

**COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND MOBILIZATION: PARTICIPANTS'  
EXPERIENCES ON THE OCTOBER 2018 CARAVAN**

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Aiming to make sense of participants' experiences, ways of expressing resistance, and the network of relationships between participants and coordinators of the caravan, I draw on the literature on collective identity in social movements. Alberto Melucci's (Melucci, 1995, 1996) work on the theory of collective identity in social movements remains one of the most influential and systematic works to this date.

The following chapter analyzes three themes that emerged during the interviews with participants of the first wave of the Caravans, those of October 2018: social media mobilization strategy, acts of resistance, and brotherhood. The chapter draws on the stories of 14 participants who spoke about their experience in the caravan, from the messages they received on social media to the acts they carried out to arrive at the US-Mexico border. In other words, the chapter explores how migrants developed a collective identity throughout the movement. Even when the justifications for participating in the caravan were diverse, migrants had a common goal: to arrive in the US. The collective identity that they constructed, also reflected in their brotherhood, allowed them to resist the multiple obstacles they encountered on their way to the US.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The chapter starts with a literature review on collective identity. Then, I identify the themes that emerged during the interviews that relate to collective identity and discuss them briefly. The chapter concludes with a more extensive discussion of the themes in light of the literature. Findings show that the collective identity and agency developed throughout the movement, reflected in the brotherhood that grew out of the action, were instrumental for the "success" of the movement.

### **Theoretical lens: Collective identity**

How can we make sense of the experiences caravan members had? How did caravan members overcome different obstacles along the migratory route to the US? What resources did they draw on to do so? To answer these questions, I draw on the collective identity. Alberto Melucci (Melucci, 1995, 1996) developed a comprehensive theory of collective identity that is still very influential. The work of Gamson (1991) and Flesher Fominaya (2010, 2019) have also contributed to the vast literature on collective identity.

Melucci (1996, p. 71). defined collective identity as a "process of active relationships between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate and make decisions." He added that a degree of emotional investment was needed in the definition of collective identity, which also relates to the link between emotions and social movements (Jasper, 1998, 2011; Van Ness & Summers-Effler, 2019). Through this process, constituents define and negotiate ends, means, and fields of action (Flesher Fominaya, 2019).

Collective identity does not imply that all group members share the same or are in complete agreement on beliefs, interests, and goals to come together in collective action; instead, it is about a network of active relationships (and actors) that negotiate and make decisions. Although, scholars agree that at least some shared goals are needed for collective action to occur.

The relational dimension of collective identity is linked to the distinction of the collective self in reference to the other. Through reflexivity, a group becomes aware of "we" that is recognized by the "others." Often, the formation of a "we" grows due to opposition. That is to say, "a collective actor cannot construct its identity independently of its recognition by other social or political actors" (Melucci, 1995, pp. 47–48). For instance, the counter-frames that arose between Bartolo Fuentes and the Honduran government led to the development of an oppositional relationship of "us vs. them," where the "we" referred to the caravan and

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activists in favor of it, strengthening the collective identity of the caravan; and “them” referred those against the caravan, mainly the Honduran and US governments.

In other words, Melucci (1995) argued that conflict provides the basis for cohesion, group identity, and solidarity. Social actors enter a conflict to demand what their opponent has denied them, “to reappropriate something that belongs to them because they are able to recognize it as their own” (Melucci, 1995, p. 48). The conflict reinforces the solidarity and bonds in the group, as they need it to make sense of what they are making. Participants also gather and reorganize to claim what they recognize as theirs. Here, conflict is what bounds people together, acting as a united front versus a common enemy. In other words, people unite in conflict.

Moreover, collective identities are created (Flesher Fominaya, 2019; Gamson, 1991; Melucci, 1995). As mentioned earlier, it is through distinction that groups recognize their self from the other. This requires some boundary work, a type of behavior that people display when describing who they are similar to or different from (Lamont, 2000; Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Social recognition needs to be reciprocal between actors (authorities, governments, movements), even if in the form of denial, challenge, or opposition (Melucci, 1996).

Finally, emotions play an important role in collective identities, as positive emotions can lead to cohesion, and negative emotions can undermine such cohesion (Flesher Fominaya, 2019). Additionally, emotionally charged happenings, such as political repression or immigrant criminalization, that participants experience together can lead to asserting their collective identity, increased solidarity, and the likelihood of engaging in high-risk activism (*Ibid*).

## **The Mobilization**

The following section delves into the analysis of three inductive codes that emerged after coding the interviews with participants. The codes are related to the social media mobilizing strategy, the ways in which migrants united to challenge policies and actions of exclusion, and the brotherhood created among members. I define each code, followed by at least two comments from caravan members and a discussion of each code.

**1. *Social media mobilization strategy.*** I coded for social media mobilization strategy when there was a reference to the messages migrants viewed/received on social media about the caravan. This includes messages posted on Facebook and spread through WhatsApp. Out of the 14 participants, ten spoke about the information and the message they received when they first heard about the caravan. This information had two different purposes: on the one hand, the information spread on social media was meant to inform the population about the movement's existence. On the other, the messages transmitted had logistical purposes. They served to organize the caravan, providing information about the time and place of departure. In different Facebook and WhatsApp groups, information was posted about the time and place of departure. The platforms were fundamental for the development of the caravan, as members used those to share information about the trip.

In terms of what was said about the movement, Ignacio talked about the message conveyed and the purpose of the caravan:

The announcement said that if we wanted to leave the country, there was an opportunity [to leave] in a caravan that was being organized in the municipality of San Pedro Sula; San Pedro was going to be the meeting point to depart on [October], I don't remember the date, but it was in October, so there [in the link] they [the people] were informed. Then, as the link contained all the information, people from all the departments began to organize. For example, Choluteca had an organizer, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and La Paz all had organizers, and all the departments of Honduras had organizers [...] the caravan was organized (Ignacio, personal communication, April 04, 2021).

In the passage, Ignacio explains the framing used to convey messages about the caravan. The message targeted those who wanted to leave Honduras, offering them an

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opportunity to do so in a large group, a caravan, and in an organized manner. That is, the message seemed to appeal to those with a pre-existing thought of leaving the country. The message also provided information about the place and date of departure. Interestingly, Ignacio claims the caravan was organized. He then refers to the fact that there were organizers in each municipality (or departments as they are known locally). Honduras has 12 *departamentos* (see Figure 1), and there were groups of people from all of them at the bus station in San Pedro Sula. This type of organization was most likely done so that people could have more contact with a local organizer and facilitate the management of the movement.

Figure 1. Map of Honduras by department



Source: (D-maps.com, 2022) modified by the author

According to a preliminary survey carried out by *El Colef*, caravan members came predominantly from the most urban departments in Honduras, Francisco Morazán and Cortés, where Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, respectively, are located (see pink stars in the above figure) (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2018). Members from other departments such as Ocoatepeque, Santa Rosa, Yoro, and Colón also joined the caravan. It was expected that people

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from Ocotepeque, Santa Rosa, and Colón would have participated in the movement as the caravan followed that route (see Figure 2). The findings are consistent with the demographic profile of the people I interviewed, as most of them were from San Pedro Sula, Cortés, followed by Atlántida, Colón, and Ocotepeque.

Figure 2. Route of the Caravan, from Honduras to Guatemala



Source, Google Maps, 2022, modified by the author

Bernardo also found out about the movement on social media, adding that local media outlets were talking about the caravan:

It became first known through social media that a caravan was leaving; then, they sent notifications on Facebook. The news about the caravan was spread through social media, media outlets, and different places. People became aware that a caravan was leaving; then, San Pedro Sula, the bus station, was the departure point, the meeting point from where the movement was going to depart (Bernardo, March 21, 2021).

In this passage, the social media mobilization strategy is present when Bernardo says that the announcement about the caravan was made on social media, particularly on Facebook. It included information about the place and date of parting. Thus, the passage is an example of the code, given that the information was meant to inform about the caravan's formation and participation. The statement confirms what Ignacio mentioned earlier. Bernardo also explained

that different media outlets disseminated information about the caravan. This is consistent with what other participants reported. For example, Antonio, a Guatemalan, found out about the caravan in local and international media outlets, signaling that the news about the caravan was not limited to Honduras; instead, it was spread throughout the Northern Triangle of Central America.

**2. *Expressions of resistance.*** I coded “expressions of resistance,” the various migrants' acts of defiance, particularly actions that migrants did to a) resist the control and violence of the immigration policies and authorities and b) denounce their governments. Two conflictual relationships were brought to light with the emergence and development of the caravan. On the one hand, migrants gathered and walked together to undermine the effects of the immigration policies in Mexico and avoid the risks associated with the clandestine journey to Mexico and the US. On the other hand, migrants from the different countries of the Central American region continued to denounce the poor performance of their governments, poverty, and violence. Eight participants talked about the other actions they carried out.

First, caravan members acted to defy the control and restrictions of the Guatemalan and Mexican migration policies, expressed, for instance, in the deployment of thousands of military and migration officers to the Mexico-Guatemala border (see Figure 6). Bernardo explains what happened when the caravan encountered migration officers in Guatemala:

When we entered Guatemala, the police officers opposed it; then, police officers began to tear gas us, then emigrants started a revolution, they began to revolve. In Guatemala, the police officers formed a chain/ shield [to stop us], so emigrants backed away, and then ran to the front and broke the shield of police officers; then they [migrants] all ran out. So, when the police formed shields, that is how we did it; people walked a little backward to propel and run to the front, they defeated the few police officers left, and the emigrants passed (Bernardo, personal communication, March 21, 2021).



Figure 3. Migrants encounter the Guatemalan National Police on their route to Mexico



Source: (Infobae, 2018)

Bernardo's accounts depict migrants as fearless, courageous, and brave, willing to do what it takes to pursue their goals. The image of migrants as victims and recipients of humanitarian aid is transformed into migrants as agents of change and political actors, capable of organizing and creating strategies to confront the State's power and policies. Their actions create a political subjectivity whereby migrants' struggles for survival become politicized, demanding policy action and political attention. Migrants have the agency and freedom to openly contest the activities of the States. Their organization is key to overcoming all sorts of obstacles. Participants' actions, knowledge, strategies, and tactics speak about their capacity to self-organize politically and subjectively (Salazar Araya, 2019, p. 125). Bernardo's remarks are an example of the code "cultural expressions of resistance" as he shows how migrants challenge migration policies in Guatemala and Mexico.

Caravan members sang the Honduran national anthem while crossing into Mexico and in other stressful moments. For instance, Patricia revealed that they sang the national anthem when the police and migration officers did not want to let them cross into Mexico and advance.



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She stated: “we sang the national anthem when we gathered, like when the police did not want to let us in” (Patricia, personal communication, May 02, 2021). Nestor further explained:

When there are migration and police checkpoints, and they catch you, you sing your country's national anthem because the signs are respected; I respect the anthem of Mexico, Guatemala, of all nations. Then, the authorities, as they are respectful of the law, they have to respect me [...]. Because the national anthem, the anthem of your country, is what motivates you [...] when we were there, in Chiapas, on the bridge, the first time, we sang the national anthem; we wanted to enter. Then we revolted, well, I included myself, we revolved everything, we entered by force (Nestor, personal communication, April 29, 2021).

Nestor indicates how the Honduras national anthem encouraged caravan members to continue fighting and defying immigration authorities. First, Nestor suggests that by singing the national anthem when Hondurans passed by checkpoints and were detained, they were seeking some kind of leeway or respect. Second, Nestor implies that singing the anthem before crossing the international bridge afforded them the strength to fight and revolt, sort of a dictum before going to war. Migrants fought for the right to cross into Mexico, while the Mexican police and migration officers denied them entrance *en masse*. This account also shows the caravan members' drive, which contrasts with views of migrants as passive actors.

Moreover, Karla stated that Hondurans sang the anthem because:

[In my case] I liked to sing the anthem because it reminded us, it gave us more encouragement, reminded us where we come from, who we are, it was like a representation [...] we did it [sing the anthem] when we got to a village or small towns (Karla, personal communication, April 28, 2021).

Karla reveals that the anthem also served as a symbol of identity. She stated the anthem reminded them where they were from and who they were, thus giving them some sense of belonging and identity. It also served to motivate them to continue on their journey. Singing the anthem also shows that migrants often use different artifacts to keep their ancestries while doing everything possible to pursue their goals elsewhere. Nestor and Karla's accounts are

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examples of the code "expressions of resistance" as a people used the Honduran national anthem as a mobilizing force that kept them going and reminded them of their objective.

Singing the national anthem was a very symbolic and powerful act. By singing their anthem, Hondurans showed pride; they felt proud of their country, roots, and land. It reminded them of where they were coming from and an act of nationalism, identity, and belonging. But Hondurans sang it in foreign territory; they had left their land but were still very proud.

Second, concerning the denouncement of their governments, Hondurans and Nicaraguans carried their flags, exposing the nationalities that composed the caravan and making known the need to leave their countries. Some held the flags when they were walking and others when entering Mexico. For example, Karla carried the Honduran flag while the caravan was trekking (Karla, personal communication, April 28, 2021). Luis waved the Nicaraguan flag at the top of the fence that divides Mexico and Guatemala after crossing the international bridge, Rodolfo Robles.

The caravan was already in Tecun Uman, and it was close to entering Mexican territory [...] I was in that caravan with a Nicaraguan flag, I climbed on top of a metal fence that divided Guatemala and Mexico, and at that moment, I decided to take out my flag so that they could see that there were not only people from Honduras but also people from Nicaragua and other countries as well [...] I had my flag so that they could see that not only Hondurans needed to emigrate, but there were also Nicaraguans; we Nicaraguans did not emigrate en masse; we emigrated in small groups, but I did it so that the whole country could see that not only Hondurans were in that caravan, there were people from many countries who also needed to migrate and get where they wanted to go, I wanted to feel proud of the country where I was from even though I was leaving it, I was leaving it, but I always carried it in my heart (Luis, personal communication, April 29, 2021).

Luis explains that people from the Central American region used to emigrate in small groups. Although most of the people composing the caravan were Hondurans, nationals of neighboring countries were part of the movement, denouncing the region's poverty levels, insecurity, and political instability. Luis wanted people to see that not only Hondurans were migrating but also Nicaraguans, emphasizing their need to leave their country.

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His actions were powerful and symbolic, showing migrants' dichotomy when they leave their countries. On the one hand, he demonstrates his love and pride for his country while he waves the Nicaraguan flag and says that although he left, Nicaragua will always be in his heart. Just like Hondurans signing the national anthem, they both show, with different symbols, their identity and belonging. On the other hand, Luis held the Nicaraguan flag at the top of the fence between two other countries, Mexico and Guatemala, calling out the Nicaraguan government, demanding international attention and acknowledgment for the problems they face while seeking a better life. Climbing the fence could be interpreted as a symbol of how migrants are also trying to be on top of the migratory policies that keep them from crossing from one country to another (see figure 4). By being visible on top of the fence, they contest the policies that have kept undocumented migrants invisible and irregular.

Figure 4. Migrant holds the Honduran and Guatemalan flags at the top of the fence at the Mexico-Guatemala border



Source: (DW, 2018)

Third, Hondurans vocalized and condemned their then-president. They continuously said Juan Orlando Hernández had poorly performed and did not want him to continue as president. One chant became popular among the Honduran caravan members: "*Fuera JOH*,

*Fuera JOH*' [Out Juan Orlando Hernandez, Out JOH]. Hondurans chant it aloud throughout the trip. Joaquin, a Honduran man that fled Honduras, was very critical of the president and his performance and accused him of narcotrafficking and being a dictator. He chanted, "Out JOH, Out JOH." Joaquin explained that Hernandez was the reason he fled the country. When asked if he chanted throughout the walk, he said: "of course [ I sang] of course, if I am here it is because of him, had he been a neat president, I would not be here" (*Ibid*). Joaquin's words express aversion to and hatred against the Honduran government and the president, arguing that the Honduran people wanted him out of office. Other participants also stated that Hondurans chanted and sang together, as one voice, with the same rhythm: "Out JOH." Joaquin's excerpt is an example of the code "Expressions of resistance" as it shows how migrants denounced their governments and authorities through songs.

Finally, caravan members were chanting slogans to counter the stigma about undocumented migrants. Luis, Nicaraguan, added that some people looked down on migrants, stating migrants were criminals, bad people, and going to hurt Mexicans. Thus, caravan members chanted loudly, "*los migrantes no somos criminales, somos trabajadores*" [we, the migrants, are not criminals, we are workers] (Luis, personal communication, April 19, 2021]. Luis explained that it was never his or their intention to hurt anyone and that they were not criminals. Caravan members were seeking a better life. The passage is an example of the code "expressions of resistance" because the slogan is meant to counter and resist the stigma and discrimination migrants face.

**3. *Hermandad (Brotherhood)***<sup>1</sup>. I coded for "brotherhood" when there was a reference to unity in the group, a sense of community, a special bond between caravan members, or kinship that grew up organically while migrants traveled together. During the interviews, 11

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<sup>1</sup> In Spanish, the word used was *hermandad*. The closest word in English was brotherhood. In Spanish, it is a gender-neutral word; it refers to male and female communities. I use it for translation purposes without the intention of assigning any gender preference.

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participants spoke about the bond and unity they created and the different forms that the brotherhood took. Olga, a 30-year-old Honduran woman, spoke about the camaraderie that Honduran migrants created with each other. She traveled with her children from Tecún Umán until the caravan arrived in Tijuana:

Being Hondurans makes it so that we trust people [other Hondurans]. We ask our names, what their names are, whether people are accompanied, if they come as a family or not, and so on. We start to make friends [...]. We create harmony, like a family, do you understand me? The problems of one person are shared among all [...]. Everyone gets along; [in the caravans] there are no fights, there is no selfishness, there is nothing; if one eats and the other person does not have anything to eat, all of them give you something; and peaceful as a brotherhood, the caravans are like a brotherhood, everyone helps each other, and if they let one person pass, they let everyone pass. If they do not let one person pass, no one enters. Everyone advocates for everyone; that is how caravans are (Olga, personal communication, May 02, 2021).

Olga explains that nationality creates a bond between Hondurans and allows the building of friendships and trust. She argues that being Honduran is enough to trust a person. She illustrates the group dynamic as very positive, as Hondurans create a community on the move in which they share food, drinks, and support each other. It is the kind of support that goes beyond words of encouragement to the point of risking their lives and dreams for each other. For example, Olga stated that people advocated for everyone and that if one person was to cross the border, all the group would cross and vice versa. In other words, caravan members formed a united front to challenge the restrictive immigration policies and actions of Mexico and the US that have sought to stop the entrance of undocumented migrants for decades. The unity created among them served to make claims and demand a “free pass” through Mexico. The unity of the group was their strength. Olga's statements exemplify the "brotherhood" code as she describes the group's unity.

The caravan was composed mainly of Hondurans. According to a preliminary report by *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte*, 80 percent of the caravan was composed of Hondurans, followed by Guatemalans and Salvadorans (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2018). Honduran

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participants reported the group was united and nationality was the basis of the unity, as Olga had stated; however, other Central American participants also spoke about the unity in the group. Antonio, a 27-year-old Guatemalan, explained that the caravan was a very united group that they would take care of and protect each other. He stated that they were united regardless of their nationality, race, or country (Antonio, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Joaquin also spoke about the unity and brotherhood in the group:

There is a saying, and it is very accurate: "united people will never be defeated." The mass gives you positive energy, seeing that much positivism, all the adrenaline goes up [...] and you say, everything is positive, everything will turn out well, and well, we lifted each other with strength as human beings, as compatriots, as countrymen, as companions, as brothers; if someone had a cup of water, we shared it among all, a brotherhood (Joaquin, personal communication, April 27, 2021).

Joaquin reflects on the energy and vibe group members created while they were on the move. He speaks about the positive energy that drove people to do things and trust that everything was going to be okay, that they would be able to achieve their goals and the adrenaline that was produced and spread among them. He talked about the brotherhood, the community that shares food, and drinks, lifts each other and provides courage to keep moving forward. His accounts were similar to Olga's in that both saw the group as a brotherhood. Moreover, Joaquin realized then that their strength lies in their unity. He said that if they were united, they would not be defeated. Thus, the unity allowed caravan members to cross Guatemala, Mexico, and arrive in Tijuana despite the many obstacles they would face, including the clashes with the Mexican migration and police officers, brutal weather conditions, and hardships on the road. The chant "*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*" (the people united will not be defeated) was one of the multiple mottos the caravan articulated since they left San Pedro Sula that accounted both for the unity and the contestation of the border regime. The mottos served to guide action and motivate participants. Finally, Joaquin's passage is an example of the code "brotherhood," as his words express unity and camaraderie among the caravan participants.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The above section showed the different codes that I identified in the interviews held with participants of the October 2018 Caravan. The codes exposed how migrants found about the movement, resisted the migration regime, and the internal force that kept them going.

To make sense of their experiences, I draw on collective identity theory. In light of the literature, migrants constructed a collective identity throughout the journey, one that was not given but created with the cumulus of experiences in transit.

The collective identity is recognized through the other, as the “collective actor cannot construct its identity independently of its recognition by other social or political actors” (Melucci, 1995, pp. 47–48). In other words, social recognition needs to be reciprocal between actors (authorities, governments, movements), even if in the form of denial, challenge, or opposition (Melucci, 1996). This is exemplified when the caravan attempted to cross into Mexico, and the Mexican government deployed officers to the border. The caravan was in opposition to the government and was recognized by other political actors as a distinctive group.

Collective identity does not entail that all members of a group share the same beliefs or values; instead, members create networks of relationships and come together because they have an “enemy” in common. In the case of the caravan, even when caravan members had different justifications for joining the movement, they had one goal, to cross international borders and arrive in the US. The “enemy” was the policies and actions that states of the region had long enacted to control the borders to avoid the entrance of undocumented migrants.

In the same vein, conflict provides the basis for collective identity. Caravan members united in conflict. They united against the policies of exclusion that had been imposed in the US-Mexico corridor. With their cohesion, they advanced and resisted the actions of containment in Guatemala and Mexico. With the chant “*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido,*”



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they showed they were one voice and demonstrated that they were going to fight to achieve their goals. As they moved forward, they realized their strength was their unity, and they needed to be together to advance their claims. As one of the participants put it, "it was about being close to the group."

The various expressions of resistance speak about the multiple ways in which migrants sought to demonstrate their presence and their struggles. They chanted against their local governments and the narratives of exclusion and marginalization that cast them as criminals. Caravan members climbed the top of the fence that separates Mexico and Guatemala, waving their flags, proud of their identities but denouncing their governments. They vocalized their anger toward their presidents, exposing the difficulties they experienced in their home countries. Finally, they demanded the Mexican government let them cross the country while revealing the violence they suffered on the migratory route to the US.

In terms of how migrants found out about the movement, it was clear that social media played a pivotal role in the emergence of the movement. Most of all, participants referred that they found out about the movement through social media, further showing the effects of posting and distributing information about the caravan on Facebook. Participants spoke about the difficult conditions in their country of origin and the terrible risks of clandestine crossings. When they heard a caravan was being formed and were informed of its benefits, their accounts suggest that they felt drawn to participate. The mobilization strategy then served to inform the logistical aspects of the movements and the potential benefits associated with it.

Migrants agreed that the experience in transit was challenging; they all spoke about the hardships of the trip and how exhausted they were. However, caravan members also voiced the internal force that kept them going, their brotherhood. Movement members underscored the importance of unity among the group, stating it was their *forte*. The chant "*el pueblo unido, jamás sera vencido*" exemplifies their vision and goal. The union was central in the conception

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of the caravan as a brotherhood in which goods were shared and protection and encouragement were ensured. What is more, the cohesion proved relevant when they articulated their demands and encountered the Guatemalan and Mexican police and migration officers. They all hung together and made sure to cross into the countries as one single group. In other words, their strength rested upon their number and unity.

While these caravan members' perspectives do not apply to the entire universe of caravan members, their testimony offers insight into members' experiences before and during the movement. These provide an example of how migrants were not only recipients of humanitarian aid but active agents for social change. In other words, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of the caravan; instead, they constitute a first step in understanding how members made sense and contributed to creating this transnational social movement on the move.

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