



Research Article

Emotional Labor and Mental Health in Adult Education: Reintegration Among Deported Mexicans in Bilingual Call Centers Post-COVID 19

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of bilingual call centers in Mexico as platforms for reintegration and skill development for Mexicans deported from the United States post-COVID-19. Utilizing a qualitative research framework, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews in Tijuana and Juarez, combined with ethnographic fieldwork, to explore the lived experiences of deported individuals working in these call centers. Our analysis reveals that while call centers provide critical employment opportunities and access to adult education, they also pose significant mental health challenges due to stressful work conditions and frequent exposure to caller abuse. The findings underscore the need for targeted policy interventions to improve work conditions and support the mental health of this vulnerable population. This paper contributes to the discourse on migration and adult education by highlighting the complex dynamics of bilingual call centers as both avenues for socio-economic reintegration and sources of psychological stress for deported Mexicans.

Keywords: title 42, post-deportation, bilingual call centers, adult education, mental health, reintegration

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted various societal sectors and vulnerable groups, notably immigrants and refugees. The United States, in response to the pandemic, significantly expanded the use of Title 42, a public health law, to facilitate the rapid expulsion of individuals without standard immigration proceedings, disproportionately affecting Mexican nationals (Sherman-Stokes, 2021; Singer et al., 2023). Many of these individuals, having established lives in the U.S., found themselves deported to Mexico, a country they had often left years before, facing the daunting task of socio-economic reintegration.

In this context, bilingual call centers across Mexico have become pivotal, leveraging the bilingual skills of deported Mexicans to serve primarily English-speaking clients, mainly from the United States (Alarcón & Heyman, 2013; Alarcón & Cordero, 2019). These centers not only provide immediate employment opportunities but also access to adult education programs, essential for the development of job-related skills and personal growth. However, the working conditions within these centers are marked by challenges such as low wages, long hours, and frequent verbal abuse from clients (Da Cruz, 2018), complicating the narrative of reintegration and skill development.

This paper aims to explore the post-deportation experiences of Mexicans, with a particular focus on their engagement with bilingual call centers as a pathway for socio-economic reintegration and access to adult education.

Guided by research questions concerning the lived experiences of deported Mexicans in call centers, the facilitation of skill learning, and the mental health outcomes of such employment, this study employed a qualitative research framework in Tijuana and Juarez, two of the most important cities along the US-Mexico border. Through ethnographic fieldwork and thirty in-depth interviews with individuals deported during and after the pandemic, this research seeks to illuminate the complex role of call centers in the lives of deported Mexicans (Clarke & Braun, 2021). By delving into these experiences, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by bilingual call centers for deported individuals. It aims to stimulate discussion among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners about effective strategies to support this vulnerable population, with a particular focus on adult education and mental health, thereby enriching the discourse on social education from a multicultural perspective.

1.1 Literature review

It is important to consider that adult education refers to all forms of learning and schooling that adults engage in beyond traditional secondary education. It includes formal education, such as diploma and degree programs, and informal learning experiences aimed at personal and professional development. In the specific context of this study, adult education encompasses the structured training and skill development programs provided by bilingual call centers to their employees. These programs are designed to enhance language proficiency, technical skills, and customer service capabilities, facilitating the reintegration of deported individuals into the Mexican economy and society. In this regard, adult education is not merely a pedagogical practice but a transformative tool for socio-economic empowerment and reintegration (Jarvis, 2004). Research on adult education often highlights its role in fostering lifelong learning, crucial for adapting to rapidly changing global economies (Field, 2011). In bilingual call centers, this education transcends language skills, encompassing technical and soft skills imperative for a wide array of employment sectors (Schuller & Watson, 2009).

Globally, policies in adult education have progressively acknowledged the necessity of equipping adults with diverse skills for their socio-economic enhancement (Desjardins, 2017). The European Union, for instance, emphasizes upskilling and reskilling adults through its Agenda for Adult Learning, recognizing the dynamic nature of the job market (European Commission, 2015). The context of deported individuals, as examined in this study, calls for nuanced policy approaches that consider the complexities of reintegration into their native economies and societies (de Haas et al., 2019).

Studies on post-deportation experiences reveal significant challenges in reintegration, especially in the economic and social fabric of their native countries (Golash-Boza, 2015). The unique situation of deported individuals, who often have to re-adapt to a socio-cultural milieu they left behind, necessitates targeted interventions, such as adult education and skill development (Schuster & Majidi, 2015).

Bilingual call centers in countries like Mexico have been identified as significant employers for returnees, especially deported individuals (Alarcón & Heyman, 2013). These centers not only offer immediate employment but also serve as sites for adult education and skill development, crucial for social and economic reintegration (Alarcón & Cordero, 2019). This dual role makes them critical in the context of policies aimed at supporting deported individuals.

The concept of emotional labor, which entails managing personal emotions to meet job requirements, is particularly pertinent in the high-stress environments of call centers where workers, including vulnerable populations like deportees, must maintain professionalism in the face of customer hostility (Ashfort & Humphrey, 1993; Sprigg et al., 2007). This demand for emotional regulation, coupled with challenging work schedules, accentuates the need for policies that support mental well-being and professional development within these settings (Holman et al., 2002). The impact of this emotional labor across service-oriented fields further highlights its significance, suggesting that a deeper understanding of emotional labor's effects in bilingual call centers could offer valuable insights into improving deported workers' mental health and job satisfaction (Chuaychoo & Tunjoy, 2022).

The role of adult education in these call centers thus extends beyond skill acquisition, encompassing a holistic approach to socio-economic reintegration and mental health well-being. Given the unique challenges faced by deported individuals, there is a clear need for tailored educational and policy interventions to support their successful reintegration into society.

2. Methodology

This study, rooted in a qualitative framework, aims to delve into the complexities of the post-deportation experience, aligning with Schuster and Majidi's (2013) assertion on the richness of qualitative methods in exploring such phenomena. Our fieldwork was conducted in the cities of Tijuana and Juarez along the US-Mexico border, both on the Mexican side and known for their significant returnee populations and extensive call center industries (Alarcón & Heyman, 2013), we employed ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews to capture the nuanced experiences of deported Mexicans (Table 1).

Table 1. Data collection components

Data Collection Component	Observed Elements and Collected Data
Ethnographic Fieldwork	Work Environment Dynamics: Observations around the call centers to understand the physical setup and work atmosphere. This included the layout of workspaces, the interaction among employees, and any visible signs of stress or camaraderie.
	Community Interactions: Observations within community spaces frequented by employees, noting social interactions, support structures, and any community events or gatherings that might influence or reflect the participants' reintegration experiences.
	Cultural and Linguistic Practices: Attention to the use of language (English, Spanish, or code-switching) in both work and community settings to gauge cultural assimilation and identity.
In-depth Interviews	Informal Support Systems: Identification of informal networks or groups that provide emotional or practical support to deportees, evident through their interactions and shared activities during breaks or outside work hours.
	Ambivalent Perceptions of Call Centers: Participants shared mixed feelings about working in call centers, acknowledging the employment opportunity but also highlighting the stress and low remuneration associated with the job.
	Mental Health Challenges: Discussion of the psychological toll of call center work, including stress from handling abusive calls, emotional labor, and the impact on their mental well-being.
	Learning and Skill Acquisition: Insights into the educational aspects of the job, including language skill improvement, technical training, and development of interpersonal skills.
	Community and Solidarity: Narratives around the sense of community within call centers, including the formation of supportive relationships among coworkers, shared cultural and deportation experiences, and collective coping mechanisms.
	Identity and Cultural Negotiation: Reflections on the process of cultural reintegration and identity reshaping upon returning to Mexico, influenced by their work in bilingual environments.
	Impact of COVID-19: Accounts of how the pandemic exacerbated challenges, including increased workloads, transitioning to remote work, and its effects on their social and professional lives.
Adult Education and Empowerment: Experiences with ongoing learning opportunities provided by the call centers, focusing on how these programs contribute to personal growth, skill enhancement, and future career prospects.	
Policy and Working Conditions: Although not deeply delved into, some participants expressed the need for better working conditions and policy reforms within the call center industry to improve employee welfare.	

Source: Authors (2023)

The interviews were primarily conducted by two of the authors, both of whom have extensive experience in bilingual environments and are highly proficient in both English and Spanish. This bilingual capability was crucial in establishing rapport with participants and navigating the language preferences of each interviewee. Notably, the interviews were predominantly conducted in English, with occasional code-switching to Spanish. This linguistic choice was not merely a matter of convenience but reflected a distinct cultural aspect among the deportees, many of whom identified more closely with English due to their extended stay in the U.S. Additionally, participants often expressed a greater comfort level in conveying their experiences in English, resorting to "Spanglish" to articulate certain sentiments that felt more natural in their mixed linguistic repertoire.

The ethnolinguistic profile of our 30 participants ranged from 21 to 40 years old. This age distribution was not a deliberate design choice but resulted from the accessibility challenges within the call center environment. Efforts were made to balance gender representation, with an equal split of 15 males and 15 females participating. The participants had

spent varying durations in the U.S., from a few years to over two decades, which influenced their language dominance and cultural affiliations. The majority considered English their dominant language, having received significant portions of their schooling in the U.S. Spanish, while a native language for most, functioned more as a heritage language, re-engaged with more intensively upon their return to Mexico.

Our methodological approach involved a blend of non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted around the exteriors of several call centers and within surrounding community spaces, adhering to the strict access policies of these workplaces. These observations provided a broader context for understanding the reintegration environment for deportees. The ethnographic component was enriched by one author's prior five-year experience in a bilingual call center, offering deep insights into the internal dynamics and culture of these workplaces.

The semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview template informed by Schuster and Majidi (2015), aimed to elicit detailed personal narratives covering the pre-deportation, deportation, and post-deportation phases, with a focus on the call center employment experience (Table 2). Conducted in a mix of English and Spanish, these interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis, following Clarke and Braun's (2021) methodology, using AtlasTi for data management.

Table 2. Interview guide

Phase	Guiding points
Introduction	1. Greeting and personal introduction. 2. Purpose of study. 3. Confidentiality and ethics.
Background Information	1. Personal background. 2. Migration journey. 3. Deportation experience. 4. Initial reintegration challenges. 5. Decision to work in a call center. 6. Reflection on early days at the call center.
Employment Experience	1. Daily work routine. 2. Work challenges. 3. Handling difficult situations. 4. Positive aspects of work. 5. Work-life balance. 6. Reflection on employment path.
Mental Health and Emotional Labor	1. Psychological impact of work. 2. Emotional labor and customer interactions. 3. Support systems and coping mechanisms. 4. Impact of emotional labor on personal life. 5. Reflections on emotional well-being. 6. Workplace support for mental health.
Learning and Skill Development	1. Training and development opportunities. 2. Language skills enhancement. 3. Technical and soft skill acquisition. 4. Application of skills beyond the call center. 5. Personal growth and professional aspirations. 6. Feedback on educational programs.
Community and Social Support	1. Workplace community dynamics. 2. Social support systems. 3. Role of the call center in social integration. 4. Shared experiences and solidarity. 5. Impact of community on work experience. 6. Community activities and engagement.
Cultural and Identity Negotiation	1. Cultural reintegration. 2. Identity and bilingual work environment. 3. Navigating dual identities. 4. Impact of deportation on identity. 5. Social perceptions and stigma. 6. Support for cultural expression.
Impact of COVID 19	1. Work environment changes. 2. Health and safety concerns. 3. Mental and emotional impact. 4. Social and community effects. 5. Adaptations and resilience. 6. Reflections on the pandemic experience.
Future Perspectives and Policy Suggestions	1. Future aspirations. 2. Professional development needs. 3. Workplace improvement suggestions. 4. Policy recommendations. 5. Support systems for reintegration. 6. Long-term vision for deported individuals.
Closing	1. Final thoughts and additional insights. 2. Validation and appreciation. 3. Recap of anonymity and use of information. 4. Information on research outcomes. 5. Open door for further communication. 6. Closing gratitude.

Source: Authors (2023)

To ensure the reliability and validity of our findings, we employed data triangulation, member checking, and maintained a comprehensive audit trail. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal. A purposeful sampling strategy was used, with snowball sampling helping to identify additional participants. Our reflexivity throughout the research process acknowledged our academic positionality and its potential influence on data collection and analysis.

2.1 Limitations

The geographical focus on Tijuana and Juarez, while significant due to their high influx of returnees and call center industries, does not represent the varied experiences of deportees across Mexico. Different regions present unique challenges and opportunities for deported individuals, influenced by local economies, community structures, and the presence or absence of support networks.

Furthermore, our concentration on the employment sector of bilingual call centers does not capture the broader employment landscape that deported individuals navigate. Other sectors, such as manufacturing, agriculture, or informal economies, may offer different reintegration pathways and challenges that are not addressed in this study.

Additionally, the subjective nature of qualitative data, influenced by the participants' willingness to share and the researchers' interpretations, may introduce biases that could affect the findings.

It is important to mention that the study's reliance on self-reported data from interviews can be subject to memory recall biases and the tendency of participants to present themselves in a favorable light. While we endeavored to mitigate these through methodological rigor and reflexivity, such biases may still influence the data. Lastly, the dynamic nature of migration policies and the socio-political landscape, especially in the post-COVID-19 context, means that the experiences and challenges faced by deportees are continually evolving. Our study provides a snapshot of this complex situation, but ongoing research will be necessary to track these changes over time.

3. Results

Upon conducting an interpretive analysis of the interview data, we identified several salient themes encapsulating the complexities of the participants' lived experiences. These themes underscore the intricate dynamics of the bilingual call center environment and its effects on the post-deportation process. In the ensuing discussion, we will illustrate these themes using selected excerpts from the interviews to provide first-hand accounts and preserve the authenticity of the participants' narratives.

3.1 Ambivalent perceptions of call centers

Across the interviews, a recurring theme of ambivalence toward employment in call centers was observed among participants. On one hand, there was a clear acknowledgment of the vital role these centers play in providing immediate job opportunities:

“When I first came back to Mexico, I felt lost, man. I didn't know where to go, what to do. The call center job, it was like a godsend, y'know? I was thankful to get the job so quickly. It gave me something to hold onto, a chance to get back on my feet. But man, it's not an easy gig. The pay is low and the hours, they are long and tough. It's not just the long hours, but the work itself. It's mentally draining, y'know? You're constantly dealing with customers, some of them are pretty rude, even abusive. It gets to you. So, while I'm grateful for the job, it's not something I want to do forever. I mean, it's a mixed bag, right? It's helping me survive but at the same time, it's hard. It's really, really hard.” (TJ1, Personal communication, April 2023).

For many, these centers served as a much-needed anchor, particularly given the overwhelming challenges they face as returnees in navigating a potentially unfamiliar labor market and socio-cultural milieu:

“When I was deported, it felt like my world had ended. But the call center job, it was there for me. I got it almost immediately, and for that, I was grateful. It was a lifeline, y'know? A chance to earn some money, to start rebuilding my life here. But, the thing is, it's a tough job, really tough. We're talking about long hours, man, sometimes stretching into the night, and the pay, it's barely enough to scrape by. Then there's the emotional part of the job-dealing with abusive callers, day in and day out (...) So, it's this weird feeling, you know? On one hand, I'm thankful for the job, but on the other hand, I'm not happy there. It's a constant struggle, really.” (TJ2, Personal communication, April 2023).

This immediate access to employment is particularly significant in the context of broader socio-economic constraints that many deportees encounter upon their return to Mexico, such as stigma associated with deportation, limited social networks, or lack of recent local work experience (Gómez Cabrera, 2023). As such, the availability of call center jobs offers a semblance of stability and a foundation upon which they can start rebuilding their lives.

“Man, it’s a mixed bag, you know? On the one hand, I’m grateful, truly grateful. When I first got sent back, I felt lost, like a fish outta water. Everything felt foreign, even though it was supposed to be ‘home’. And then the call center gave me this chance, you know? It was something familiar-English, dealing with clients. It was a lifeline when I felt like I was drowning (...) The pay ain’t great. I mean, for the hours we put in and the kind of stuff we deal with on those calls? We should be getting more. It’s draining, man. Long hours sitting in those booths, barely getting breaks, and then you have some caller from the States treating you like trash, throwing insults, or just being plain rude (...) It’s a trip. Here I am, speaking to people from a place I called home for so long. And some of them, they’re cool, you know? Just regular customer service stuff. But then you get those few who, I don’t know if they can sense it or what, but they get real nasty. Like, ‘Go back to your country’, kinda remarks. And I’m sitting there thinking, ‘Well, here I am.’ (...) It’s hard. I won’t lie. But the camaraderie in the center helps. We all got stories, and we’ve all faced similar challenges. It’s like a brotherhood, and we lean on each other. But honestly, it’s not easy. This job, it’s a blessing and a curse. It helps us rebuild but also reminds us every day of the life we left behind.” (JZ1, Personal communication, July 2023).

However, while the significance of the employment opportunity was universally acknowledged, this sentiment of appreciation was frequently juxtaposed with expressions of discontent and frustration. Foremost among these grievances was the issue of low remuneration. Many participants felt that the wages they received were insufficient, especially when considering the rigorous demands of the job. Extended working hours further compounded this dissatisfaction, with many highlighting the challenges of managing work-life balance and the physical and mental toll of prolonged shifts.

“Every day, we get a mix of calls. Many are routine, just regular customer service stuff. But there are times when (...) some callers, when they get frustrated or angry, they throw these jabs, like ‘You people don’t even belong in our country.’ And it stings, you know? Because for a good part of my life, the U.S. was my country (...) It’s hard. The training tells us to stay professional, to not take things personally. But how can you not, when it’s so personal? I’ve had callers straight up ask if I’m ‘legal’ or say things like ‘No wonder you’re over there and not here.’ They don’t know my story or what it took for me to start over. But every insult, every dig, it’s like reliving the deportation all over again (...) Honestly? Some days I question that myself. But this job, as hard as it is, it’s also my lifeline right now. I have to provide for my family, and the call center is one of the few places that gave me a chance. Plus, not every call is bad. There are genuinely good moments and kind people. But the emotional toll, dealing with the abuse and connecting it to my own deportation experience, it’s a weight. A heavy one.” (JZ2, Personal communication, July 2023).

Perhaps most poignant was the emotional strain described by participants when dealing with frequently abusive callers (Golash-Boza, 2019). Serving predominantly English-speaking clients, often from the very country from which they had been deported, participants not only grappled with the routine challenges of customer service but also, at times, with derogatory remarks or overt hostility from callers:

“Man, it’s like walking on a tightrope. One moment, I’m just helping someone with their bill, and the next, I’m trying to dodge hurtful comments thrown my way. When they detect my accent or realize I’m in Mexico, some get real nasty (...) there’s this one time I won’t forget. The caller was getting agitated because of some issue with their account. I was trying my best to help, but then out of the blue, they say, ‘Is this why they kicked you out? Can’t even do a simple job!’ It was a low blow. I mean, they didn’t know I was deported, but it felt like they knew, you know? (...) It’s not easy. I take a deep breath, remind myself that they’re just taking out their frustration, and it’s not really about me. But sometimes, when I hear English from the very country

I grew up in, and they hurl those insults... It's a constant reminder of a life that was taken away from me. Yet, I need this job. It's a strange place to be in, feeling grateful for a job that also reopens old wounds." (TJ3, Personal communication, April 2023).

This added emotional labor, set against their own personal experiences of deportation and readjustment, underscored the complex, multi-dimensional challenges they faced in their roles.

3.2 Sites of learning and skill acquisition

The transitional experiences of returnees, as captured through their engagement with bilingual call centers, offer a nuanced exploration into the unexpected avenues for personal and professional growth. These places, often perceived solely as immediate employment solutions, reveal themselves as complex educational environments, fostering diverse skill sets that extend beyond the immediate tasks at hand.

"This job has become like... an unexpected school for me (...) Look, I've been in the U.S. for so long that I kinda started losing touch with proper Spanish, especially when it came to technical stuff or professional jargon. Here, in the call center, I had to step up both my English and my Spanish game. Every day, you're switching between languages, dealing with different clients. It's like a mental workout, y'know? I never realized just how much of my Spanish I'd let slip until I started this job (...) Ay, Dios mío, that was a trip! Back in the States, I was working construction, manual labor mostly. So, coming here, I suddenly had to learn all these computer systems, software, CRM tools. It was overwhelming at first, but now I feel confident, you know? Like I've got these tech skills I never imagined I'd have. Makes me see a whole new world of opportunities out there (...) That's another layer, man. You think it's just about solving problems, but you really gotta connect with people, feel where they're coming from. Some callers, they're upset, and you've got to be that calm voice, understand their frustrations, and guide them. It's almost like being a diplomat in these tiny, everyday moments. And that, believe it or not, has taught me patience and understanding like nothing else." (TJ7, Personal communication, April 2023).

While much emphasis is placed on the enhancement of English language skills, the development of Spanish proficiency is an aspect that warrants equal attention. Many returnees, having spent considerable time in the U.S., had experienced a gradual erosion of their native language fluency, particularly in professional and technical contexts (Enriquez & Monge, 2022). The bilingual nature of these call centers not only necessitated the sharpening of their English but also the re-acclimatization and refinement of their Spanish. Engaging daily with diverse clients, handling technical queries, and navigating varied conversations ensured that participants regained and enhanced their competency in both languages, rendering them truly bilingual assets in a globalized workforce.

"This place, it's been a classroom in its own right (...) While I was in the U.S., I worked in a restaurant, mostly taking orders and managing the front. I spoke in Spanish with coworkers but mostly English with customers. Here, the call center challenged me. I had to revive my Spanish, mold it to fit a professional setting, and at the same time, maintain my English. (...) Oh, that was a learning curve! I was used to a cash register, not these intricate computer systems. But I surprised myself, you know? With time and training, I got the hang of these platforms, CRMs, the software. Now, I feel empowered, like I've added a new skill set that makes me more versatile in the job market (...) That's one of the most demanding parts. People call with emotions-frustration, anger, confusion. And sometimes, you can sense underlying tones, like they're talking down to you. You have to tune in, really listen, not just to their words, but their feelings. I've learned to empathize, to be patient, and most importantly, to remain professional no matter what's thrown at me (...) It's ironic, but this return to Mexico, and this job in particular, has pushed me to evolve, to refine skills I didn't even know I had. Every challenge here has been an opportunity, and I'm genuinely grateful for that." (JZ6, Personal communication, July 2023).

The intricacies of customer service extend beyond mere transactional interactions. For many participants, this

role demanded an elevated level of interpersonal intelligence, requiring them to decipher and navigate emotional undercurrents, anticipate client needs, and offer solutions with tact and diplomacy. These skills, cultivated in the pressure-cooker environment of call centers, are invaluable across a range of professional landscapes, from sales to diplomacy.

“Every call is an emotional landscape, and you need to navigate it with precision and empathy (...) People don’t just call for a service or product; they call with emotions, histories, and sometimes, even baggage. They might be frustrated from a previous call, anxious about an issue they’re facing, or even overjoyed with a service they’ve received. My job is to tune into those feelings, anticipate their needs, and guide the conversation in a way that ensures a positive outcome for both of us (...) It’s like... developing a sixth sense. The high-pressure environment here really accelerates that learning. You quickly realize that mere scripted responses won’t cut it. You have to be intuitive, listen actively, and sometimes even read between the lines. And all of this, while keeping the company’s guidelines in mind (...) The ability to connect, to anticipate, to solve problems with tact—these aren’t just call center skills. They’re life skills. I can see them being essential in sales, negotiations, even in international diplomacy. It’s about understanding people and responding in the most effective way (...) Every day is a lesson here. But the growth I’ve experienced, both professionally and personally, is immeasurable.” (JZ9, Personal communication, July 2023).

An often-overlooked dimension of call center work is the interface with advanced technological systems. Many participants, especially those who previously engaged in manual labor in the U.S., found themselves thrust into an environment that demanded technological adeptness. Whether it was navigating intricate Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, troubleshooting technical issues, or utilizing various software tools for effective customer engagement, their roles invariably enhanced their IT literacy. This newfound technological confidence, juxtaposed against their prior manual work experiences, expanded their professional horizons, allowing them to envisage roles and sectors previously deemed inaccessible.

“Back in the U.S., I worked in agricultural fields, and technology wasn’t really a part of that life. Here, suddenly, I’m sitting in front of dual monitors, using headsets, and managing multiple applications at once (...) it was daunting at first. But I had this realization that if I can pick up skills in one place, I can do it in another. The CRM systems, for instance, were complicated. There were countless functions, buttons, and procedures. But with training and practice, I got the hang of it. And you know what? I discovered I had a knack for troubleshooting! When something went wrong, I began to enjoy figuring it out (...) Before this, I never considered myself ‘tech-savvy’. Now, I’m confident in my ability to navigate various software tools. It’s not just about this job; it’s opened doors in my mind. I can now imagine myself in roles I wouldn’t have dreamt of before—perhaps even in tech support or IT (...) Before, technology was something other people did. Now, it’s a part of who I am professionally. And it makes me proud to know I’ve bridged that gap, especially coming from a manual labor background. It’s proof that we can always adapt, learn, and grow, no matter where we come from.” (TJ10, Personal communication, May 2023).

With this arsenal of honed competencies, participants were not just passive receivers of skills but strategic accumulators of professional capital. Their narratives resonated with an awareness of how bilingual proficiency, combined with customer service excellence and technological savvy, set them apart in the job market. The optimism surrounding their future employability was not just a reflection of these acquired skills, but a testament to their resilience, adaptability, and the transformative power of unexpected educational environments.

“You know, when I first walked into this call center, I thought it was just a pit stop—a place to earn while I figured things out after returning to Mexico. But as the months rolled on, I began to see it differently. This wasn’t just a place where I took calls; it was like an informal university, teaching me things I didn’t expect to learn (...) My English got polished, and my Spanish—ironically, being away from Mexico for so long, I’d lost some of its nuances—got refined. But more than languages, I felt like I was strategizing for my future. Every interaction,

every tech tool I mastered, I wasn't just doing a job; I was building a professional capital, if that makes sense (...) It's made me see possibilities. With my skill set, I'm not limited to call centers. These abilities-bilingual communication, handling customer nuances, tech troubleshooting-they're transferable. They're valuable. I'm equipped for roles in tech companies, multinational firms, or even positions that involve mediation and diplomacy. I've evolved, and that's because of this environment (...) I am optimistic about the future and that's because I've recognized the potential in myself. This journey, filled with unexpected twists, has revealed a resilience and adaptability in me that I didn't know existed. The call center? It's been the catalyst. The future's open, and I feel ready for it." (JZ12, Personal communication, July 2023).

In distilling the essence of these narratives, it becomes evident that call centers serve as more than mere employment hubs for returnees. They are transformative spaces, where challenges are met with learning, growth, and an unwavering spirit of adaptability, setting the stage for promising future prospects in a rapidly evolving global job market.

3.3 Community formation and solidarity

Call centers are not merely hubs for economic activities; they function as pivotal socio-cultural arenas where intricate social bonds are established and nurtured (Enríquez & Monge, 2022). Rooted within the narratives of the returnees, the themes of community building and camaraderie provide a compelling insight into the profound relationships that develop within the challenging confines of such workplaces. At a cursory glance, a call center may seem like an archetypical modern workspace-row upon row of agents tethered to their headsets, addressing customer concerns. Yet, delve deeper, and one uncovers a vibrant social world, brimming with stories of resilience, shared histories, and collective aspirations.

"Many might look at call centers as just these sterile, corporate spaces. You know, all business, no soul. But you've been there, right in the thick of things. Tell me about the 'life' inside a call center from a returnee's perspective (...) from the outside, it does look like just another job, you know? Just a bunch of us with headphones, talking away. But inside? It's a whole different mundo. It's like this... unexpected familia that's born out of shared struggle, shared dreams (...) almost all of us in there, we've been through the same thing, ese. We've felt the pain of being pushed out from the U.S., the home we knew. Then, coming back here, it's tough, you know? Trying to find your place again. And that shared pain, that shared history, it pulls us together in a way that's... it's hard to put in words (...) It's like this sanctuary, you know? It's where you find people who get you, who've walked in your shoes. During breaks, we're sharing stories from the barrio, giving each other tips on handling tough clients, and just looking out for one another. It's an unspoken pact-like, we got each other's backs no matter what (...) we celebrate birthdays, have gatherings after shifts, there's even a soccer league some of the guys started. And the best part? If someone's having a hard day, we rally around them. It's like this circle of strength we've built, you know? Through the good and bad, we're in it together. It's not just about answering calls-it's about building a comunidad (...) It goes to show, no matter where you are or what life throws at you, if you have the right people around, you can create a little piece of home. And for us returnees, that's... that's gold, man." (TJ4, Personal communication, April 2023).

The shared experience of expulsion from the U.S., coupled with the subsequent challenges of reintegration into Mexican society, forges an almost immediate sense of kinship among the returnees (Schuster & Majidi, 2015). This shared backdrop serves as a powerful adhesive, binding individuals together in a network of mutual understanding and empathy. Within the bustling ambiance of the call center, moments of interpersonal solidarity manifest in myriad ways (Golash-Boza & Ceciliaño-Navarro, 2019). There are the informal 'support groups' that spontaneously form during break times, where returnees exchange anecdotes of their lives in the U.S., share coping strategies, or offer advice on navigating the intricacies of their newfound Mexican milieu. There's the unwritten code of 'watching each other's backs'-a protective instinct that emerges when colleagues confront particularly challenging callers or when the pressures of the job momentarily become overwhelming. The practice of mentoring new returnees, assisting them in acclimatizing to the demands of the role, further underscores this sense of community responsibility.

“We all share this scar of being booted from the U.S., and then trying to fit back into a society we sometimes feel out of sync with. That’s a heavy weight, you know? But here, that weight becomes a bond.” (TJ11, Personal communication, May 2023).

Beyond these day-to-day interactions, deeper bonds of friendship frequently crystallize. Celebrations, gatherings, and shared social activities outside the workplace become common, as returnees find solace in the company of those who ‘truly understand’ their complex emotional and socio-cultural journey. This, in turn, facilitates a robust support network, enabling individuals to collectively negotiate the multifaceted challenges they face, both within and outside the call center environment (Schuster & Majidi, 2015). In essence, the call center, while fundamentally an employment avenue, metamorphoses into a crucible where returnees, navigating the complexities of their transitional lives, come together to forge a resilient and vibrant community. This process of community formation underscores the adaptability of the human spirit, demonstrating how, even within challenging contexts, individuals can create spaces of mutual support, understanding, and belonging.

3.4 Struggles with mental health

Expulsion from one’s familiar environment and subsequent reintegration into a society that may appear foreign, despite being one’s birthplace, undeniably introduces an array of psychological challenges. The act of deportation isn’t a mere physical relocation; it’s an involuntary severing of deeply-rooted connections—be it familial, social, or professional (Hamilton et al., 2023). Many participants recounted feelings of abrupt dislocation, loss, and a palpable sense of identity crisis post-deportation. The ensuing adjustment period often further amplifies these emotions, as individuals grapple with renegotiating their sense of self within a cultural and social landscape that may seem at odds with their recent lived experiences.

“Getting deported was like a punch to the gut. Imagine being uprooted from everything familiar—your family, friends, work—and just dropped back into a place that’s supposed to be home, but it doesn’t feel like it anymore. It’s not just a physical move, you know? It’s like a part of me was left behind. The whole ordeal felt like a betrayal, like my very identity was being questioned (...) There’s this lingering sadness, too—a kind of depression. And the job? It keeps you on edge, it’s like I’m constantly bracing for the next challenge, the next tough call. The memories of my deportation, mixed with the demands of the job, it’s... it’s just overwhelming (...) just when I’m trying to process one trauma, the job throws another curveball. The constant repetition, always having to be on alert—it’s draining. Sometimes, I feel I don’t have the emotional strength to deal with it all. It’s a double battle, you know? Coping with the pain of being uprooted and then, facing the relentless grind of the call center. It’s tough.” (JZ3, Personal communication, July 2023).

On transitioning to the call centers, participants also encountered a different set of stressors—high call volumes, frequent confrontations with irate customers, and the pressure to meet performance metrics. Furthermore, the necessity to continuously switch between English and Spanish, cater to diverse client needs, and maintain professionalism under strain adds layers of cognitive and emotional load.

“With every call, there’s this pressure to perform, to solve the problem, and to be on point, language-wise. All that, on top of managing the emotional baggage of each interaction. It’s a lot, especially when you’re already carrying the weight of what happened with the deportation and all. The job’s demands, combined with the emotional rollercoaster I’m on, sometimes it feels like I’m on the verge of breaking.” (JZ13, Personal communication, July 2023).

Anxiety and depression, as reported by participants, can often be traced back to the combined pressures of navigating their new roles while concurrently processing their deportation trauma. Chronic stress, too, emerged as a consistent theme. The perpetual state of heightened alertness demanded by their job, coupled with the lingering shadows of their expulsion experience, creates an environment ripe for the emergence of chronic stress symptoms (Oh et al., 2017).

“Many of us are already battling anxiety and depression from the deportation, and the job just intensifies those feelings. It’s this vicious cycle: The more anxious you are, the harder it gets to handle the calls, and the harder the calls get, the more anxious you become (...) The work is repetitive, and you’ve gotta be vigilant all the time. For someone still trying to make sense of their deportation, the job becomes an extra layer of stress they’re not fully equipped to handle. We’re doing our best, but man, it’s a heavy load to carry.” (TJ9, Personal communication, May 2023).

The demanding nature of call center work, characterized by its repetitive nature and the need for constant vigilance, can exacerbate existing mental health vulnerabilities. This is especially poignant for those still in the throes of processing their deportation, as they might lack the necessary emotional bandwidth to effectively manage the added work-related stress.

3.5 The COVID 19 pandemic’s exacerbated challenges

The pandemic’s onset saw a rapid escalation in customer service demands. This increase can be attributed to several factors: with confinement measures in place, more consumers resorted to telephonic and online methods of communication, leading to a surge in the number of inbound calls and service requests. The changing global landscape ushered in by the pandemic meant that consumers’ questions and concerns evolved, requiring call center agents to be adept at handling a broader spectrum of queries, ranging from health and safety protocols to changes in service delivery (Auer, 2022). Transitioning to remote working arrangements or managing reduced on-site staff due to safety protocols presented its set of operational challenges, with participants often struggling to access necessary resources or collaborate effectively with team members. The amalgamation of these factors resulted in augmented stress levels among the participants, who already grappled with the intrinsic pressures of their roles.

“Moving to remote work sounds great, right? Working from home in your pajamas? But the reality was different. We had to make sure our internet was fast enough, deal with software issues, and sometimes, the tools we needed just weren’t accessible like they were back at the office. Communication with team members became harder. And it wasn’t just about the job—we missed seeing each other, the small chit-chat during breaks. That sense of community was disturbed (...) We were already dealing with the regular pressures of the job. Now, add to that the surge in calls, the emotional toll of hearing so many worried voices, and the operational challenges of the ‘new normal’. It was a heavy load, and it weighed on all of us.” (TJ5, Personal communication, April 2023).

While social distancing measures were crucial for public health, they inadvertently compounded the challenges faced by returnees in their attempts to reintegrate into Mexican society. Participants’ narratives underscored several pertinent issues. For many, the act of deportation had already wrought feelings of isolation. The pandemic-induced distancing measures further heightened these sentiments, as opportunities for face-to-face interactions, essential for establishing social connections in a new environment, dwindled. Essential aspects of reintegration include participation in local cultural, communal, and recreational activities (Schuster & Majidi, 2013). However, with public gatherings restricted and many communal spaces shuttered, returnees found their avenues to assimilate into the local culture curtailed. The pandemic’s economic fallout meant that many participants faced additional financial stressors, exacerbating their sense of instability and insecurity.

“Just when I was trying to reach out, the world was pulling in. Social distancing meant fewer opportunities to interact (...) Many of us were already finding our footing, financially speaking. The pandemic brought about job losses, wage cuts, and everything just became more unstable. It wasn’t just about money, though. It was the added uncertainty, the heightened feeling of ‘what next?’ that weighed heavily on many of us.” (JZ4, Personal communication, July 2023).

For returnees, already undergoing a tumultuous period of transition, the additional burdens introduced by the global health crisis highlight the profound resilience and adaptability required to navigate these unprecedented times.

3.6 *The crucial role of adult education*

As previously stated, call centers have taken on an added dimension as centers for learning and professional development (Enríquez & Monge, 2022). For returnees, these programs offer more than just tangible skills. They serve as gateways to self-improvement and socio-economic mobility, offering an anchor in the midst of the turbulent sea of reintegration. A closer examination of the adult education programs, as described by the participants, reveals a multifaceted curriculum tailored to equip them with a diverse skill set. These range from basic IT literacy courses to more advanced training modules in customer service, sales, and management.

“When I landed a job at this call center, thinking it was just gonna be another dead-end gig. To my surprise, this place had more to offer. They had a whole range of courses set up, from basic computer stuff to advanced sales techniques. It was like this place was tailored for us returnees, not just to help us do our jobs better but to give us a fighting chance out there in the world. The program they’ve got? It’s not just about answering phones. They’re molding us, shaping us into professionals with skills that can fit anywhere, not just in the call center world. It’s like they’re equipping us for this globalized economy, making sure we’re not left behind. Every class I attended, every skill I picked up, it wasn’t just about learning; it was therapy, you know? Every day, that feeling of being lost, that pain of deportation, it got a little less. Learning gave me a purpose, a direction. It made me feel like I could dream again, plan for a future where I’m not just surviving, but thriving. These education programs, they’re not just classes; they’re lifelines, man. They’re pathways to a new start.” (JZ14, Personal communication, July 2023).

Notably, these curricula seem to be designed with a twofold objective in mind. Firstly, to enhance the immediate job performance of the participants within the call center ecosystem, and secondly, to furnish them with transferrable skills that are invaluable across various employment sectors.

“I found myself diving into IT courses, then gradually moving to management training. It’s like this whole world opened up for me. I felt valued, empowered, like I was being prepared for more than just my role at the call center. The dual focus of their curriculum is genius. It’s not just about enhancing our roles within the call center but also giving us skills that we can carry forward, wherever life takes us next. And in a world where skills dictate your worth, it feels good to be on the front foot. For many of us, the trauma of deportation is very real. It’s a wound that’s always there. But these education opportunities, they acted as a balm, giving me hope, making me feel like there was a purpose, a future awaiting. It’s not just about professional growth; it’s healing in its own way. This program, it’s like they’ve given us a chance to rewrite our stories, to redefine our destinies post-deportation.” (TJ12, Personal communication, May 2023).

The emphasis placed by participants on the role of these educational interventions in broadening their career horizons speaks to the transformative potential of such programs. In a globalized world where the knowledge economy increasingly dictates economic prospects, being equipped with a contemporary skill set is more than just a competitive advantage; it becomes a vital tool for survival and upward mobility. Moreover, the psychosocial benefits associated with engagement in adult education cannot be understated (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020). For many returnees, the act of learning and upskilling in a structured environment instills a renewed sense of purpose, helping mitigate feelings of dislocation and loss that often accompany their deportation experience. This proactive engagement with education serves as both a coping mechanism and a forward-focused strategy, enabling them to envision and work towards a more stable and promising future.

“When they deported me, man, it was like being ripped out of my life and thrust into a world where I felt like a stranger. I can’t even begin to explain the sense of loss, the dislocation. I remember looking in the mirror and thinking, ‘Who is this guy? Where does he fit?’ And then, when I started at the call center, they introduced me to their adult education programs (...) At first, I was skeptical. I mean, why would a call center invest in my education? But as I started engaging with it, there was this... transformation. Every class, every new skill was like piecing back a part of me. The act of learning, that structure, it gave me something solid to hold

onto when everything else was shifting sand. The most surprising thing wasn't just the practical skills I was acquiring but the psychological healing it brought. Each day, I felt a little more grounded, a little more hopeful about the future. It became my therapy in a way, allowing me to confront the pain of deportation head-on while focusing on building a better tomorrow (...) This education, it's more than just courses and certificates. It's a lifeline. It's the promise of a future where, despite the past, I can still aspire, achieve, and dream." (JZ7, Personal communication, July 2023).

In essence, the introduction and accessibility of adult education programs within call centers exemplify a holistic approach to employee well-being and development. It not only addresses immediate occupational needs but also plants the seeds for long-term personal and professional growth, facilitating a more seamless and empowered process of reintegration for returnees.

3.7 Advocacy for policy reforms

In the data collected from participants, there emerges an undeniable emphasis on the need for significant policy changes to improve call center working conditions. These suggestions span a gamut of concerns, from restructuring wages to the creation of more humane work schedules and the institution of comprehensive measures against caller maltreatment. Such sentiments undoubtedly reflect the broader context of labor rights, occupational health, and the dignity of work in the globalized service industry. These are vital avenues of inquiry and action, promising rich insights into the dynamic interplay of socioeconomic forces, labor politics, and individual agency. However, while the importance of these narratives cannot be understated, this particular paper will not delve into this aspect in depth. The exploration of labor conditions, rights, and policy advocacy in call centers, while interrelated, constitutes a subject of its own, deserving a dedicated and nuanced analysis separate from the current study's scope.

3.8 Post-deportation identity reconfiguration

Throughout the collected narratives, another recurrent theme was centered on the participants' intricate dance of identity renegotiation after their expulsion. Their descriptions are charged with the vivid emotion of feeling ensnared between two distinct realms. Intriguingly, the call center becomes emblematic, serving as a symbolic bridge that connects their previous lives in the U.S. to their re-established realities in Mexico. This liminal space of identity, caught between two cultural and geographical entities, offers a diverse range of lived experiences, complexities, and nuances. These insights undeniably hold the potential to contribute to broader discourses on transnational identity, diaspora, and the psychological effects of displacement. However, it is crucial to note that, while the theme of identity negotiation is undeniably interwoven with the narratives at hand, this paper will not deeply explore this facet. The intricate process of identity formation and evolution in the context of expulsion deserves its own specialized focus, separate from the primary scope of the current research endeavor.

4. Conclusions

Our findings reveal a complex interplay between immediate employment opportunities and the precarious nature of call center work. While providing a vital gateway to reintegration and adult education, these centers also pose significant challenges, particularly in terms of mental health and job precarity.

The dual role of call centers as both employment hubs and educational platforms resonates with Jarvis's (2004) conceptualization of adult education as a transformative tool for socio-economic empowerment. We underscore the importance of adult education in facilitating the reintegration of deported individuals, aligning with Field's (2011) emphasis on lifelong learning as a mechanism for adapting to changing economic landscapes.

Policy implications of adult education, as noted by Desjardins (2017), are particularly relevant in this context. The need for policies that recognize the complexities of reintegration for deported individuals aligns with the insights of de Haas et al., (2019) on migration and its socio-economic impacts. Our findings suggest that targeted policy interventions are required to support this unique demographic, particularly in enhancing the quality of employment and access to

education.

On the other hand, the reintegration challenges highlighted in this paper align with Golash-Boza's (2015) findings on the difficulties faced by deportees. The role of bilingual call centers in Mexico, as identified by Alarcón and Heyman (2013), becomes pivotal in this scenario, serving not only as employment providers but also as crucial sites for skill acquisition and social reintegration.

The mental health challenges identified in this study echo the findings of Sprigg et al., (2007) regarding the high-stress environment of call centers. This aligns with previous research on the emotional labor in different contexts, including call centers (Ashfort & Humphrey, 1993; Holman et al., 2002; Chuaychoo & Tunjoy, 2022), emphasizing the need for policies that ensure mental well-being alongside professional development.

When it comes to the implications for policy and practice, we stress the need for comprehensive policy reform in the call center industry, especially concerning labor conditions and mental health support. This calls for a multi-dimensional approach involving stakeholders from various sectors, including policymakers, industry leaders, and mental health professionals.

Further research could explore the longitudinal impact of employment in call centers on the socio-economic mobility of deported individuals. Additionally, studies focusing on policy reform and its implementation in the context of bilingual call centers could provide deeper insights into effective strategies for supporting this vulnerable population.

In drawing this paper to a close, it becomes clear that the role of bilingual call centers in the socio-economic reintegration of deported Mexicans extends far beyond providing mere employment opportunities; it encompasses a holistic approach that thoughtfully intertwines skill development with crucial aspects of mental and emotional well-being. This comprehensive strategy seeks not only to equip individuals with the necessary job-related skills, such as advanced language proficiency and nuanced customer service abilities, but also to address the broader spectrum of their needs. This includes fostering emotional resilience and providing support mechanisms to navigate the high-stress environment characteristic of call center work, where emotional labor is an inherent demand (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Sprigg et al., 2007). By embedding mental health resources, access to counseling, and continuous opportunities for personal and professional growth within the fabric of their programs, these centers can cultivate an environment that nurtures holistic development (Holman et al., 2002; Chuaychoo & Tunjoy, 2022). Such an approach does more than offer a pathway to employment; it provides a foundation for stability, fosters a sense of community belonging, and supports the overall well-being of individuals navigating the complexities of life post-deportation. As we consider the multifaceted challenges that deported individuals encounter, it becomes imperative to advocate for educational and policy interventions that are as diverse and dynamic as the individuals they aim to support. Thus, ensuring their successful reintegration and thriving in society calls for a concerted effort that goes beyond traditional measures, advocating for a truly holistic approach in both policy formulation and practical application.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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