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RANT—The Politics of Despair Enabled by Dysconscious Xenophobiaism

A Call to Action on Behalf of Immigrants and Their Children

Irina S. Okhremtchouk & Adam T. Clark

Abstract

This article underscores the urgency of protecting the most vulnerable citizens in the United States during the time of political distress brought forth by the Trump administration. More specifically, in this piece we draw attention to social factors affecting the nation's immigrants and their children. We ask readers to consider immigrants' struggles and think about our society, its citizens, and the meaning of citizenry, broadly, while at the same time acknowledging immigrants' numerous contributions. We point to schools, which often carry core values of our communities, and stress the need for support and assistance for those who often find themselves on the front lines in this climate of distress and anxiety: the nation's educators. Further, as we discuss the struggles enabled by the political discourse of hatred and intolerance, we attempt to unpack the current xenophobic climate as well as highlight the devastating impact of xenophobia, particularly on the nation's schools and its children, who habitually find themselves under siege due to their heritage and/or citizenship status.

Introduction

*"A seguir la lucha, mi gente. When will society understand that
being an immigrant and being a criminal are not synonymous?
When will my parents stop being pushed to the side in this*

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immigration discourse after they have been exploited, while gifting to the U.S. four children who have contributed, and will continue to contribute, to the overall well-being and prosperity of its people? When will my family, like thousands, be able to sleep well at night, without being startled at late-night or early-morning knocks? No sé. La neta, no sé. Pero la lucha sigue. Vamos a seguir dandole, puro pa' delante con mucho corazón. And to you, United States, just know that I am not twelve anymore. I've broken your chains. I've reclaimed my future. I've scraped the narrative you assigned me. I've written my own. And I am ready to rewrite yours too. I am your future, and you will respect me and my rights as your citizen, just as you will respect the rights of every single human being who inhabits you. And I am prepared to fight for it to happen. I am not twelve anymore."

—Rocío Mondragón Reyes,

Proud daughter of undocumented parents

A rapid increase in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) workplace raids coupled with steep spikes in arrests of undocumented and other immigrants (immigrant arrests have increased by 43% since September 2016) have become an everyday reality for immigrant citizens and their communities (Hart, 2017). The sense of terror and uncertainty surrounding immigration status is truly unsettling for approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants (3.4% of our total population), their children and communities live in fear as this very piece is written and read (Krogstad, Passel & Cohn, 2017). Despite the majority of the country seldom hearing about these events from mainstream and social media, we remain at societal crossroads of deciding whether to allow our government and the current political climate to tacitly encourage hatred and xenophobia while fostering a fear that tears our diverse communities apart (e.g., "ICE raids have 'blown up' in Alabama since Trump immigration orders went into effect," [Hart, 2017]) or to take action.

From the very inception of Trump's campaign,¹ his divisive platform has been at the core of the campaign's rhetoric and continues to play a central role in administration's policies. Indeed, one could argue that several minority groups (i.e., religious minorities, persons of color, LGBTQ, among others) have been further marginalized in some form or another, be it in the form of rolling back administrative rules and protections or refusing to continue cases being litigated by previous administrations. In this article, we argue that the Trump administration's profoundly xenophobic, racially laced tactics serve as (a) a default measure for both supporting arguments that drive legislation and executive orders as well as a means of (b) their implementation and enforcement.² Further, we attempt to unpack the extent to which immigrants and their children have been affected by these changes as these relate to both immigration rhetoric and public policy. All of which further underscores our call for action.

We argue that the phenomenon of a 'Trump-like' candidate is not simply a

fluke or coincidence and suggest that a climate of dysconscious racism may be at play (King, 1991). As conceptualized by Joyce King, dysconscious racism is a tacit acceptance of norms and White privilege that isn't "the *absence* of consciousness (that is, not unconsciousness) but an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race" (King, 1991, p. 135). While there are racialized elements included in the events of the last year, we contend for a form of impaired consciousness in terms of immigration status, a dysconscious xenophobiaism, of sorts. This dysconscious xenophobiaism leads to uncritical ways of thinking about immigration and undocumented immigrants that accept assumptions, anecdotal accounts and myths that justify political positions related to immigration or other governmental failures. In the political sphere, this not only helped President Trump win the election, but also permitted his administration to continue to rely on profoundly xenophobic racially ingrained tactics to advance the administration's agenda. We draw readers' attention to consider how the policies of the Trump administration may affect immigrants and children of immigrants. We also call on educators to take special notice of how rhetoric on immigration along with increased immigration actions might impact their students, especially immigrant students and children of immigrants. Finally, we briefly outline several shifts that helped drive xenophobic rhetoric, and we highlight several noteworthy contributions of citizens who were once undocumented. It is our genuine hope that readers will continue to research this topic in order to resist the uncritical ways of thinking that pervade the conversation on immigration and immigrants who are and remain to be invaluable segment of our society.

Within days after his inauguration, on January 25, 2017, President Trump signed a directive to build a border wall along the U.S.-Mexican border and strip funding from cities that shield undocumented citizens. This directive was the first example of many such directives to follow. The Trump administration's selection of immigrants, as a base for profoundly xenophobic racially ingrained tactics, is not surprising. After all, immigrants are arguably among the most vulnerable group. Of course there is great variety in terms of immigration status among these individuals; immigrant status ranges from the undocumented to persons who possess U.S. residency or protective status, but are not "naturalized" U.S. citizens, as such unable to vote, i.e., contribute to the political landscape via individual vote. As a result, despite representing a significant segment of our society (more on demographic trends below), it is easy to use this entire population as a rhetorical scapegoat, in part due to a lack of fear relating to political fallout. Additionally, selecting a specific group, like immigrants or other minority group, as a scapegoat population for other societal problems may resonate politically but can lead to misguided perceptions of minority populations to mainstream population at large (Chaudhry, 2016).

In other words, candidate Trump was very effective in identifying a "scapegoat" population. Scapegoat broadly defined as a tendency to blame a specific group of individuals for one's problems with the primary goal of deflecting from the real

problem while explaining failure so that one does not have to own-up to his/her own weaknesses, incompetency, or inabilities (Glick, 2002).

With this definition in mind, it is also important to note that Trump and his administration were able to continue their profoundly xenophobic, racially ingrained rhetoric and tactics for over two years, which includes his time on the campaign trail and in office: the most recent remark, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” when referring to Haiti, African and Latin countries whereas suggesting that U.S. needs more people from countries such as Norway—a country overwhelmingly White and predominantly middleclass (Dawsey, 2018).³

The fact that President Trump felt comfortable repeatedly making these comments in a bipartisan meeting caused many news network pundits to argue that this remark, indeed, represents Trump’s core character. More notably, in denying it after the fact, this event suggests a sense of confidence that mainstream society will tacitly accept this rhetoric and dominant norms—if not immediately, then with time. This dysconscious xenophobiaism and a sense of assurance by Trump and his administration that it will all ‘blow-over’ suggests a profound reliance on what King (1991) calls dysconscious oppressive ways “that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges” (p. 135). For the purposes of this article and in search for a more precise description of the current socio-political climate, we utilize the term dysconscious xenophobiaism to trouble the profoundly xenophobic racially ingrained rhetoric and tactics widely exercised by Trump’s administration. We unpack the term further below.

King (1991), while conducting a study on her teacher candidates, termed their attitudes toward students of color and these students’ experiences in the education system as dysconscious racism while trying to justify or explain their (student teachers’) attitudes and feelings toward habitually marginalized students who happened to be of color. Dysconscious racism, as the author asserts, is “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 135). The term ‘dysconscious’ itself is not meant to emphasize unconsciousness, or unawareness, but rather selective consciousness that default to accepting the dominant society’s (habitually White) norms. In her definition of this term, King relies on the works of Heaney (1984) and Cox (1974), who both assert that consciousness (in general) and critical consciousness (in particular) require both analytical assessment and judgment that are ethically grounded. Dysconsciousness, on the other hand, completely lacks the critical component in such evaluation. As King puts it, “it involves a subjective identification with an ideological viewpoint that admits no fundamentally alternative vision of society” (p. 135). That is to say, in order to break away from dysconscious ways of seeing the world, one must be willing to engage with other ways of understanding and knowing society.

Furthermore, King (1991), while building on Heaney’s (1984) and Cox’s (1974) definitions, contends that the concept itself “need not be limited to racism

but can apply to justifications of other forms of exploitation such as sexism or even neocolonialism” (p.135). As such, we feel the current national climate has a pervasive *dysconscious xenophobism* similar to dysconscious racism wherein “any serious challenge to status quo that calls racial privilege into question inevitably challenges the self identity of White [native-born] people” (p. 135). Building on definitions provided above, this dysconscious xenophobism leads to ways of thinking about immigrants and immigration that uncritically accept a number of negative and damaging assumptions that have potential dire implications for the population affected and rest of society.

It is too soon to know or project the full impact of the destructive new policies aimed at immigrant communities and children of immigrants. Examples of this include: arrests and deportations of immigrants, elimination of policies such as DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals], and removal of protective status for certain citizens who had fled distress in their home countries. These acts of removal of our neighbors, and in some cases large segments of our communities, would forever change the fiber of our society and infringe on our core values. Thus, now more than ever we are faced with a moral imperative to challenge, resist, and limit the impact that these actions have on immigrant communities and children of immigrants. Here we also draw attention to schools, since schools are the closest entities to students’ homes and naturally absorb anxieties experienced by communities where they are situated.

The vast majority of immigrant students and children of immigrants attend public schools (Capps, Castaneda, Chaudry, & Santos, 2007; Dreby, 2013). Likewise, in 2014, public school enrollment data showed for the first time that White students are no longer a majority student population (Hussar & Bailey, 2014). This trend is expected to continue well into the next decade. While Latino students are projected to represent the largest segment (29%) among minority groups, students of color represent more than 55% of enrollment in public schools (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016).

It goes without saying that the current political climate affects every student; however, immigrants and children of immigrants (both documented and undocumented, but especially the latter) are among the ones most affected. One of the more startling examples of the current climate directly affecting children in a school context is the case of Romulo Avelicia-Gonzalez who was arrested by ICE officials as he was dropping his children off at school (Hernandez, 2017). To help understand the magnitude of these effects, we circle back to demographic data.

In California, for example, one in eight school-aged children have an undocumented parent (The Education Trust - West, 2017). California also enrolls the highest number of language-minority students and English language learners in public schools (California Department of Education, 2016). Many states, the majority of which are in the West—Alaska, California, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas, among others—show similar demographic trends. With so many links between

immigrants (documented and undocumented) and places of schooling, undoubtedly, issues of immigration and enforcement become a question for schools.

Indeed, public schools once viewed as safe zones where no student regardless of immigration status can be denied education are now laced with fear, uncertainty and some serve as 'hunting grounds' for ICE agents as evidenced by the above example. Ironically, education and advancement through education is highly regarded among immigrants where schools are viewed as the places for this opportunity (Johnson & Kotrlik, 2017; Rangel, 2016). Schools are also perceived as safe and trusted spaces where students' home and academic lives blend together, where school administrators and teachers have a unique insight into students' lives and often viewed by immigrants as trusted allies who have the ability not only to shape the present education of their students but also affect their future opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Wong, Gosnell, Luu & Dodson, 2017). That is precisely why the education community, not just in large diverse settings, but all over the U.S., should be proactive in one another considering the incredible, potentially massive fallout of the Trump administration's policies.

During these times of uncertainty laced with dysconscious xenophobiaism, we must be mindful of those who serve the frontlines in nation's schools. For many educators across the nation the current political climate and how quickly it has changed the nature of their jobs has created a challenging problem. The struggle is real. How can one teach an effective science lesson having knowledge that one or several students in one's classroom have been briefed the night before on how to pay bills and take care of themselves in case their parents are arrested and/or deported? How can one discuss attributes of creative writing when all students can write about is their fears, ICE raids, deportations, and border stories that are filled with horror? How does one respond to students' panic about Trump's goals of deporting all Mexicans during a whole-class discussion? (Hung, March 4, 2017). This struggle, their struggle, is real. These teachers are on the front lines of tensions that have been created outside of their control.

As of 2014, there were roughly 42.4 million immigrants in the United States, approximately 13% of the total population (these numbers do not include children of immigrants) (Zong & Batalova, 2016). More than 11 million, or roughly a quarter of all immigrants, are considered to be "unauthorized" or undocumented (Baker & Rytina, 2013). A significant majority of all immigrant students and children of immigrants attend public schools (Camarota, Griffith & Zeigler, 2017). The same is true for children of undocumented parents and undocumented students (Camarota, 2012). It is also important to note that most of the immigrants are of Latino/a origin, and Latino/a students comprise 25% of the student population overall and roughly 42% in the western states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In fact, in 18.5% of schools and school districts in the southern and western states, the majority of students are of Latino/a background (Maxwell, 2014). Moreover, fairly recent reports show that by 2044, the United States will be a majority-minority nation, in which

persons of immigrant heritage, primarily of Latino/a background, will comprise the majority of the nation's population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Statistics show that in the last three decades the percentage of immigrants from Latino nations has shifted to outweigh that of White immigrants, moving from 38% for Whites and 26% for Latinos in 1985 to 18% for Whites and 47% for Latinos in 2015 (Cohn, Caumont, Posts, & Bio, 2016). As a result of these demographic shifts, the rhetoric surrounding immigration, that is polarized and underscored by race, heritage, home/primary language, has impacted a large population. The ways this "turn white and speak English" political climate has polarized our society (Okhremtchouk, 2015).

Although much of Trump's (at least the initial) rhetoric has centered on deportation of undocumented immigrants who have committed criminal acts, more recent executive orders provide a definition that can be widely interpreted, and therefore broaden the scale of deportations (Medina, 2017). As a result, many of the nation's communities and families have been and will be profoundly impacted. It is also important to highlight that crime rates among immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, are considerably lower than those of the native-born U.S. population (Ewing, Martínez, & Rumbaut, 2016). Indeed, the vast majority of documented and undocumented immigrants are productive members of our society and bolster the nation's economy by assuming jobs that many U.S.-born citizens cannot or will not do (Preston, 2016).

While there have been many practical changes that have taken place in immigration policy enforcement, there have also been notable shifts in terminology used to describe immigrants who are both documented and undocumented. Here we argue that the anti-immigrant sentiment laced with dysconscious xenophobia paved the road for current administration and its politics. With the rise of the Trump administration, politicians, lawyers, and news agencies have shifted from using terms such as "immigrants" and "undocumented" to "illegal," "legal," and "aliens"—labels that have long been frowned on for many reasons, including the fact that "illegal" is never used to describe a living being except in reference to undocumented citizens. Moreover, "illegal" carries a presumption of guilt, disrupting due process. The use of the term "illegal" in reference to undocumented persons has been both defended and heavily criticized; yet, its widespread use has recently reemerged. Many see the term's use as intentionally pejorative, dehumanizing immigrants so that they need not be treated as human (Aguilera, 2016). These social stigma further hammer the dehumanization of a large segment of our society and normalizes xenophobia which leads to more pronounced dysconscious xenophobia. In addition to these and among other negative factors, normalization of this type of rhetoric can lead to anxiety, high levels of stress, poor attendance, and lowered performance among affected populations (Chaudry, Capps, Pedroza, Castaneda, Santos & Scott, 2010)

Anxiety about arrests and deportation orders has been heightened for undocumented citizens, including children, and for U.S. children with undocumented

parents for almost two decades (Chaudry, et. al, 2010). The Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations were each tougher than their predecessors on undocumented citizens, causing much stress for those affected (Chishti, Pierce, & Bolter, 2017). But current policies under Trump have reached new heights in terms of policy changes and enforcement actions that cause fear and anxiety, arguably due in part to the public and ongoing dehumanization and demonization of the undocumented. Additionally, these newly enacted policies have been haphazardly implemented and poorly communicated, and there is no clear understanding of under what conditions individuals will be subjected to deportation orders. For example, in the week of February 11, 2017 alone, ICE roundups were conducted in six states (Rein et al., 2017), and many individuals have been deported with or without criminal record or with an arbitrary criminal record. One of these many deportations included a mother in Arizona of two school-aged children who was deported for using a false Social Security number at her job—in other words, deported for working (Schwartz, 2017). While considering the considerable distress and human cost these acts of citizen removal cause, we must note that our nation depends on the labor of immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, whose contributions are often not explicitly known (Camarota & Jensenius, 2009). The technology sector, the hard-to-staff highly skilled professional sector, the farming, packing, service, and construction industries—all have heavily benefited from both documented and undocumented labor, and so have U.S. consumers. This makes the move to deport immigrants all the more ironic, considering the secondary focus of the current administration is job creation.

Trump's stark shifts in language used about immigrants and enforcement actions that have exceeded predecessors should prompt some level of national soul searching. The moral shift in the U.S. from being a nation of immigrants to a nation that hunts immigrants and/or potential immigrants deserves attention. From a historical perspective, it could be argued that immigrants have always been mistreated due to their status (Arnold, 2011). However, the current political climate takes this mistreatment to the next level in the 21st century. This moral shift is certainly impacted by the changes described above, from the terminology used to describe immigrants to the devaluing language used in the Trump campaign that significantly minimized the profound and positive impact immigrants have on our society—all underscored by the surge toward a political climate that exploits xenophobia with the intent to dehumanize and devalue specific populations and individuals. The killing of two teenagers across the Mexican border by ICE agents underscores this decline in human value our society places on a very specific population. In 2010 and 2012, ICE officers killed unarmed Mexican school-aged children on Mexican soil (Burnett, 2015; Penman, 2017). The killings of two teenagers across Mexican border by ICE agents underscores the very shocking trend of declining human value our society attributes to a very specific population of people.

Immigrants (documented and undocumented) constitute 13.3% of our society, a percentage that is greatly amplified when combined with the children of immigrants

who have yet to participate in the trajectory of our nation and society. Marginalizing these individuals through abusive and often criminal behavior affects in total 26% of society, essentially creating a new and perpetuating the existing American underclass (Zong & Batalova, 2016). If we develop an underclass it also means that we (as a society and nation) cannot capitalize on these individuals' talents as fully as we could have otherwise, i.e., if this population were not abused, marginalized, and fearful of government and their fellow citizens, and were provided with opportunities to expand and demonstrate their talents. In short, the current administration seems to consider immigrants and their children as an American underclass. This is especially the case for undocumented individuals, whose achievements are often unrecognized.

The Trump administration remains silent on the societal contributions of undocumented citizens—who ARE our nation's citizens, our neighbors, our community members, who, while under siege, while living in anxiety and distress, continue to “show up” and serve our country, create opportunities for many, and save lives. For example, consider Dr. Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, who after migrating, moved from undocumented farm worker to world-renowned neurosurgeon (Martin, 2011); Francisco Jimenez, preeminent author and professor of modern languages and literature at Santa Clara University, who came to the U.S. as a child to work the fields in California (Santa Clara University, n.d.); Jose Antonio Vargas, brought to the U.S. as a child, who realized his determined dream to become a successful journalist (Vargas, 2011); or Julissa Arce, who came to the U.S. as a child, had a successful career in finance, became a documented citizen through marriage, and quit finance to work on behalf of undocumented immigrants (Abelson, 2015)—just to name a few.

Concluding Remarks

First and foremost, we all must recognize and challenge dysconscious xenophobiaism and racism in ourselves, in our spaces, in our communities and society. Likewise, it is vitally important (now more than ever) to constantly highlight and validate the fact that immigrants and children of immigrants (documented or not) are a part of the American society and our social fiber (Ewing, 2016). Their contributions are no less important than those of non-immigrant individuals. In fact, many U.S. industries would collapse without immigrants' contributions to sustain the demands of those industries. The shift in immigration policies creates a fear that is likely to spark attrition and self-deportation, which could deeply impact U.S. society, its social fiber, and its economy in negative ways. Likewise, as we established above these shifts affect immigrant households, especially those with children. This impact directly translates to changes in the overall climate at schools. That is, the current message to immigrants and children of immigrants is that their parents' and communities' contributions and work are not valued and, in fact, are criminal. This notion directly contradicts the “work hard and succeed” of

the American Dream argument, as it sends a message of criminality where there is none. Work is noble, NOT criminal.

All of these shifts in the contemporary policy landscape violate American principles and the best of America. Our students and their communities are attacked on all levels with a profound message that devalues who they are, their heritage, their self-worth, and even their lives. Our students do not live in a vacuum; though some news stories are less publicized than others, it is important to remember that now immigrant students and children of immigrants live every day in a climate of dehumanization and fear of deportation. These stories (some of which referenced in this article) are too close to home for them—and, in some cases, are home.

In times such as these, it is important for all, but especially educators, to rise and pose questions with the next generation in mind: our students, and how their current and future lives might be or will be affected by the xenophobic political rhetoric and dysconscious xenophobiaism. In other words, we need to decide, and decide quickly, who we are as a society and who we want to become when we “grow up” as a nation. More importantly, as brutalities and the aftermath of immigration policies unfold and unfold further, we cannot lose sight of the despair many of our language minority, immigrant, and Latino/a students and their communities experience and feel, which is by far more horrifying for them than many of us can imagine or comprehend.

Notes

¹ “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Candidate Donald Trump, June 16, 2015.

² Nearly every governmental failure has been framed as “immigrant” issue or in connection to immigrants. A more recent example is, the White House has contextualized government shutdown as “Thank you for calling the White House. Unfortunately, we cannot answer your call today, because Congressional Democrats are holding government funding, including funding for our troops and other national security priorities, *hostage to an unrelated immigration debate*. Due to this obstruction, the government is shut down. In the meantime, you can leave a comment for the president at www.whitehouse.gov/contact. We look forward to taking your calls as soon as the government reopens” (Jan. 21, 2018, White House Comments Line: 202-456-1111). The message has also been reported by many news agencies including Washington Examiner’s Kelly Cohen, on Jan. 21, 2018.

³ Josh Dawsey at *Washington Post* broke the story on January 12, 2018.

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