Why do you trust him? The construction of the good migrant on the Mexican migrant route

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Abstract

How do Central American migrants in transit decide which other migrants they can trust when they are crossing Mexico? In this article, based on extensive multi-situated ethnography in Mexico, I suggest that migrants look for the same signs and signals when deciding whom to trust, thus creating a single, ideal "good migrant". This stereotype is fed to them by the migrant shelters and advocacy institutions which, in an effort to protect the migrants and to humanise them, create a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate migrants. The construction of the "good migrant" ideal forces migrants to change the way they behave and affects those migrants who are unable to conform to the stereotype as they are likely to get less solidarity and help. *Keywords*: trust, transit migration, good migrant, violence, advocacy, Mexico.

Resumen: ¿Por qué confiar? La construcción del buen migrante en la ruta migrante mexicana

¿Cómo deciden los migrantes centroamericanos en tránsito en qué otros migrantes pueden confiar cuando cruzan México? En este artículo, basado en una extensa etnografía multi-situada en México, sugiero que los migrantes buscan los mismos signos y señales al decidir en quién confiar, creando así un único "buen migrante" ideal. Este estereotipo es alimentado por los albergues para migrantes y las instituciones de defensa que, en un esfuerzo por proteger a los migrantes y humanizarlos, crean una distinción entre migrantes legítimos e ilegítimos. La construcción de un ideal de "buen migrante" obliga a los migrantes a cambiar su forma de comportarse y afecta a aquellos migrantes que no pueden adaptarse al estereotipo, ya que es probable que obtengan menos solidaridad y ayuda. *Palabras clave*: confianza, migración en tránsito, buen migrante, violencia, defensa, México.

Introduction

The first time Cristian migrated from Guatemala to the United States, he was the victim of a crime. After crossing the river that divides Guatemala from Mexico, he rode a *combi* (a 10-passenger bus) from the border to the nearest town, Palenque. He was only nineteen and feeling very anxious. He sat in a

window seat with his bag on his lap. Inside it he had a change of clothes, some cash, and – most importantly – his hairdressing tools. He planned on using them to earn some money along the way. Soon, the man sitting next to him started chatting. "I felt he was a nice, serious man who wanted to help me", he told me. "When we arrived at Palenque, he told me that he could find a place for me to stay. He gave me 100 pesos and asked me to go buy some tacos for both of us while he stayed with our bags. By the time I came back he had gone and he had taken my stuff. I was stunned." Cristian, like many migrants before him, had been tricked by someone who pretended he wanted to help. "I think I learned not to trust now…or at least, I learned how to pay attention," he told me as we had an ice cream in the plaza, "but you have to understand, I needed to know where to go, where to get off the bus, and how far away the United States was…you just cannot avoid talking to people."

Cristian's experience shows how complex crossing Mexico can be. On the one hand, migrants need up-to-date information and support to navigate the ever-changing road; but, on the other, they are surrounded by strangers who can take advantage of them. They need to interact in order to survive and keep moving, but they also need to be careful about whom they trust. As they meet other migrants, they need to learn to balance caution and trust. The objective of this article is to examine what the characteristics of a trustworthy migrant are, according to others on the migrant route through Mexico and to explore why those characteristics have come to signify that someone can be trusted.

Based on extensive multisituated ethnography, I suggest that, when deciding which of their peers to trust, migrants in transit look for the signs and signals of an idealized good migrant who is crossing Mexico for what they consider to be legitimate reasons: improving their lives and fleeing violence. This idealized migrant is generally described as someone who is dusty, burned by the sun, and whose clothes are showing signs of wear (appearance); who is humble and not too talkative (attitude); who is not too loud and has the correct Central American accent (speech); and who does not have a phone, a gun, or drugs (accessories). This uniform idea of the good migrant is created and reinforced by the advice they get from experienced migrants and from migrant shelters.[1] In migrant shelters, personnel need to decide quickly whom they can safely allow in and help; the idealized migrant provides a useful shortcut. Although this stereotype makes it easier to classify the thousands of people crossing Mexico every year, it excludes those whom – for whatever reason – cannot conform to the ideal stereotype. It becomes harder for them to access information and help. The concept of a "good", legitimate migrant also perpetuates the idea of deserving and undeserving migrants and forces those in transit to conform to a unanimous expectation if they want to be considered worthy of assistance and solidarity.[2]

I assert that the concept of "good migrant" affects the way migrants experience the route and their chances of getting help and surviving. This classification defines whom they talk to, which advice they take, and whom they ex-

clude. At the same time, it defines how they behave and how they are treated when they need help. I show that solidarity and advocacy are not equally available to everyone on the migrant trail and that, when activists try to only help the "good ones", many migrants who need aid fall by the wayside. This research contributes to the academic knowledge about trust in an open, high-risk structure where the actors do not know each other and the cast of characters change continuously. I show how, even for careful, rational actors, trust is flexible (because it is based on subjective traits) while at the same time it is rigid (because it excludes everyone who cannot conform). This analysis illustrates how easily some actors, including activists, may come to accept the idealised image of the people whom they study and help.

I begin this article by explaining my fieldwork and how I gained the confidence of the people I interviewed. I then move on to discuss the literature on risk management and trust, and explain how, in relation to other ethnographies, scholars have observed individuals making high-stakes decisions about trust. In the next section, I use ethnographic examples to show how migrants pay attention to the: appearance, attitude, speech, and accessories of other migrants they encounter to decide if they seem trustworthy. I conclude this section by showing how easy it is to mimic those signs and signals with the case study of Francisco, a hustler who became adept at imitating the "good migrant". In the final section I discuss how the stereotype of the good migrant is created and reproduced in the migrant shelters, and what is lost when there is only a single, fixed conception of what "good" means.

An ethnography of trust in transit

This research is based on eight months of ethnographic research and in-depth interviews conducted between 2016 and 2018. I carried out multi-situated research in Palenque and Tenosique (southern border of Mexico), and Nogales, Tijuana, and Saltillo (northern border of Mexico). I chatted with migrants and those around them and observed their interactions in migrant shelters, canteens, churches, on the street, and along the train tracks. I interviewed fifty migrants in transit (forty men and ten women with ages ranging from 18 to 59 years old), seven volunteers, and three members of the National Migration Institute (INM).[3] I use a situated research methodology (Haraway 1988) and, in so doing, I attempt to create "partial, locatable, critical knowledge" (Haraway 1988: 584). By adopting a situated perspective I accept that my vision (what I can observe, understand, and interpret) is necessarily biased, partial, and situated in my own (female, young, middle-class Latin American) body and my own context. I acknowledge that all production of knowledge is ideological-political and is situated (Narvaz & Koller 2006). I also reject the notion that there is a neutral way of observing events and people (Beiras et al. 2017). I observed my own expectations and noted how I reacted when migrants did not behave as I expected. For example, I was initially shocked to discover that migrants in

transit often had fun along the way. I had to revisit my prejudices and examine where they originated. This introspection provided me with important insights for this article and for the way that I conduct my research in general. I established trust with my interviewees by accessing their spaces through people they trusted and by always keeping my promises. I spent about a month and a half in each area and, while I was there, I maintained a constant presence. As I tried to learn about them, I sometimes made mistakes and misinterpreted things, but always apologised afterwards. For example, once I offhandedly minimised the pain a migrant had experienced on his journey and he reprimanded me for it. I realised that I had become desensitised to the strife of the migrants in transit, apologised and adjusted my behaviour.

Risk, risk management, and trust

Social networks are fundamental within the international and clandestine migration process (Flores-Yeffal 2013; Lusk et al. 2019; Palloni et al. 2001). Ties quickly become essential for survival and/or accessing resources. Although established networks are still important, new studies have shown that associating with strangers is one of the most efficient ways for undocumented migrants to adapt to a new reality, especially when migrants are vulnerable and surrounded by uncertainty (Díaz de León 2019; Wheatley & Gomberg-Muñoz 2016). Central American migrants in transit form new social ties during their transit through Mexico (González Arias & Aikin Araluce 2015; Vogt 2018). These links, which can range from short encounters to longer associations, allow them to reduce the costs of migrating by providing them with protection, information, and sometimes resources (Lusk et al. 2019). Migrants from Central America whom I interviewed in the northern border region of Mexico suggested that, "without the help of their social ties they would not have been able to survive the road." It is important to remember that these connections the migrants made that were so important for them were formed with strangers they met on a dangerous and unpredictable road.

Migrants in transit cannot choose isolation; they need to engage and cooperate with other people in order to get up-to-date information, material resources and a sense of solidarity and belonging. In this article I analyse how migrants decide if another migrant is trustworthy before and during their initial interaction. This is an important question. Learning how migrants choose whom to trust in an extremely risky situation will help researchers understand how people – under stress – make split-second decisions about others. It is impossible to observe trustworthiness directly. To decide if someone can be trusted, people pay attention to the signs and signals that others are sending. Although we all do that constantly for low-risk interactions in our lives, for migrants, deciding whom to trust is extremely important. The context in which the interaction happens affects what is considered a sign of trustworthiness. In dangerous and violent situations, we expect people to demand more costly

signs of trustworthiness as they have more to lose. There have been several ethnographies that study how levels of trust change between people, authorities and institutions in dangerous situations such as civil unrest (Askew 2009) or in prison (Liebling & Arnold 2012). These scholars focus on changes that happen to relationships that already exist, not to new ones. This article conceptualises how the initial approach is made, before a tie is formed.

Gambetta and Hamill (2005) studied how cab drivers in dangerous cities decided which prospective passengers to pick up; whom they trusted enough to let ride in their cab. Drivers need to pick up fares in order to make a living, while migrants need information and help in order to survive. Drivers need to decide in an instant which passenger seems trustworthy. They learn for themselves whom to consider trustworthy, and thus each driver has his or her own version of a "good passenger". To arrive at this notion, drivers combined their own biases, statistical discrimination, and their past experience. In general, drivers observe a passenger's gender and skin colour, the clothes they are wearing, the location, and any accessories they carry to decide whether to stop for them. Although they prefer white women who look well-presented and flag them in a well-lit and safe location, they often need to stop for other fares to earn enough money. Cab drivers are constantly calculating if the combination of signs and signals given out by a person, and her personal characteristics makes her trustworthy enough to stop for. However, cab drivers face the risk of "bad customers" mimicking good customers. While gender and race are difficult or very costly to disguise, some other signs and signals associated with good customers give are easy to imitate, for example their clothing and accessories. When drivers stop for someone they need to be able to discern false signs and signals.

The situation for migrants in transit is similar, although the stakes are higher (Izcara-Palacios 2012). They are more likely than cab drivers to be robbed, beaten, kidnapped, or killed if they make a bad judgement. Migrants are more inexperienced and have less time to learn the rules of the game and the way people interact while migrating. Although many migrants start their journeys alone, they are constantly surrounded by others including migrants, activists, concerned citizens, and criminals. These actors can influence the migrants with their own biases about what constitutes a "good person" on the road. Finally, the cost of imitating a trustworthy migrant is very low, as I will demonstrate. Observing the interactions between newly arrived migrants and people already in the migrant shelters, the church, or the park and then interviewing the people who interacted with each other allowed me to learn whom they considered "good" or trustworthy and whom they avoided.

The "good", trustworthy migrant

When new groups of migrants arrived at the migrant shelter in Palenque in the southern border region of Mexico, they had to wait a while on the *patio* while

volunteers completed their admission forms. On one occasion, a dark, short, stout man with a green backpack, clean white shoes, and a confident grin stood among the group of men and women waiting to be let in. Pedro, a Honduran man told me, "Look at that man, there's something suspicious about him, he looks…different. Don't trust him if you interview him." As my fieldwork progressed and I asked everyone how they decided whom they could trust, I started to notice that most people were describing the same idealized type of "good" migrant. In this section I detail how migrants describe a trustworthy migrant by paying attention to: appearance, attitude, accessories or props, and speech. As Marlo, a 19-year-old migrant from Honduras, summarises it: "*Se les ve*, you can see if they are good or bad." I do not believe that any one of these four characteristics is more important than the others. Migrants take all of these in and put them together to make decisions about who seems trustworthy.

Appearance

Crossing Mexico takes its toll on migrants. They have to walk for weeks under the scorching sun or the relentless rain, they sleep in the jungle or on the train tracks, and they carry everything they consider valuable in a small backpack. They do not have the opportunity to shower very often or to wash their clothes. The sun tans them and discolours their clothes. Often, they are scratched by the vegetation or stung or bitten by bugs. Their noses and cheeks start to peel. The journey is arduous and they suffer along the way, which is evident from their faces, their clothes (dusty and worn), and their shoes (falling apart). Their appearance signals several things. First, it shows that they are migrants who have endured life on the road for a long time. It also shows that they are *humildes* [humble]. Pedro, a 43-year-old migrant from El Salvador, undertaking his fifth migration, explained it as follows: "the road makes you humble…you can see someone who you can trust because he is humble, like oneself, and he has the same objective, to improve his life." I was continuously told that humble people are "true migrants" and that "true migrants" will not trick you because they only want to get to the northern border. Just a couple of days after embarking on their migration, they acquire this "look". As Chino told me in Saltillo, "the dignity is chipped away as soon as we come into the country, we become dirty, not important."

Those claiming to be migrants but who are too clean, too rested, and wearing shoes in good condition are considered suspicious. If the scars a person acquires along the road are not visible, people assume he is a smuggler or *enganchador*, someone who seeks out migrants who are by themselves and convince them to go with him. Sometimes *enganchadores* take the migrants safely to the north for a price but more often they rob or kidnap them. Smugglers or *enganchadores* can mimic a humble migrant. They can choose to wear faded clothes and scuffed shoes, and they can avoid showering for a while. They might also walk with the migrants for stretches of time so that they get

dusty and tired like them. Often, these people have migrated before or had intended to get to the United Sates, but for various reasons decided or were forced to work as smugglers or *enganchadores*. Because it is very cheap and easy to imitate a "legitimate" migrant, often criminals use this tactic.

Tattoos are more difficult to hide. Tattoos are, for most migrants on the road, a clear sign that someone is untrustworthy. Tattoos mean two things; that the person with the tattoos was in a gang in Central America or that he has spent time in prison in the United States. Either way, very few people trust migrants who have tattoos. For example, when I asked Chaparro, a 22-year-old man from Honduras, how he could distinguish who was likely to hurt him before they interacted, he replied: "You can see, you can see he is bad, everyone who is tattooed is bad." This definitive statement is at odds with the fact that many of the people who told me something similar, including Chaparro himself, had tattoos on their chests or on their upper arms that were not visible to everyone. For them, their tattoos should not suggest that they were part of a gang or had been in prison; they had the tattoos done for personal reasons, often to remember a special moment or their families. When I confronted them with this dissonance, migrants usually echoed Chaparro's response: "yeah, but I know I am a good person, the tattoos do not make me a criminal."

This theme of the contradiction between the way the migrants I interviewed defined a good person and the way they presented themselves continues as I describe the other characteristics that they observe. For them, this did not produce a conflict because they know themselves and their own intentions and they know that their reasons for travelling north are legitimate. They do not need to pay attention to the way they look or act because they can see inside their hearts.

Attitude

In general, migrants observe how confident the person seems to be. They notice his eyes and how he looks at them, and they note whether or not he is religious and if he seems nice. These are characteristics that can be observed from a safe distance, but they can also be teased out in the first couple of minutes of conversation. During my fieldwork, I sometimes observed how a lively conversation ended when someone committed a *faux pax* in the way he presented himself. Everything went quiet and everyone moved away and left the now untrustworthy migrant alone. Even from a distance, migrants can judge people's confidence. There are some people who are loud, wave their hands around too much, ask for too much food, and occupy a lot of physical space. According to a migrant in Saltillo, such people "are just strutting around, showing their phones and talking loudly." They do not seem as beaten down by their situation as they should be. Again, this comes back to the humble attitude that other migrants expect to see in "good migrants."

When I asked, "How do you know you can trust that guy?" or "How would I know if I could trust him?" almost all the migrants told me that it is something in the eyes. Miriam, whom I met in Nogales told me: "you know when someone is bad because they are looking too much at you and they have the face of a criminal. Someone is looking too much at you and they might follow you and check out what you are doing. It feels horrible". Migrants in transit do not trust those who stare at them. Why would someone look straight at them in such a dangerous setting? What is he or she trying to find out?

The last, and perhaps the most counterintuitive, attitude that makes someone an immediate suspect is being nice and too generous. There is an appropriate level of generosity, but it is difficult to achieve: "when we were sitting down and the sun was hitting us on the back, very very strong, and we were hot and thirsty, this man I didn't know offered me a sip of his water. He had very little and he shared it. I don't know, that's when I knew he was OK," Nahu told me, describing how he knew Juanjo was a person he could trust. They eventually became so close that they travelled north together. However, people who are too nice and too generous are immediately branded smugglers or *enganchadores* by other migrants and consequently are avoided. The line between being generous and *too* generous is thin and very difficult to navigate. Rogelio, who had attempted to cross Mexico unsuccessfully seven times tried to explain the difference: "I mean, a sip of water is one thing but offering to pay for something expensive like a roasted chicken or offering to make a phone call for you are definitely dodgy. Who can afford to be so generous? It's obviously a trick. I never accept anything from others unless I asked for it first and I'm still alive."

Accessories or props

Migrants also observe the accessories that other people are wearing to get a sense of their true personality. Anyone who has a phone is immediately branded as a smuggler, an *enganchador*, or a potential kidnapper or spy. Real migrants are believed to never carry phones, not even to keep in touch with their family or to look up a map of the route they are taking. The idea is so pervasive that the use of phones is forbidden in some migrant shelter and if anyone is found using one, it may be confiscated. This is because, if someone *is* a criminal, phones would allow him to coordinate hits, meet-ups, and crimes. Weapons make someone suspicious immediately. I often asked migrants if they carried knives to protect themselves and I was always told: "you don't want to bring a knife because that is looking for trouble. What if a *marero* [gang member] took our stuff and saw the knife? He would think we are up to no good and would do us."

That is exactly what happened to Darwin and Elvin, two first-time migrant brothers from Honduras who had bought a *machete* from a peasant in Palenque. I told them I did not think it was a good idea for them to take it with them.

However, they did not listen: they wanted to feel protected and to have some defence against criminals, maybe even gang members. They were about to follow the train tracks from Palenque to the next town. When they left, another migrant approached me and told me, "they are idiots, they will get killed. You all know that if you have a gun the gang members will think you are competition, or you have something to protect and they will kill you. They'll be dead tomorrow." I was angry and frustrated that he had not told them this himself, so I upbraided him. He responded, "I don't trust people with weapons, I was not going to talk to them about it." The next day it emerged that both brothers had been murdered a couple of kilometres from where we parted ways. They had been chopped up with their own *machete*, some said. Some of the props that make someone look like an honest migrant have already been mentioned. Backpacks are especially important, while shabby hats and tattered shoes also signal that someone has suffered as a result of walking for hours in the relentless heat. People who carried Bibles were always described as trustworthy by others.

Way of speaking

The way people speak also affects how trustworthy they seem. It is important to have a Central American accent. This obviously excludes some of the groups that have started using the migrant route such as Haitians and Cubans, for example. Some people I met did not trust migrants from outside of Central America. In one instance, a very blond Russian migrant arrived at the Saltillo migrant shelter with someone who we thought was a Colombian migrant and everyone refused to talk to them. The Colombian kept insisting he was from Honduras, but the Hondurans did not believe him. They could not recognise his accent. Most migrants were upset that the migrant shelter personnel had let them in and even I felt reluctant to talk to them. People also pay attention to local inflections and recognise which town others are from; that usually makes them bond faters.

How do you imitate the good migrant?

The second interview I conducted was with Santos, and I thought it went well. He seemed genuine and he told me how he had left El Salvador and had endured the scorching sun, the pain, and a couple of run-ins with the *Migra* before arriving at Palenque. I was struck by the conversation and amazed at his story and his eloquence. Later, as my fieldwork progressed and I got to know the *real* Santos, I learned that he had invented most of his story, telling me what I wanted to hear. It turned out that he was born in El Salvador and had left for the United States with his family when he was eight because his father had deserted the Salvadorian military. Santos grew up in the United States but was deported back to El Salvador a couple of years before I met him for re-

peated drug dealing offences. A couple of months before I arrived in Palenque, he started posing as a migrant on his way north to gather information about others on the road, and later to extort or threaten them. The example of Santos illustrates how someone with bad intentions can mimic a "good" migrant and how blurred the line is between a legitimate and an illegitimate migrant.

Santos spent most of his time sitting outside the migrant shelter in Palenque with a small group of people. From far away they looked poor. They were tanned and their shoes looked worn. It was obvious they had had a hard life. Santos rarely looked downcast or shy if there were no researchers or other migrants around. However, when a new group of migrants arrived, I could see the change in him as he mimicked the characteristics I described in the Attitude section. He would look down and would never engage the newcomers directly in conversation. Often, when the new migrants seemed unsure about what to do, as the migrant shelter only opened its doors at certain times, he would reluctantly give them some advice before retreating. He never offered help in an ostentatious way and he was never as loud and funny as I knew he could be.

As we became familiar with each other, Santos eventually told me that he no longer intended to go to the United States. He had tried but had got stuck in Palenque (he never explained why). Now he survived by doing "this and that." From my conversations with other people in the area and from talking to migrants, I know that what he actually did was pretend he worked for the gangs and ask the migrants for a fare to ride on top of the train. Sometimes he promised food or help – that he never delivered – in exchange for money. He was not violent, but his scams affected the ability of his victims to buy food, shelter, or move more easily to the north. Being victim of Santos also increased their mistrust in other migrants and made them more reluctant to cooperate in the future. We were able to have a couple of conversations where he talked about what he did. I eventually asked him how he established a rapport with new people so quickly.

> I try to be quiet when I meet them because they spook quickly, you know. Then, if they start talking about the road, I share my stories of suffering and pain. You might not believe me but everything I tell them is the truth, I was beaten by the *migra* [migration officers in Mexico] and I did get these scars, you see? I am a migrant, like them, I just decided to stay here and make money…then, when we all tell our sad stories, sometimes I offer them advice and ask them about themselves. The man there, for example, after that, he started telling me about his family and his wife; if I were a bad man, I would know he has people worried about him and could use it.

Santos had learned how to mimic a "good" migrant – because he had been one himself and because he had observed migrants carefully – and was able to keep the facade up for long periods of time. He comes from El Salvador and has brown skin, was sunburned, and had some scars from previous journeys. There were some things he had to alter, though. He knew he had to keep wearing his

tattered shoes, and he always wore long sleeves to cover a couple of tattoos he had done while in prison in Illinois. He used his phone in secret. He assumed a vulnerable and downcast demeanour. He did not approach the migrants, but waited for them to come to him and then reluctantly helped them. Although some could sense that there was something suspicious about him from a distance, many trusted him initially and were swindled out of their money.

Santos' case shows that the distinction between a "good migrant" and a "bad migrant" can be quite subtle and difficult to discern. He *was* a migrant in Mexico, and he was still vulnerable. He had tried to cross Mexico and suffered like the others; he had the scars to prove it. He had learned how to imitate a trustworthy migrant because he had originally been one. Thus, mimicking "good migrants" is easy because, by definition, the costs are low. The definition of a migrant is based on suffering, which is manifested through sunburn, scars, and a person's attitude and because some of the other external signs are cheap to imitate (attitude, clothing, and props). Additionally, most of the people who pretend to be migrants going northwards did intend to go to the United States at some point; therefore, they know what is expected of them.

The mobility of transit migration makes it easier for people like Santos to remain effective at what they do. Those who fell victim to his tricks could not report him to the police for fear of being deported themselves. They usually moved on quickly after being extorted while Santos stayed behind. Every couple of days his slate would be erased, and he could start charming the new cohort of migrants. In transit, it is impossible to form a lasting reputation. The people who stayed knew, of course. The activists warned migrants against him and scolded him frequently. However, this did not protect everyone. As long as he was able to strike up a conversation with a new arrival around the migrant shelter and to gain his trust for a couple of hours, he was set. If the signal of trustworthiness is "cheap" enough, then some untrustworthy people will use it (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001). As I have shown in this section, in transit, the idea of a "good migrant" is consistent, and the signals are cheap enough that some people can use them to trick others. This is especially true when the structure is open and the interactions are short and singular. In the following section, I explain where this consistent idea of the good migrant originates and how it is reproduced.

The construction and reproduction of the good migrant

It is striking that most of the descriptions of a trustworthy migrant along the migrant route were relatively uniform, especially considering the diversity of people who are trying to cross Mexico. Gambetta and Hamill (2005), in contrast, observed several common traits that most cab drivers considered suspicious (like ethnicity, for example), but many more that varied. There were as many good customers as there were drivers. I interviewed a wide variety of people from different Central American countries, with diverse migratory his-

tories, and at different stages of their migration journey. They all described the same type of good or trustworthy migrant: someone who wants to get to the United States to improve his life and who has "*s*uffered" on the road to achieve this. He has a "mestizo", brown phenotype, "looks tired, worn down", and is sunburnt and scratched; he is "polite but not chatty" and not too attentive; he is "poor and generous but not too generous"; he is "unarmed" and does not have a mobile phone and he speaks with a Central American accent. In this section I discuss where this uniform idea comes from, how it is perpetuated, and what is lost and who is affected when there is only one type of good migrant.

The idea of who is trustworthy rarely comes from the pre-established social networks of the migrants in transit or from their own experience of crossing. Most of the people I interviewed had acquaintances who had migrated before; however, very few of them had received help from them when they decided to cross. Others, especially first-time young migrants who had fled the violence of their countries or made the impulsive decision to leave, left without any advice or information: "I left *en blanco*, with no information. I didn't even know how big Mexico was." In contrast to other migration systems (like the Mexico-United States one), I did not observe that the families of Central American migrants transmitted a lot of information to them. Interestingly, migrants who have acquired migration-specific knowledge through several journeys do not significantly alter their conception of who is trustworthy on the road.

Activists and migrant shelters are an important source of information. Many of the arguments that activists use to defend undocumented migration focus on the benefits and worthiness of the undocumented migrants and not on the principle of open borders. As a result, they create a distinction between good deserving migrants and bad undeserving ones. This necessarily excludes undocumented migrants who are not model citizens, who have committed crimes or who do not conform to the "good migrant" narrative. This distinction is also clear along the migrant route. A good migrant-in-transit is someone who is enduring the migrant route and who has left his home country for "legitimate reasons" (poverty, violence, climate change). A nun working in a migrant shelter in the northern border region told me that: "the *real migrants* are the ones who are striving and suffering on the road, they do not want to hurt anyone, they just want to help their families. The poor things! They need our help!" During my fieldwork I initially found myself feeling annoyed that those in transit had time to play soccer or have fun. I later reflected that I expected them to be suffering constantly because I saw them as migrants, not the complex individuals that they are.

The leading academic and journalistic arguments that are used to defend undocumented migrants often reinforce a distinction between good and bad migrants by portraying migrants as innocent victims or as assets to their new countries (Fernández 2019; Sebastiani 2018). Although their intentions may be good, when they use these narratives, they erase the variety of characteristics, objectives, and stories of those who migrate. They remove their complexity

and perpetuate a simplified and singular idea of what constitutes a legitimate migrant who deserves our help and concern. The idea of the good migrant is perpetuated and co-created by those who help them, especially in the migrant shelters and migrant canteens. In these spaces, scattered along the migrant route in Mexico and in the United States-Mexico border region, migrants in transit can rest and get some help for a couple of days. Most are run by local Catholic priests or nuns with the help of volunteers, although there are some secular ones. Those who care for the migrants do so at great personal risk. Many are under threat from the local authorities or cartels. Often, the community rejects the migrant shelter and waits for an opportunity to close it down. Evidently, the people who run these places need to be very careful about whom they let in.

It is common knowledge that, among those who want to move to the north, there are usually people pretending to be migrating. They are there to find clients if they are smugglers, or victims if they work for a criminal organization. The people who run the migrant shelters do their best to detect them and keep them out. But, as I have shown, mimicking a trustworthy migrant is cheap so the personnel often have to use their knowledge and their biases to decide whom to allow in and whom to turn away. This is where the "ideal migrant" shortcut becomes useful. Ricardo, who worked as a guard at a migrant shelter in the southern border region told me:

> It's obviously very difficult to know for sure who is a *malandro*, a criminal, but I've learned what to pay attention to. If they are too clean or too confident or if they have phones or guns, I don't let them in. If I believe I recognise them from before I might not let them in. When they have tattoos, we do let them in, but I keep an eye on them. I know there are many smugglers and *enganchadores* inside, but we are doing our best to keep the real migrants safe. It's an impossible job.

Those whose appearance, clothing, and accessories conformed to the stereotype of a trustworthy migrant are able to overcome the first hurdle – to be allowed through the door. Once inside, they learn how to behave and conform if they want to continue getting help. They listen to the speeches before meals, to the warnings of the people inside the migrant shelter, and they observe how those who play the role of the good migrant are treated better because they are considered "real migrants" who have suffered a lot. This is where the idea of a trustworthy migrant – for other migrants and for the activists – gets mixed up with the idea of a "good" or "legitimate" migrant. Only those who migrate for legitimate reasons (poverty or violence) and suffer on the road are considered real migrants. Real migrants are trustworthy and good. They learn to be – or to appear – grateful for whatever they are given to eat (even though many do not like the prickly pear that Mexicans eat), to look down and adopt a humble demeanour, and to be quiet and polite. They quickly come to understand that having a story of hardship and the goal of reaching the northern border – or seek-

ing a better life – is what makes people believe that someone is a real migrant who deserves help and compassion. Migrants, especially young and inexperienced ones, internalise these lessons and apply them to the people they meet.

Undocumented migrants who are welcomed in those spaces feel that they need to repay the debt they incur just by being there and so they strive to fulfil the expectations of those who help them (Thayer Correa 2013). The behaviour of the migrant shelter personnel teaches those in transit about the expected conduct of the good migrant who deserves help. A nun once told me: "they are poor and humble and grateful. They take what you offer because they have nothing." In a migrant shelter on the southern border, on one occasion we had some visitors from the press. The migrants sat in chairs looking at the honoured guest and sang some songs. Then, one of the nuns called on Roque, who had been kidnapped and held hostage for a month, to tell his story. She said, "Roque, your story is pretty hard. Tell it to these people so that they see what you poor migrants experience in Mexico." Roque's heart-rending story helped reinforce the notion that he deserved a place in the migrant shelter and to show that the nuns were helping good, deserving migrants to stay alive.

Who is excluded from this definition of "good migrant"? Those with a darker skin tone or with a completely different phenotype are excluded. For example, Garifuna (black migrants from Honduras), Cuban, Chinese, or Haitian migrants are more visible and are discriminated against. Pedro, a Honduran told me, "Yeah, we don't hang out with the *morenos*, the black people, because they exclude themselves and like to go in their own groups. I don't know if they will hurt us, but they will definitely make us more visible. We don't like travelling with them and I think they don't like moving with us." Their skin tone or nationality excluded them from forming bonds of solidarity with the others. People who have served time in prison are excluded too. Younger men who cannot adjust their behaviour also receive less favourable treatment. When a couple of confident looking men arrived at the church in Palenque, everyone avoided them. "They must be onto something", Juan, a 20-year-old migrant from El Salvador, whispered to me, "otherwise, why would they strut around the area as if they weren't scared. Be careful with them."

For those who can adjust their appearance, behaviour, and attitude, being classed as the good migrant is invaluable. However, the good migrant trope remains problematic as it reinforces the idea that there is only one way to be perceived as deserving of help, trust, and compassion. Those with darker or lighter skin, people with visible tattoos, those who are more vocal about demanding help or those who do not like the food that is freely offered to them are considered unworthy, ungrateful, and not there for the right reasons. In 2018, when the migrant caravans acquired a more visible presence in the media, one news clip showed a Honduran woman saying that she did not like beans and would like something else to eat (Redacción 2019).

People in Mexico were furious: how dare she ask for something else to eat if she was a transit migrant? Most of them thought she should have acted like

the good migrant, put her head down and said nothing and eaten the beans that she was given. The backlash against her and the members of the caravan was so intense that she was eventually forced to apologise and show humility in order to regain her place as the good migrant who deserved help (Rojas 2018). Sometimes, when I speak in public forums about migration, people ask me about that woman as a way of reminding me that not everyone who crosses Mexico is a legitimate migrant.

Conclusion

In this article I have advanced the way we approach the concept of trust by showing in a non-experimental setting how people make on-the-spot decisions about whether to trust strangers. I described how people observe the appearance, attitude, accessories, and way of speaking of others before they decide if they will engage. I displayed the contradictions in which people fall when they describe who they trust. Furthermore, I showed how often, people describe characteristics they themselves have as untrustworthy (such as having tattoos or bad attitudes); even when they consider themselves trustworthy. In other words, they would not trust themselves if they met themselves on the street.

My research is the first study – to my knowledge – that attempts to understand how strangers who are surviving extreme violence and uncertainty make quick decisions about whom to engage with. I show that in these exceptionally high risk situations, where injury or death is likely, people tend to rely on the biases and knowledge they acquired from people who seem more knowledgeable rather than on their first-hand experiences. For migrants in transit, the voices of authority come from the members of their families with migration experience and from activists. I contribute to the knowledge of trust by showing how inflexible the ideas of whom is trustworthy become after someone has accepted them. Even as migrants gain more experience, their image of whom is trustworthy tends to remain uncompromising, even when the lived experiences of those on the road show them otherwise.

The fact that there is only one model of "good migrant" and that some of the characteristics are easy to imitate makes it easy for criminals to take advantage of migrants. At the same time, the archetype excludes those who might have no criminal intent but who are unable to, or unaware that they have to adopt a particular appearance and attitude to signal their trustworthiness. This prevents them from having meaningful interactions that would help them access information or material help. I provide a critique to the idea of who deserves help and trust in the transit through Mexico by showing how problematic the idea of the "good migrant" is. Creating and reinforcing a consistent and idealised notion of who is good and deserving ignores the fact that those who cross Mexico are people with complex reasons for moving, with varied life histories, personalities and goals. This affects the way in which migrants are treated and the way in which they treat each other.

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Notes

1   Migrant shelters are shelters run by volunteers where migrants can rest, eat, and get information. Migrants stay for a couple of days and move on. There are around 60 shelters in Mexico.
2   In the northern shelters, migrants try to find smugglers to take them across the United States-Mexico border. They usually use their networks to find someone and rarely accept someone who approaches them independently. How migrants choose their smugglers is beyond the scope of this article so I do not discuss this further.
3   I refer to them by pseudonyms and have removed any identifying details.

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