

Uplifting Immigrant Narratives through a Strength-Based Perspective

Ambar Hernandez Negrete, University of California Davis

Linn Normand, University of Stavanger, Norway

Monica Torreiro-Casal, University of California, Davis

Abstract

Under the current Trump Administration, the United States' (US) explicit demonstrations of anti-immigrant sentiments and racial tension are increasingly forming part of the mainstream discourse and public debate. Drawing on a racist nativism framework, this study underscores how these discourses create ideological and material differences between immigrants and nonimmigrants that serve to justify the ongoing oppression of immigrant communities in the US (Perez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008). Further, this study aims to humanize and highlight the voices of immigrants across the nation by inquiring: What are some of the lived experiences and challenges that immigrants face under the current Trump administration? What support systems and resources have they used to overcome those challenges? Using an anonymous online survey co-developed alongside undergraduate students at UC Davis from immigrant backgrounds, we collected more than 330 immigrant narratives. Employing a qualitative thematic analytical approach (Merton, 1975), our findings reveal that immigrants cultivate a series of coping strategies and support systems to overcome challenging experiences with racist nativism.

Keywords: immigrant narratives, racist nativism, strength-based perspective, qualitative research

Uplifting Immigrant Narratives through a Strength-Based Perspective

Introduction

Under the current Trump Administration, the United States (US) has witnessed increased anti-immigration attitudes and racial tension, illustrated perhaps most prominently by the rise of white supremacy activism and extreme-right movements across the country. Contemporary public policy debates around immigration/anti-immigration in America often rely on the notion of the “outsider immigrant” “swarming” the nation, a discourse which is consistent with the historically demonizing portrayals of immigrants “invading” nations (Gemignani and Hernandez-Albujar, 2015; Nirenberg, 2015). Under this political climate, it is important to investigate not only the manifestations of the anti-immigrant climate, but also simultaneously examine the strategies immigrants employ to persevere: for while the hostility towards immigrants is widely covered in popular media (Natanson, Woodrow-Cox, & Stein, 2020) and deconstructed in the existing literature (Galindo & Vigil, 2006; Jacobson, 2008; Kilty & Haymes, 2000; Ortiz, 2012; Perez Huber, 2006; Perez Huber, 2010; Sanchez, 1997), the unique perspectives and lived experiences of immigrants remain largely understudied and under-documented in the existing literature (Chavez, 2012; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz, Vigil, Jach, Rodriguez-Gutierrez, 2018; Perez Huber, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

Critical scholars argue the anti-immigrant climate serves as a mechanism to “assign a subordinate, racialized non-native status to U.S. immigrants [of color]” (Perez Huber, 2016; p. 241; Kitty & Hames, 2008; Sanchez, 1997). The contemporary opposition to an increasingly non-white US immigrant population reflects the persisting efforts to maintain and sustain structures of dominance based on racial hierarchies throughout US history (Huber, Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008). Existing empirical studies document the anti-immigrant

climate materializes in educational spaces in the form of increased hostility and aggression towards historically marginalized groups (Muñoz, Vigil, Jach, Rodriguez-Gutierrez, 2018; Perez Huber, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Our study expands the existing literature by sharing marginalized immigrants' accounts on how the anti-immigrant climate manifests in their everyday realities. In surveying over 300 individuals, immigrants expressed they experienced verbal and physical hostility under the current Trump administration.

In uplifting the narratives often omitted in the immigration debate, our study aligns with research that counters deficit-constructions of historically marginalized groups, particularly those of color (Adames, Bailey, Brooms, Chavez-Dueñas, Cokley, Garba, & Kennedy, 2017; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Contrary to the deficit-constructions advanced by the Trump administration, immigrant communities of color possess an array of skills, abilities, and networks to resist migration-related challenges (Ayon & Naddy, 2013; Falicov, 2007; Parra-Cardona, Bullock, Imig, Villaruel, & Gold, 2016). Our study builds on these bodies of literature by identifying and highlighting the ingenious strategies immigrants of color draw upon to cope with the verbal and physical manifestations of the anti-immigrant climate. In particular, immigrants question the assumptions underlying the dominant discourse through counternarratives, protect their well-being by cultivating optimistic mindsets, and garner strength from their families to remain resilient.

Our paper is organized as follows. The first section unpacks the political context influencing immigrants' experiences in the US. The second section unpacks the “racist nativism” and “strength-based” conceptual frames that inform our paper. The third section discusses the methodology. The fourth section presents the major narrative themes/findings from our survey—highlighting the verbal and physical acts directed toward immigrants, and the coping strategies

immigrants use. The final section concludes with a discussion around the broader implications of these findings for research on immigrant communities of color.

Political Context: A Heightened Anti-Immigrant Climate

Curbing immigration was one of the central campaign promises in President Donald J. Trump's election campaign. In one of his presidential campaign speeches to the nation in 2015, Trump stressed the “undesirable” nature of immigrants arriving to the United States, particularly from the country’s southern borders: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” Trump warned, “they’re sending people that have lots of problems... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Trump’s rhetoric on immigration has created a bipolar dividing line between the notion of ‘good’-‘bad’ and ‘desirable’-‘undesirable’ immigrants. Moreover, these dividing lines are racially dependent. For instance, during an Oval office meeting with several US Senators on 11 January 2018 to develop a new immigration policy towards immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador and certain African nations, the President expressed frustration at accepting immigrants from so-called “shitholes,” while adding that the US should get more immigrants from countries like Norway (i.e., a nation distinct for its racially white citizens) (Watkins & Phillips, 2018). Though later denied by the administration, Trump had also reportedly made previous remarks about undesirable immigrants from Haiti who “all have AIDS” and from Nigeria who would never “go back to their huts” in Africa. According to Trump, then, a clear hierarchy of desirable (e.g., Norwegians) and non-desirable (e.g., Africa and Latin America) immigrants exists.

In addition, Trump, in the run-up to his Presidency, not only identified ‘undesirable’ immigrants as a security threat to the nation, but one of the determining sources of the nation’s downfall. Indeed, Trump directly correlated Americans' decline with the influx of ‘bad’ or ‘undesirable’ immigrants: “I don’t like what I see happening to America [...] millions of people are flowing across our southern border. We’ve got to build a real wall... Let’s make American great again” (Trump). Trump’s narrative was clear: ‘America’ was no longer great *because* of the “millions of people flowing across our southern borders” (Perez Huber, 2016, p. 228). His campaign slogan then contributed to a narrative that blamed the falling of America on immigrants; they were at fault for the crumbling US infrastructure; they were stealing blue collar jobs, generating crime, and contributing to drug trafficking. “Making America great again” therefore involved cleansing the country of unwanted immigrants. Again, race became a defining dimension of the debate, or as former Congressional Black Caucus Chairman Cedric L. Richmond noted: “Perhaps racist Americans see the browning of America as the shitholing of America.” The Chairman continued by pointing out that they (i.e., Trump supporters) hear “Make America Great Again” as “Make America White Again.”

Conceptual Framework

Racist Nativism: Unpacking Racism and Nativism in the US

In the recent years, around 80% of the immigrant population in the US is non-white (Pew Research Center, 2015). With an overwhelming non-white immigrant population, an understanding of the intersection between race, racism, and nativism is essential for deconstructing the current immigration debate. Historically, race has been used as a mechanism to categorize individuals based on ostensible biological, physical, and material differences between whites and non-whites (Perez Huber, 2006; Lopez, 1994; Omi & Winant, 1994). As Lopez (1994) argues, race is an “ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle” (p. 7). Building on this acknowledgement of race as a social construction, racism is distinguished as the creation or reproduction of “structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 70). Ultimately, racism centers the construction of structures of domination as based solely on an individual’s race. In contrast, nativism utilizes an individuals’ foreign “un-American” connections as the basis by which structures of domination are developed and justified.

In acknowledging that both racism and nativism seek to maintain structures of domination through the subordination of individuals, Perez Huber et al. (2008) define racist nativism as “the assigning of values to real or imagined differences in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is perceived to be white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of color, and thereby defend the native’s right to dominance” (p, 81). Racist nativism identifies White Supremacy as the force driving the historical exploitative and contradictory tensions between immigrants of color (perceived as ‘non-native’) and dominant native groups (historically tied to perceptions and constructions of whiteness) (Pérez Huber et al., 2008). Racist nativism can take several forms ranging from microaggressions to other “subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed towards People of Color that are committed automatically and unconsciously” (Perez Huber, 2011, p.380).

A racist nativism frame, then, is useful for highlighting the social structures, cultural values, and underlying beliefs implicated in verbal and physical hostility immigrants of color voiced in their responses. It reveals how the anti-immigrant socio-political context serves the function of maintaining and upholding the subordination of immigrants of color (Johnson, 1997). In incorporating this theoretical framework, the aim is to expose the dominant narratives reflective in Trump’s rhetoric that silence the perspectives of non-white immigrants, blames them for the pitfalls of the country, and creates a distorted image. Ultimately, a racist nativism research lens helps us unpack the lived experiences of over three hundred immigrants (predominantly immigrants of color) who responded to our survey.

A Strength Based Approach: Countering Racist Nativist Constructions of Immigrants

While a racist nativism lens allows us to name the oppressive discourses and practices contributing to the marginalization of immigrants of color, a strength-based perspective allows us to challenge the distorted, deficit-oriented image of immigrants created under the current anti-immigrant climate. Deficit perspectives are often based on stereotypes regarding communities of color—prompting a focus on what they “lack” when describing or working on issues impacting minorities (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). In this vein, deficit-perspectives label immigrants of color as a threat, rather than an asset, to US society (Adamson, 2006; Andreas, 2003).

In contrast to deficit-perspectives, strength-based approaches acknowledge the knowledge, skills, and abilities communities of color foster to resist, and thrive in US society (Adames et al., 2017; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2015) documents communities of color draw upon a wealth of cultural practices (i.e., aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familial, and social capital) to “survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p.77). The strategic cultural resources communities of color possess are essential for the functioning, development, and well-being of communities of color (Ameldom, 2005; Moll et al., 2009; Tello, 1994; Valencia-Garcia, Simoni, Alegria, & Takeuchi, 2012). Inspired by a strength-based epistemological orientation, our study highlights the laudable attributes present in non-white immigrant communities that the current Trump administration fails to acknowledge or validate.

Methods**Data Collection: Survey Design and Distribution**

The survey data was collected as part of an IRB-approved project in 2018, entitled “Immigration narratives resisting anti-immigrant discourses in the US.” It aimed to capture

immigrant narratives of their lived experiences as a minority ‘counter-narrative.’ To protect the identity of the immigrant respondents an online anonymous survey was used. Anonymity was important for our research design for two reasons: firstly, it provided more latitude in relaying sensitive stories and secondly it allowed immigrants who may be scared to be identified due to their immigration status to still participate in the study. Indeed, a methodological challenge often associated with research on undocumented populations is the recruitment of potential participants who live ‘in the shadows.’ For valid reasons related to fear of discovery, their voices and lived experiences are often left undocumented—leading to a gap in research knowledge of this vulnerable population group.

In distributing the survey, a snowball sampling method was used: students were asked to advertise the study to other individuals on campus and beyond. They were also asked to share the link with members of their extended community, and any other local or national relevant organization or networks on a voluntary basis. Moreover, many of the students helped distribute the survey link through their own networks. Other university mailing lists, including the AB540/Undocumented Center listserv, were also used. The survey link was also posted on social media sites including Facebook as well as distributed through on and off campus presentations.

The survey combines questions on demographics and open-ended questions about reasons for migrations, economic, political, and psychosocial challenges of integration, perceptions of the anti-immigration discourses, sense of belonging (or not), understanding of their contributions to political, economic or social aspects of society and any identification of support systems. It was open to anyone over 18 years of age who identified as an immigrant (i.e. living in the US, but not being born there). All the responses are stored on the survey software Qualtrics.

Participants

As for demographics, the survey respondents include a high proportion of immigrants of Mexican origin (65%). This statistic is not surprising given that the vast majority of California’s immigrants were born in Latin America (50%), with Mexico being the leading country of origin (4.1 million in total in California alone).

Table 1: Country of origin

#	Country of origin	%	Count
1	Mexico	65	217
2	India	4	14
3	Philippines	3	9
4	China	2	6
5	Other	27	90
6	Total	100	336*

Note. The total numbers of the survey responses in this survey differ as the demographic self-identifying categories were voluntary, and not all respondents chose to reply to all the multiple-choice questions.

Of the 90 individuals who labeled their country of origin as “other” – their representations reveal a relatively diverse group of nations (Spain (8%), Afghanistan (13%), Vietnam (8%), El Salvador (10.5%), Guatemala (13%), Honduras (8%), Iran (10.5%), Pakistan (16%), Peru (13%). As for ethnicity, the majority of the respondents are people of color with the largest group (73%) self-identifying as Hispanic/Latinx/Chicanx. Only a small minority of respondents (4%) self-identify as white.

Table 2: Race/Ethnicity

#	Ethnicity	%	Count
1	Hispanic or Latinx/Chicanx	73	238
2	African American	1	3
3	Native American or Alaska Native	0	0

4	Asian	13	42
5	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	1
6	White	4	13
7	Other*	9	29
	Total		326

Note. Of the other group, the largest group was made up of individuals of Middle Eastern/Arab origin.

The vast majority survey respondents live in California though other states are also represented (Nevada, Texas, Pennsylvania, Maryland, North Carolina and Idaho). In terms of gender, there is a slight majority of females (61% of respondents self-identified as women, 38% as men, and 1% as non-binary). Of the respondents who chose to disclose their status (329), the majority (47%) have now become citizens, with 24% being permanent residents or only 4% visa holders. 25 % of respondents identified as ‘other’ (which denotes a DACA or undocumented immigrant). According to the Center for Migration Studies, only about 14% of immigrants in California are undocumented, thus this survey includes a higher than usual representation of undocumented citizens (California, 2019). This can likely be explained by the strong network of undocumented students, who were involved in the project and who also helped distribute the survey.

Table 3: Residency Status

#	Status	%	Count
1	Citizen	47	155
2	Permanent resident	24	78
3	Visa holder	4	14
4	Other status	25	82
	Total		329

Of those who responded to the question of “years spent in the US”, the large majority have lived in the US for more than 10 years (87%), compared to respondents who had lived for 6-10 years (9%), 1-5 years (3%) and less than a year (1%). The overwhelming majority of the respondents are therefore an ‘established’ group of immigrants but vary in residency status (see table 3). For instance, while almost half of this population had permanent residency, over one in four were undocumented. As for age, the largest group of respondents (35%) are young (between 18-28 years old), though if we combine the second largest group of respondents (29%) aged between 40-50 years old and third largest group (27%) who are 51 years old or more, then over half of the respondents are over 40 years of age (only 9% of respondents were aged 29-39).

When asked of annual income, the majority of respondents (42%) report earning less than \$20,000 per year; 19% earn between \$21,000 and \$35,000; 14% earn between \$36,000 and \$50,000; 10% earn between \$51,000-\$75,000; 15% of respondents reported making more than \$76,000. The question related to occupation shows a very diverse range of professions that typically reside in the lower income-bracket (e.g., bus/truck drivers, construction workers, farm workers, preschool teachers, operation technicians, food/service workers, janitors, factory workers, mechanics, caregivers). Respondents with more high-end salary associated professions included bankers, pharmacists, doctors, engineers and managers—though these represented a very small minority in the survey. Relatedly, the respondents’ reported level of education was relatively low, with the majority of respondents (35%) holding a high school degree, 21% having only completed elementary school and only 10% with postgraduate degrees.

Data Analysis

We used a qualitative approach to capture perceptions and insights from participants’ narratives where they articulated, reflected, and deconstructed the phenomenon of immigration

based on their own lived experiences and meanings. Using a thematic analysis (Merton, 1975), the immigrant narratives were coded and thematically classified (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). More specifically, the thematic analysis was done in two stages (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014): in the first stage keywords and phrases were identified in the survey responses to help gain a holistic overview of the respondents' narratives of challenging lived experiences and their strengths. In the second stage the keywords and phrases were categorized into themes. Thus, the process consisted of (1) identifying recurrent patterns in the lived experiences of immigrants and (2) thematically classifying them. In particular, the paper focuses on the thematic analysis on questions related to the lived experiences of immigrants during the current Trump administration and the strategies they utilize to overcome the oppressive anti-immigrant climate.

Findings

Our analysis of over 300 survey responses reveals that while immigrants are exposed to a variety of hostile attitudes and behaviors, they also cultivate a series of strategies to navigate this virulent climate. In the lived experiences of immigrants, the anti-immigrant climate manifested as verbal (i.e., accusations claiming immigrants are “a burden on the economy”, “uneducated and stupid”, “rapists and criminals”) and physical hostility (i.e., exclusion, discrimination, and physical aggression). To survive amidst the antagonism, immigrants advanced counternarratives that recognized their contributions, cultivated optimistic mindsets, and garnered strength from their families to remain resilient.

1.0 Manifestations of Racist Nativism

1.1. Verbal manifestations. Immigrants overwhelmingly experienced racist nativism = as accusations that immigrants were a (1) “burden on the economy,” (2) “uneducated and stupid,” or (3) “criminalists and rapists.”

1.1.1 “*A burden on the economy.*” Many respondents acknowledged that they are perceived as a draining resource and are frequently exposed to such implied narratives. The following terms appeared consistently across the respondents’ replies “we leech off the system,” “they’re taking our jobs,” “they take advantage of welfare,” “they are lazy,” “do not benefit society,” and “immigrants come to this country to rob people’s jobs and use up the state money.” Narratives demonstrate immigrants were very aware that they are perceived not only as draining a system, but, on top of this, they are seen as doing nothing in return or “lazy.” Respondents also share lived experiences of direct verbal abuse or so-called blatant racist nativist remarks because they were directly blamed for unemployment. For instance, one respondent shared “I was once asked ‘Why don’t you just stay in China but have to come and take my job?’ when passing through a homeless guy.”

1.1.2 “*They are uneducated and stupid.*” Lack of intelligence was expressed both in the form of accusations around a ‘lack of education’ (i.e., a circumstantial attribute related to lack of opportunity to attend college) or as an ‘innate attribute’ (i.e., as a biological-genetic trait caused by a lack of mental capacity to retain or process information). Both these representations appeared as a narrative theme in the immigrants’ responses, with many revealing attitudes where they were labeled as “not being smart because of language barriers.”

1.1.3 “*We are rapists and criminals.*” The criminalization of immigrants is another recurrent narrative across the responses. “We are gang bangers, criminals, narcos, drug smugglers, human traffickers,” shared one respondent that reflected on the comments they heard regarding immigrants. Two other respondents noted these remarks: “They make up the majority of criminals in this country” and “they are criminals and up to no good”. Several immigrant narratives also included hearing accusations related to sexual misconduct (immigrants “are rapists”) and illicit substance trade (immigrants “are drug dealers”).

1.2 Physical manifestations. Survey responses illustrate the hostility underlying the anti-immigrant discourse materialized physically as (1) exclusion, (2) discrimination, and (3) physical aggression.

1.2.1 Exclusion. Some respondents attributed the exclusion they experienced based on the combination of their immigrant background, racial background, or religious affiliation. As one respondent shared: “As a Muslim Pakistani woman, [...] I was on a flight and the hostess came and served water to the white passenger sitting next to me, and skipped me.” The feeling of deliberate exclusion expressed by this respondent shows that she feels her identity as both Muslim and Pakistani contributed to the air hostess’s deliberate ‘oversight’.

1.2.2 Discrimination. Other respondents experienced the physical antagonism as discrimination in the form of microaggressions that occurred in subtle ways that negatively affected immigrants. As one respondent confessed, “the constant discrimination since Trump has become president is exhausting and devastating.” Another respondent openly connected the treatments he feels is directly correlated to his race: “America is the land of opportunity, but at times [I] feel persecuted based on the color of my skin.” In response to the discriminatory treatment, immigrants felt they were not valued or respected. As a young respondent from Mexico expressed: “My mother has not been treated with the same amount of respect when she would go to school meetings.”

1.2.3 Physical aggression. Respondents also share the less subtle manifestations of racist nativism, such as explicit physical aggression. As a respondent points out, “I have seen white people become very aggressive with immigrants.” In response to the physical aggression taking place under the Trump administration, respondents constantly feared they would be physically “attacked in the streets.”

2.0 Immigrant Strategies for Countering Racist Nativism

In light of verbal and physical manifestations of racist nativism taking place in their everyday realities, immigrants resisted the vindictive environment through creative and empowering ways. Narratives suggest immigrants fortified their psychological well-being through counternarratives that acknowledge their contributions, maintaining optimistic mindsets, and garnering strength from their families to persist despite the current socio-political opposition towards immigrants.

2.1 Counternarratives. In their narratives, immigrants recognized their contributions as a means to counter the misconceptions underlying the racist nativism rhetoric. For instance,

respondents' countered accusations claiming immigrants were "lazy people" by emphasizing "trabajamos muy duro" (we are working very hard). In validating their strenuous efforts, respondents recognized "somos el motor de la economia" (they are a driving force for the economy). In acknowledging this contribution another individual stresses: "there has to be more information out to the public about how a migrant worker is exploited and a push back against exploitation." This respondent points to the incongruence between accusations that immigrants are a burden on the economy and the forms US society benefits from immigrants' labor. Respondents noted many immigrants filled undesirable jobs often neglected by natives given the physically demanding and exploitative conditions they required for below livable minimum wages. As another immigrant pointed out, "immigrants work hard in the fields, not everyone is willing to take those types of jobs." Other narratives echoed these perspectives, "immigrants do all the blue-collar jobs that no one else wants to do." In acknowledging that immigrant filled jobs vital for securing natives' necessities such as food, services, and experiences, respondents challenged accusations that they were "a burden on the economy."

To counter other denigrating labeling of immigrants, respondents shared information missing from beliefs that immigrants are "uneducated and stupid." Immigrants protest these labels by exposing the limited educational opportunities many immigrants experienced in their countries of origin: "en nuestro pais no tenemos la educacion que aqui proveen" (in our country we do not have the education that is provided here). Immigrants cited their struggles to access better educational opportunities in their countries as one of the motivating factors for their migration to the US. An immigrant mother shares she migrated to "mejorar mis conocimientos para cumplir mi sueño de ver mis hijos con una buena educacion" (expand her knowledge to accomplish her dream of seeing her children with a quality education). Their fiery desires to

educate themselves and their families is evidence of the high value immigrants place on education. Survey narratives expose the context omitted from the dominant rhetoric classifying immigrants as “uneducated and stupid.”

Immigrants also challenged the distorted constructions of immigrants as “criminals and rapists” by affirming their numerous positive contributions to US society: “languages,” “food,” “music,” and other cultural traditions. Embedded in their narratives is an acknowledgement that by granting access to their different languages, music, food, and traditions, immigrants provided US natives an opportunity to participate in a multicultural global society. In addition, immigrants’ presence provided an opportunity for US natives to increase their cultural awareness and sensitivity as a means to create a more humanitarian society: “I think bringing different cultures together raises awareness of many issues, we become more accepting of the world, and care more about people from other countries.” Through their counternarratives, respondents brought to light information often erased in the discourse promulgated by the Trump administration.

2.2 Optimistic Mindsets: “Oportunidades” y “Bendiciones”. Immigrants cultivated optimistic mindsets to cope with the adversity related to navigating a racist nativist environment. Immigrants ingeniously increased their capacity to face challenges by re-construing difficulties as “opportunities” to improve the quality of life their family and children would experience. As narratives illustrate, immigrants were remarkably thankful; respondents stressed gratitude for their family, jobs, communities of support, and abilities to provide for relatives in their native countries. Another immigrant illustrates their tendency to focus on the positive: “I feel blessed of being here in the United States.” A narrative from an older female that identified as “other status” captures the drastic differences in opportunities available in their countries of origin

influencing their positive outlooks: “My family was very poor [in Mexico] that even my dad did not make sufficient money to cover food. Also, my parents did not have enough money to provide us clothes. Similarly, there was no money to continue studying or send us to study.” Based on these experiences, immigrants felt blessed for the chance to strive for a better future. Cultivating these optimistic mindsets were vital to immigrant’s well-being in navigating US society, as a female shared, “facing the challenges in this country was easy for me because I just kept thinking that anything was better than the life I had back in Mexico.”

2.3 Fostering Resilience through la Familia. “Familia” (family) fueled immigrants’ resilience in light of adversity. Family for our participants included blood and not blood related relatives of the nuclear and extended family as well as spouses, children, and relatives in their country of origin. In particular, families served as emblems of “esperanza,” “motivacion,” and “fortaleza” (hope, motivation, and strength). An older male from Mexico expressed, “something that was very helpful to face the challenges of being in a new country was the support from my family. My family was my motivation to go on. During difficult times, my wife was always there with me and together we work together to build what we have now.” Immigrants garnered motivation from their families to persist despite the anti-immigrant environment they experienced.

The important role family played in fostering immigrants’ resilience was seen across different age groups and familial position. For older respondents, children served as motivation and inspiration for immigrants to strive for a better life: “Having my children by my side and giving it my all in life to be able to provide them with a quality life so they can have a good future.” Participants shared how their tenacious efforts function as “an example for my children to overcome barriers.” In remaining resilient, parents embodied the values and ethics they hoped

to inculcate to their children. It is through their resilience that parents showed their children the value of fighting for their dreams and persevering despite the multiple challenges they might experience. As one respondent noted: “Everything that I do is for my children and every challenge that I faced and overcome demonstrated to my children that if their mom could overcome the challenge they can do the same and better.” Immigrant parents inspired their children with their sacrifices and served as role models of hard work and tenacious determination: “My parents have helped me push forward, they're my [inspiration] and what motivates me to work my hardest every day.” The narratives of children of the immigrants demonstrate the fruit of parent’s resilience as children emulate their acts of persistence. For children of immigrants, parents were also a source of support (“apoyo”), love, healing and motivation to persist in their academic endeavors. Parents helped them with words of encouragement as “échale ganas en los estudios” (do your best academically).

Discussion and Conclusion

Making visible the lived experiences of immigrants is essential to challenge the distorted images of immigrants that are increasingly normalized under the current Trump administration. Our analysis of more than 300 narratives reveal the strategies immigrants draw upon to overcome the challenges associated with navigating the current political climate. Immigrant narratives humanize the current immigration debate by revealing the verbal (i.e., accusations claiming immigrants are “a burden on the economy,” “uneducated and stupid,” “rapists and criminals”) and physical (i.e., exclusion, discrimination, and physical aggression) manifestations of the racist nativist climate. As part of our efforts to urge a shift from a nativist-centered to an immigrant-centered focus, our findings also document immigrants persist in creative and

empowering ways by advancing counternarratives, cultivating optimistic mindsets, and fostering resilience through their “familia.”

Perez Huber (2006) forewarned the anti-immigrant rhetoric promulgated during Donald Trump’s campaign would open “the doors to more overt and violent practices of racism that target people of color in the US” (p. 216). Immigrants provide examples of the increased hostility foreshadowed by Perez Huber (2016). Our findings are consistent with existing studies documenting an increase in “subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults” in educational spaces after the election of Donald J. Trump (Muñoz, Vigil, Jack, Rodriguez-Gutierrez, 2018; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Our results expand these previous findings by demonstrating that the harassment and racial bias under the current Trump administration also affects immigrants of different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds outside of educational spaces. Deconstructing the narratives through a racist nativism lens, exposes how the ongoing construction of immigrants as “a burden in the economy,” “uneducated and stupid,” and “rapists and criminals” creates and upholds a separation between natives and non-natives (Perez Huber, Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008). This separation negates and justifies the ongoing and historical exploitation of immigrants of color for cheap labor, the dehumanizing work conditions that many immigrants endure, and the criminalization of immigrants in the US (Ewing, Martinez, Rumbaut, 2015; Farris & Silber Mohamed, 2018; Mize & Swords, 2010; Vogel, 2007). Further, these anti-immigration narratives create and uphold a separation between the native and non-natives to justify the ongoing marginalization of immigrants of color as seen under the current Trump administration (Perez Huber, 2016). A racist nativism frame, therefore, allows an interrogation of the social structures and cultural

values increasingly normalizing racist nativism in the current political context (Perez Huber et al., 2008; Sanchez, 1997).

Few studies simultaneously examine how immigrants resist the racist nativist force of the Trump administration. Our findings show respondents questioned the assumptions underlying the denigrating anti-immigrant rhetoric through counternarratives that valued their economic and cultural contributions to US society. Immigrants' acknowledgement of their contributions reflects previous scholarship outlining the "wealth" of cultural practices and the "funds of knowledge" present in marginalized communities for resisting systems of oppression (Moll, et al., Yosso, 2005). Raising awareness of the cultural wealth and strategies marginalized communities possess is essential for supporting their conscious and empowering use of these practices to support themselves and their communities (Tello, 1994). Then, to protect their emotional and psychological well-being in light of the verbal and physical hostility, immigrants maintained a positive outlook by focusing on their "opportunities" and "bendiciones." These positive attitudes act as coping mechanisms for overcoming challenges and help immigrants adjust to their new environment by reframing their sacrifices (Gullón-Rivera, 2017). Finally, immigrants garnered strength from their families to persevere despite the racist nativist manifestations. As documented in the literature, family (among Latinx communities) constitutes a central pillar of support, attachment, loyalty, reciprocity, and a cultural value known as "familism" (Bermudez, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Torres-Robles, Alvarez-Rivera, Nobles, & Lersch, 2014; Rumbaut, 2008). As a protective factor, "la familia" (the family) is an invaluable asset to Latinx communities' social support network, given its association with improved health outcomes (Almeida, Molnar, Kawachi, & Subramanian, 2009; Falcon, Todorova, & Tucker, 2009; Valencia-Garcia, Simoni, Alegria, & Takeuchi, 2012). Simultaneously uplifting the

strengths of marginalized communities is necessary for prompting a paradigm shift that humanizes and validates the lived experiences of immigrants of color in the US.

In rendering visible the lived experiences as voiced by immigrants themselves, this study encourages future research that recognizes immigrant communities of color as holders of valuable insights and knowledge (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Restructuring research as a strength-based mode of inquiry, holds broader implications for supporting advocacy efforts based on immigrants' first-hand experiences, skills, and assets. Strength-based research holds the potential of not only deconstructing the systems of oppression, but also unveil the modes of resilience that advocacy and policy efforts can reinforce to support the liberation efforts of historically marginalized immigrant communities.

References

- Adames, H. Y., Bailey, M. L., Brooms, D. R., Chavez-Dueñas, N. Y., Cokley, K., Garba, R. & Kennedy, S. A. (2017). Law enforcement in the age of black lives matter: Policing black and brown bodies. Lexington Books.
- Adamson F.B. (2006) Crossing Borders: International Migration and National Security. *International Security* 31: 165-199.
- Almedom, A. M. (2005). Social capital and mental health: An interdisciplinary review of primary evidence. *Social science & medicine*, 61(5), 943-964.
- Almeida, J., Molnar, B. E., Kawachi, I., & Subramanian, S. V. (2009). Ethnicity and nativity status as determinants of perceived social support: Testing the concept of familism. *Social science & medicine*, 68(10), 1852-1858.
- Andreas P. (2003) Redrawing the Line: Borders and Security in the Twenty-first Century. *International Security* 28: 78-111.
- Ayón, C., & Naddy, M. B. G. (2013). Latino Immigrant Families' Social Support Networks: strengths and limitations during a time of stringent immigration legislation and economic Insecurity. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(3), 359-377.
- Bermúdez, J. M., Kirkpatrick, D. R., Hecker, L., & Torres-Robles, C. (2010). Describing Latinos families and their help-seeking attitudes: Challenging the family therapy literature. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 32(2), 155-172.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77-101.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*, London: Sage

Chavez, L. R. (2012) *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society.*, Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Ewing, W. A., Martinez, D., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2015). The criminalization of immigration in the United States. *Washington, DC: American Immigration Council Special Report.*

Falcón, L. M., Todorova, I., & Tucker, K. (2009). Social support, life events, and psychological distress among the Puerto Rican population in the Boston area of the United States. *Aging and Mental Health*, 13(6), 863-873.

Falicov, C. J. (2007). Working with transnational immigrants: Expanding meanings of family, community, and culture. *Family process*, 46(2), 157-171.

Farris, E. M., & Silber Mohamed, H. (2018). Picturing immigration: How the media criminalizes immigrants. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 6(4), 814-824.

Galindo, R. and Vigil, J. (2006) Are anti-immigrant statements racist or nativist? What difference does it make? *Latino Studies* 4: 419-447.

Gonzales, R. G. (2016) *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*, Oakland: University of California Press.

Gullón-Rivera, A. (2017) "Voices of Latino Fathers: Migration and the Dual-Frame of Reference. *Journal of Intercultural Disciplines*. 16 (18), 50-67.

Kilty, K. M., & Haymes, M. V. D. (2000). Racism, nativism, and exclusion: Public policy, immigration, and the Latino experience in the United States. *Journal of Poverty*, 4(1-2), 1-25.

Jacobson, R. D. (2008). *The new nativism: Proposition 187 and the debate over immigration*. U of Minnesota Press.

- Johnson K. (1997) The new nativism: Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. In: Perea JF (ed) *Immigrants out! The new nativism and the anti-immigrant impulse in the United States*. New York: New York University Press, 165–189.
- Merton, R. K. (1975). Thematic analysis in science: Notes on Holton's concept. *Science*, 188(4186), 335-338. Migration Policy Institute (MPI) State Immigration Data Profiles, Accessed, November 10, 2019 <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/US>
- Mize, R. L., & Swords, A. C. (2010). *Consuming Mexican labor: From the Bracero program to NAFTA*. University of Toronto Press.
- Miles M, Huberman M and Saldana J. (2014) *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, Washington Sage.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Muñoz, S. M., Vigil, D., Jach, E., & Rodriguez-Gutierrez, M. (2018). Unpacking resilience and trauma: Examining the “Trump effect” in higher education for undocumented Latinx college students. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, 12(3), 33-52.
- Natanson, H., Woodrow-Cox, J., & Stein, P. (2020). Trump’s words, bullied kids, scarred schools. The Washington Post. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/school-bullying-trump-words/>.

- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2014). *Racial formation in the United States*. Routledge.
- Ortiz, C. M. (2012). Latinos nowhere in sight: Erased by racism, nativism, the black-white binary, and authoritarianism. *Rutgers Race & the Law Review*, 13(2), 29-64.
- Parra-Cardona, J. R., Bullock, L. A., Imig, D. R., Villarruel, F. A., & Gold, S. J. (2006). "Trabajando duro todos los días": Learning from the life experiences of Mexican-origin migrant families. *Family relations*, 55(3), 361-375.
- Perez Huber, L. (2016). Make America Great Again: Donald trump, racist nativism and the virulent adherence to white supremacy amid U.S. demographic change. *Charleston Law Review*, 10(2), 215-250.
- Pérez Huber, L. (2009) Disrupting apartheid of knowledge: testimonio as methodology in Latina/o critical race research in education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22: 639-654.
- Pérez Huber, L., Benavides Lopez, C., Malagón, M., et al. (2008) Getting beyond the "symptom," acknowledging the "disease": Theorizing racist nativism. *Contemporary Justice Review* 11: 39-51.
- Rumbaut, R. G. (2008). Reaping what you sow: Immigration, youth, and reactive ethnicity. *Applied Development Science*, 12(2), 108-111.
- Selod, S. (2015) Citizenship denied: The racialization of Muslim American men and women post-9/11. *Critical Sociology* 41: 77-95.
- Sanchez, G. J. (1997). Face the nation: Race, immigration, and the rise of nativism in late twentieth century America. *International Migration Review*, 31(4), 1009-1030.

- Southern Poverty Law Center. (2016, November 28). The Trump effect: The impact of the 2016 presidential election on our nation's schools. Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/20161128/trump-effect-impact-2016-presidential-election-our-nations-schools>.
- Tello, J. (1994). *Cara y corazón, face and heart: A family-strengthening, rebalancing and community mobilization process*. San Antonio, TX: National Latino Children's Institute.
- Valencia, R. R., & Solórzano, D. G. (1997). Contemporary deficit thinking. The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice, 160-210.
- Valencia-Garcia, D., Simoni, J. M., Alegría, M., & Takeuchi, D. T. (2012). Social capital, acculturation, mental health, and perceived access to services among Mexican American women. *Journal of Latina/o Psychology*, 1(S), 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1037/2168-1678.1.S.78>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race ethnicity and education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Vogel, R. D. (2007). Transient servitude: The US guest worker program for exploiting Mexican and Central American workers. *Monthly Review*, 58(8), 1.