Based on my research project on glyphosate, my original interest was the use of herbicides along with possible harms of pesticides and the situation of farmworkers. As this issue has to be understood on a global level and knowing that agriculture works differently in America than in Germany, I thought and think the variety of situations in which herbicides are applied has to be studied. While still in Germany, I spoke to Jeannie Economos, the Pesticide Safety and Environmental Health Project Coordinator of FWAF. Soon, I realized several relevant aspects concerning different perspectives for my research. First and from a critical perspective, agriculture and the issue of herbicides is deeply linked to questions of ethnicity and racism. Second and connected to the interest in communication activities by NGOs, the Farmworker Association of Florida is a good example of context sensitivity of NGO communication. I will come back to these aspects later. First, I will introduce the NGO.

The Farmworker Association of Florida is a grassroots organization that was established 1983 by farmworkers themselves. This background is still visible today, as farmworkers do play an active role and are not just clients. For instance, there are community gardens run by farmworkers. On my trip to FWAF, I visited one of these Campesinos’ Gardens. Besides plants and beds, I could see signs displaying the sociopolitical dimensions, like the one saying “Aquí se respira lucha” or “Here we breathe the struggle.” (This is a common phrase indicating that there is resistance, struggle or fight):

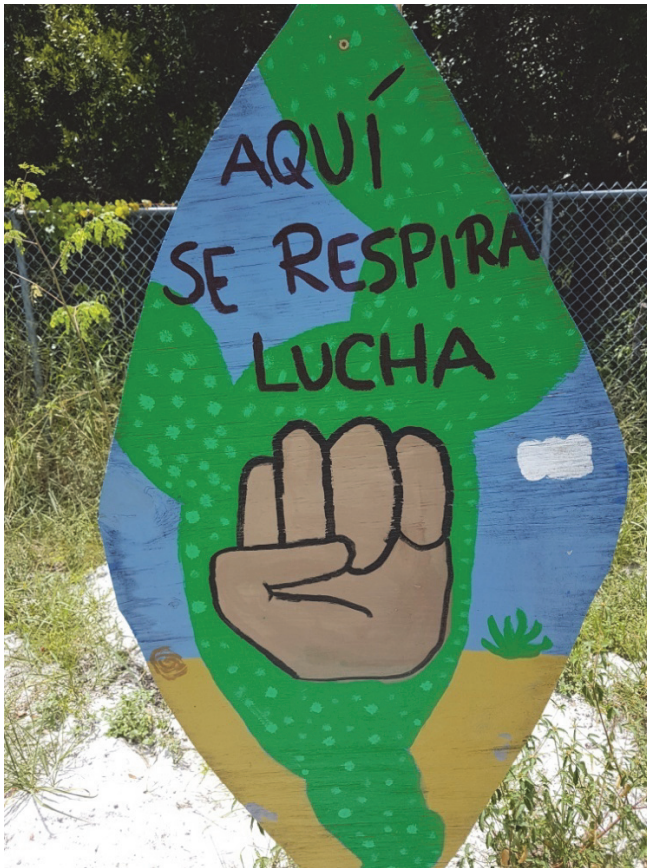


Figure 1: A Campesinos' Garden in Apopka  
Source: Martha Kuhnenn

### **The Community Garden in Apopka**

The Farmworker Association of Florida is working together with a range of partners in a variety of subjects. Worker justice is one focus. The organization educates farmworkers concerning their rights and functions as a supporter when there are workplace problems or violations, such as wage theft. As many farmworkers are immigrants, immigrants' rights are another central concern of the organization. Generally, FAWF supports and works to educate and empower migrant and seasonal farmworkers to embrace their rights. Due to the fact that there are many undocumented farmworkers, the organization is a contact point for the community when it comes to everyday issues such as access to health care. Pesticide actions are a further topic of the organization. Concerning these, the organization trains and educates farmworkers about pesticides, their usage, risks, how to protect themselves in the workplace, short and long-term health effects, and their rights under the Environmental Protection Agency's Worker Protection Standard. In addition, the organization works together with partners from universities in order to conduct research on health issues involving farmworkers, including studies on the risks and health effects of pesticides. Jeannie discusses a four-year study around pregnancy health among Florida farmworkers with me. In this study, the NGO created and implemented a community-based participatory research project in collaboration with Emory University. The reason for the study can be summed up by

what Jeannie has been observing since she has been working with farmworkers, she says:

“Pregnant farmworkers are at increased risk for spontaneous abortion, and fetal abnormalities as a consequence of exhausting prolonged manual labor, periodic dehydration and exposure to pesticides, as well as substandard living conditions, poor health, and malnutrition.”

Three cases in 2004-05 of severe birth defects of children born to farmworker women who were exposed to pesticides during their pregnancies was a motivating factor for the design of the study, as Jeannie explains. The exposure to pesticides is one risk in combination with others. This exemplifies the complexity of risks. As Renn (2008) argues, we are living in times of systemic risks. Systemic risks evolve from the interplay of the physical world (e.g. geographical areas), the economy, social relationships and the political sphere. “Globalization and world trade have augmented the potential for systematic risks to become the major challenge of risk governance in the years to come” (Renn 2008, p. 61). The situation of the farmworkers in Florida is a case in point of how physical, bio-technological, social, economic, and political aspects come together and establish a complex risk. The farmworkers are physically exposed to harms and risks (heat, pesticides, etc.); the political context leads to their social situation, which is precarious – think of working as a non-registered person within a country that is not your home country and you might not even speak the official language of that country. Linked to the political context are likewise the physical and bio-technological risks. For instance, the political approval and support of herbicides reinforces the risk deriving from the latter.

“I’ll show you the Lake Apopka region. Let’s meet farmworkers”, Jeannie says to me when I visit FWAF headquarters in Apopka. On our way to Lake Apopka we pass acres of fields of blueberries; vegetable fields where crops, such as corn, cabbage and cucumbers are grown; and ornamental plant nurseries of indoor greenhouses and outdoor potted plants. The importance of agriculture is still evident.

“Lake Apopka is Florida’s most polluted large lake. Wildlife studies on the lake’s alligator population identified considerably reduced reproductive rates, along with genetic deformities. Decades of farming in the north shore of Lake Apopka resulted in pesticide and fertilizer run-off that were blamed for the lake’s distinctive pea green color,”

Jeannie explains, as we reach Lake Apopka. There are restoration efforts to recover the lake’s eco-system, which was altered in the 1940s when some 20,000 acres of shallow marshland on the north shore of the lake was drained and diked to expose the rich, lake bottom muck soil to open it up to agricultural production. Nonetheless, there is a public note at the information board next to Lake Apopka, saying that there is an E.P.A. approved herbicide applied to the lake in order to control weeds (E.P.A. stands for the United States Environmental Protection Agency). Lake Apopka might be understood as a symbol of the consequences of the usage of pesticides, such as Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT). In 2006, FWAF pub-

lished a report about a health survey of Lake Apopka farmworkers (FWAF 2006). The report addresses the lack of public interest in the health of farmworkers. The report cites the case in 1998/1999 in which hundreds of fish-eating birds were found dead on the former farm land on Lake Apopka. It was determined to be one of the largest bird mortality incidents in the history of the United States. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that organochlorine pesticides were responsible for the birds' deaths. Farmworkers were exposed to the same chemicals for decades. While more than 100 billion government dollars were spent buying out the farms and for investigations on the birds' deaths, no government dollars were spent on researching the Lake Apopka farmworkers' health (FWAF 2006).

“Agriculture was built and still is built on racism”, Jeannie criticizes. Historically, black slaves did the main work on the fields and helped the farms to prosper – while the white farmers gained from this exploitation (Demny 2001). Nowadays, mainly migrant farmworkers do the ‘dirty work’ on fields, nurseries, etc. Within these working conditions, farmworkers are exposed to different risks, such as pesticides or extreme weather conditions. Furthermore, due to a lack of language skills, some migrant farmworkers might not understand English (neither Spanish) and thus cannot handle certain pesticides according to special regulations. Consequently, these farmworkers are at high risk for different maladies. These issues make evident, that any risk (and along with that risk communication) has to be understood within its political circumstances and cultural background. Risks are context specific; they might be worse under certain circumstances.

While we are discussing the living conditions of farmworkers in Apopka, Jeannie says: “Let’s go to speak with a farmworker.” As we drive from the former farm land to one of the farmworkers’ neighborhoods, we pass a Superfund site. Superfund sites are places, “where toxic chemicals from factories and landfills were dumped for decades, polluting the surrounding soil, water and air. [...] Since industry and waste tend to follow people, Superfund sites are often concentrated in highly populated areas” (Johnson 2017, n. p.). However, the Superfund site we visit, Zellwood Ground Water Contamination (FL), is located in an area where I see mainly African-American people living. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, this “57-acre site is located [...] 25 miles northwest of Orlando. [...] The site’s surroundings include residential developments, a nursery, citrus groves, and pastureland, as well as several other businesses” (E.P.A. 2017, n. p.). Jeannie and I discuss the fact that Superfund sites are disproportionately found in low-income, minority neighborhoods, where the already marginalized population is subject to high levels of contamination in their communities. Most (ex-) farmworkers living in the area of South Apopka are African-Americans. In the neighborhood we visit, we speak with Linda, an African-American and former farmworker. Linda is suffering from Lupus, her daughter and granddaughter both died from the same autoimmune disease and Linda is now raising her grandchildren and great-grandchildren on her own. Back in FWAF’s headquarters we meet some medical students from the University of Central Florida (UCF). The students



are conducting a health screening and education program for children in the community with learning and/or developmental problems. Next to this, Jeannie talks to some young Hispanics about the upcoming demonstration in Washington D.C. concerning the government's decision to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. DACA was introduced by former U.S. president Barack Obama as part of the immigration policy for undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children. These people would receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation to enable them to legally apply for a job and get a drivers' license. This policy is also known as the Dream Act. The government under U.S. president Donald Trump decided to end this policy. "This would also affect some of our people. So, representatives from FWAF are going to demonstrate in D. C.", Jeannie explains.

After one day with the Farmworker Association of Florida, I do not only gather the complexity of risks in the agricultural sector but see that cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political aspects have to be addressed from a critical point of view in risk communication.

### **Risk Communication – A Critical Perspective**

Following the National Research Council (1989), risk communication is defined as an "interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions" (see at the beginning of this report). Such a kind of process implies that the involved agents have access to relevant information and the possibility to express their opinions concerning the questionable risks. In this report, I put this statement in doubt and scrutinized it within the context of farmworkers in Apopka, Florida. As I observed, farmworkers are exploited and discriminated in different ways. Amongst others, this affects aspects of language (and thus access to information) and documentation (and thus the possibility and willingness to express opinion in public). Altogether, these issues should make clear that risk communication in the given case is not communication based on equal preconditions.

Hence, I doubt the democratic context of risk communication. Looking at the starting point of this research, my field trip started with the notion that farmworkers are significantly exposed to pesticides. I was interested in relevant consequences concerning risk communication in this matter. However, this question leads to the general risk environment in which farmworkers are working and living. This risk environment is inseparably connected with socio-economic, socio-political and cultural aspects. "Risk society and cultural interpretations" are understood as a dominant view in the perception, analysis, communication, and management about risks (Heath & O'Hair 2009, p. 14). Sellnow et al. (2009) argue for a focus on culture within risk communication. Such an approach recognizes the multiple audiences as well as the involvement of underrepresented groups in any discourse about a certain risk, and it pays attention to the central role of language. Referring

to my observations and findings within my field trip to the Farmworker Association of Florida, I support this statement thoroughly.

However, I would argue for a more critical perspective in risk communication. Saying that, the study of risk communication on a certain issue should ask for the historical backgrounds, cultural, economic, and socio-political circumstances that led to a specific situation. As in the given case, issues of race are also evident. This raises the question of whose perspective is given access to the discourse and whose perspective is neglected (Foucault 1972). The critical discussion of whose voice and position is present in a risk discourse is fundamental for the approach that Slovic (1999, p. 689) pleads for, an approach “that focuses upon introducing more public participation into both risk assessment and risk decision making in order to make the decision process more democratic, improve the relevance and quality of technical analysis, and increase the legitimacy and public acceptance of the resulting decisions”. When certain positions are excluded from a discourse, risk communication is far from being a democratic process. With the topic of migration on the global agenda, this notion and the issues discussed at hand are highly relevant.

## Abbreviations

DDT	Dichlorophenyltrichloroethane
ECREA	European Communication Research and Education Association
EFSA	European Food Safety Authority
E. P. A.	United States Environmental Protection Agency
FAWF	Farmworker Association of Florida
IARC	International Agency for Research on Cancer
NRC	United States National Research Council
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WTO	World Trade Organization

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