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**“Perceived Disorder, Fear, or Xenophobia?: A Comprehensive Model for Action Research on Immigrant Communities”**

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Abstract

Historical and contemporary anti-immigrant attitudes and policies in the U.S. and Europe are reviewed. Natives in host communities associate low-income immigrants with social disorder and thus with increased risk and fear of crime. But most immigrants are hard-working, law-abiding, and are more often victims of crime than are natives. The developed world has benefited from immigration from less developed countries but has practiced policies of forced acculturation and social exclusion. Research on immigration is on the rise, but has barely begun to focus on policy and other macro-societal influences, political acculturation, and host community responses to immigration. A comprehensive ecological model, adapted from Christens and Perkins (2008), is presented to guide action research on immigrant communities at multiple levels and focusing on the socio-cultural, physical, economic, and political environment. We must turn xenophobia into xenophilia, or the love, appreciation and strength of diversity.

Keywords: immigrants, anti-immigrant bias, immigration policy research, oppression, liberation, empowerment, wellness, multi-level

**Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Historical and International Context**

Extreme right-wing racist-nationalist groups and political parties in Europe, the U.S., and every other post-industrial society are just the “tip of the iceberg” of widespread anti-immigrant attitudes. Most natives in host communities associate low-income immigrants with social disorder and thus with increased risk and fear of crime. But the vast majority of immigrants are hard-working, law-abiding, and as a group are more often victims of personal crime than are natives; and those immigrants who appear less European, who are young, single, and live in public housing in large cities—i.e., those *most feared* – are, in fact, *most victimized*. Community, social, and developmental psychologists can play a critical role in studying and addressing problems associated with anti-immigrant fears and prejudice. I will apply a comprehensive ecological model for analyzing social power dynamics and issues across four domains of capital and three levels to suggest promising topics for applied interdisciplinary research on immigration, perceived disorder, and fear.

Anti-immigration attitudes in the U.S. are as old as the country itself. In the mid-1800s, the “foreign devils” were the Irish, who were depicted in political cartoons as filthy and equal to Blacks, i.e., the lowest. In the late 1800s, the immigrant menace were Italians! As recently as one year ago, a writer commenting on the status of Italian-Americans wrote: “If not totally black, Italians have certainly complicated the notion of whiteness in America so that they are neither totally white, and it is this in-between status that makes them likely candidates to support the abolition of whiteness as a privilege status in the U.S.A” (Gardaphe, 2008).

[INSERT: Anti-Italian cartoon from The Mascot newspaper, 1888]

Anti-foreigner bias was especially strong in the early 1900s. The role of psychologists of that era was not entirely positive—one hopes we can now do better as both a science and a profession. American psychologists used Binet’s IQ test to limit immigration of “undesirables” (Rappaport, 1977). Some of the most distinguished American psychologists were behind such ventures. For example, Henry Goddard used 'mental tests' to examine large numbers of immigrants and concluded that eighty-three percent of Jews, eighty percent of Hungarians, seventy-nine percent of Italians, and eighty-seven percent of Poles and Russians were "feeble minded." The tragedy, of course, is that many thousands of Jews and other Eastern Europeans who were denied entry or discouraged by such prejudice would die at the hands of Nazi-style eugenics.

Lewis Terman, in his famous 1916 book, The Measurement of Intelligence, suggested that children of genetically "inferior races...should be segregated in special classes... They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers... There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding” (quoted in Ryan, 1976, p.306). Similarly, the renowned experimental psychologists Robert Yerkes and Carl Brigham used testing of World War One soldiers to argue that Blacks and Southern Europeans are intellectually inferior to those of Nordic descent.

Attitudes toward immigrants in the United States have not changed much, particularly among less educated working-class people. This sign says “Deporta tutti. Parla inglese o muori.”

[PHOTOS: *ANTI-IMMIGRATION ACTIVISTS RALLY IN PA, DC & CA*]:

The first two photos below show the ignorance of xenophobes—ironically unable to correctly use the language they hope to preserve (correct spelling: “morons” and “official”). The sign in the third photo reads:….

**Policies of Forced Acculturation and Social Exclusion**

It is easy to make fun of illiterates and extremists. But this map shows that xenophobia is widespread: these are just some of the local anti-immigration ordinances that have recently passed legislatures or voter referendums and become law in the United States.

[MAP: Anti-immigrant ordinances that have been adopted within the last two years]

Xenophobia is unfortunately NOT just a problem in America. Italia and the rest of Europe have experienced more of it in recent years.

[Photos: “They have suffered immigration. Now living in the reservations! Think about it;” Umberto Bossi, Lega Nord; “Yes to polenta. No to cous cous. Proud of our traditions.”]

All of Western Europe is experiencing rapidly increased immigration. Economic globalization is essentially an effort to allow unlimited international flow of capital and market goods, while limiting the flow of workers and especially their families. Despite those limits, many have managed to migrate to fill a labor gap in developed countries. And so the developed world has benefited from immigration from less developed countries, but has practiced various policies of both Forced Acculturation and Social Exclusion.

Examples of forced acculturation include language requirements and banning headscarves from public schools for “imperilling public order” as the French government has done (Adrian, 2006). Social Exclusion includes forcing immigrants to live, work, and go to school only in certain areas, which have become immigrant ghettos (Geddes, 2000). Concentrating poverty always leads to social problems, including crime, especially when legal work that pays a livable family wage is limited, as is particularly the case now.

However, we cannot assume that any association between immigration and crime is attributable to immigrants themselves, the vast majority of whom are only looking for lawful work and want to avoid any contact with law enforcement. A recent study took advantage of the variable geographic dispersion of immigrants in France and compared punishment regimes across local jurisdictions (Pager, 2008). A strong association was found between the presence of immigrants and the institutional response to crime.

The French criminal justice system has responded to growing concerns on the part of native French about immigrants from North Africa and other less developed areas and about perceived levels of social disorder and delinquency in ethnic neighborhoods by increasing police surveillance, widening court jurisdiction, and imposing harsher penalties for offenders. As a result, immigrants, who are only six percent of the population of France, now comprise almost one third of the French prison population. More attention is needed by researchers and policymakers to social and political influences on the development and implementation of crime control and correctional strategies, not just in France but in all countries experiencing substantial immigration. I wonder how Italy would compare in such an analysis.

Research from Sweden and elsewhere finds that immigrants are more likely to be victims of crime than are native residents (Martens, 2000). Moreover, immigrants who appear non-European are more often victims than are other immigrants. Those who are young, single, live in a large city, and reside in public housing are the most victimized and are most fearful (Martens, 2000). Immigrants have even more to fear since the “War on Terror” heated up after 11 September, 2001 (Collins, 2007; Naber, 2006).

As troubling as immigrant fears are, I am more concerned about native xenophobia and perceptions of disorder, which may be less about crime and more about feelings of insecurity due to perceived job displacement, territorial invasion, inadequate integration of newly arriving immigrants, interethnic confrontation, and a threat to native identity (Avramov & Cliquet, 2007; El Yamani, Juteau, & McAndrew, 1993). The news and popular media have exploited and exacerbated those fears (Casella & Massari, 2007; El Yamani et al, 1993).

**Possible Community Psychology Responses to Problems Faced by Immigrants**

As community psychologists, we must carefully consider the state of knowledge on this problem and the opportunity for psychology, in collaboration with other disciplines, to make important contributions toward solving it. The research literature on immigration has grown rapidly, but there are still important gaps. There has been much recent research attention to immigrant acculturation and individual immigrant youth outcomes, including the work of Berry (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) and others and a recent special issue of the *Journal of Primary Prevention* on acculturation and immigrant adolescent health.

But until recently, there has been too little focus on policy and other macro-societal influences, political acculturation, and host community responses to immigrants and immigration. I am encouraged by several noteworthy recent examples, however, including the Special Section of *American Journal of Community Psychology* on ‘‘The Other Side of Acculturation: Changes among Host Individuals and Communities in Their Adaptation to Immigrant Populations,’’ which focuses on ecological processes, historical contexts, and power inequities. Other important research is being conducted in Spain (e.g., García-Ramírez, Paloma, Suarez-Balcazar & Balcazar, 2009), Finland (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000), Britain (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000), and Germany (Simon & Ruhs, 2008).

The plight of immigrants in Italy has received attention for some time (Carter, 1997). Maritano (2002) compiled a bibliography of 1500 publications on immigration, racism and multiculturalism in Italy. And that does not even include recent immigration research by Prezza and colleagues (2008) on “territorial sense of community, ethnic prejudice and political orientation” and other studies in Torino by Ricucci (2008), in Roma by Francescato and others, in Genova by Migliorini, Rania and Cardinali, and in Padova and Aosta by Cristini, Scacchi and Santinello.

Grillo and Pratt (2002) edited a book on the politics of immigration and cultural diversity in Italy, which includes not only historical chapters, for example on “Racist discourses and practices in the Italian Empire under Fascism,” but also contemporary analyses of representations of immigrants in Turin, Italian media creations of myths and moral panics, for example in the representation of Albanian immigrants, and chapters on the political participation of immigrants in Bologna, and on programs and policies affecting migrant women and children. It also includes Afro-Muslim and Scandanavian critiques of Italian society and its handling of minority issues.

I also want to highlight the important practical work by Martini Associati and others promoting Italian-immigrant community integration or convivenza. There is some new applied work coming from the psychology academy in Italy, but there could be much more, particularly at the societal policy level.

A Comprehensive Model for Action Research on Immigrant Communities

I want to conclude by presenting a comprehensive, ecological framework to guide research and action on this topic. It is adapted from a model I developed in response to an argument by Prilleltensky (2008) for research and action on issues of oppression, liberation or empowerment, and wellness. Brian Christens and I (Christens & Perkins, 2008) expanded his argument to be more explicit about levels of analysis and domains of capital or environmental contexts, which also argues for more interdisciplinary collaboration with sociologists, cultural anthropologists, geographers and urban planners, applied economists, and political scientists. For the present focus, I have applied each of the environmental domains of this framework to issues of immigration, disorder and fear.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

First, regarding the Socio-cultural Environment, at the macro level, research and action are needed to reduce oppressive and enhance liberating influences of both original and host cultures, social structures and processes, and policies (see Figure 1). One of the most important contributions we can make as psychologists is to design and implement effective media and educational interventions at the local and societal levels, and targeting both adults and young people, that will lead to greater acceptance and inclusion by host communities in ways that will enhance migrant community wellness, such as accommodations for education, language, religion, and other cultural practices.

To the extent that traditional, informal ties determine power and influence, immigrants will be shut out and remain disaffected and uncommitted to local communities and nations. Thus, at the meso-system level, we must identify and document organizations that violate standards of social justice for immigrant workers and communities, and implement changes in organizations affecting immigrants and facilitate migrant worker and client participation in organizational decisions, especially those affecting immigrants. Theories and methods of collective social action, community organizing, and multi-level analysis and social network analysis will be particularly useful. We must identify and promote opportunities and methods of reducing social threats to, and enhancing the social wellness of, migrants and their families. Within migrant families and microsystems, we should study and identify oppressive socio-cultural structures and dynamics which lead to individual and group helplessness and internalized oppression.

An example of the utility of social network analysis and the importance of reaching out to immigrant organizations comes from my current research with Kimberly Bess and Paul Speer on networks of public and nongovernmental organizations engaged in youth violence prevention. The biggest challenge to the action-research project and to the organizational coalition we helped create was to get coalition members, who mainly provide services to youth, to understand violence at a structural level and to engage in policy change. Representatives of immigrant organizations understood structural causes of violence and the need for policy change better than any other type of organization. But they were also the most peripheral to the organizational network and so their influence on the coalition and other organizations is very limited.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Social scientists must also attend systematically to the influence of the Physical Environment on the oppression, integration, and wellness of immigrants (see Figure 2). At the macro level, research and planning and policies are needed to address unhealthy physical conditions both in the workplace and in ethnic neighborhoods and homes, such as the placement of industrial and contaminated sites in close proximity to residential areas. Research can document group inequities in environmental wellness and identify and examine organizations that violate standards of environmental justice for migrant workers and communities. We should scrutinize planning, development, and design policies, as well as preservation regulations to optimize the wellness of migrant and native communities alike and to promote their integration. We should help organizations that create environmental risks to change and assist the development of groups and organizations addressing environmental oppression and justice. Participation by migrants in planning and other environmental decisions is important. Thus, we must identify and promote participatory opportunities and methods for immigrants in organizations aiming to reduce environmental threats or enhance environmental wellness.

At the individual and group level, we should study native and immigrant behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes affecting the health of the ecology for all of us. We also need to better understand how immigrants form a sense of place and attachment to community (Mazumdar et al, 2000). And at the organizational and community level, we need to help them create such places, including fighting “Not In My Back Yard” responses to the location of mosques and other sacred spaces. Across levels, we need to better understand the relationship between city and regional planning decisions, setting-level environmental features and conditions, and individual behaviors, health and wellness.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

We must not ignore the Economic Environment, as psychologists typically do (see Figure 3). Along with applied economists and Marxian sociologists, we must engage in a critical and systemic analysis of the influence of economic interests at each level. To understand and respond effectively to anti-immigration or immigrant exploitative policies at the societal level, we need to know whose economic interests are at stake. Immigration policy makes for “strange bedfellows” as labor unions and social conservatives generally oppose immigration while business interests and civil rights advocates favor more open policies. This provides an opportunity for the latter groups to work together to reform anti-immigrant policies. At the organizational level, businesses that exploit migrant workers for economic gain must also be identified and reform, however. And at the individual and family levels, the micro-economy of immigrant work opportunities is in crisis as many immigrants cannot make a livable wage, and they are forced into overcrowded, substandard living conditions, and in some cases, illicit economic activities.

These connections between economics and social and physical wellness demands further investigation. Economic development, including innovative entrepreneurial programs and micro- and meso-credit are needed, both in receiving nations, and in immigrants’ home countries, which would help reduce the economic need to emigrate.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

It is perhaps most important that more psychologists attend critically and systematically to the political context of immigration (see Figure 4). We must not only actively oppose laws that unjustly discriminate against immigrants. We must also identify and examine political structures, attitudes, and behaviors in society that oppress immigrants in more subtle ways and thereby threaten community cohesion and wellbeing for all of us. In order to respond effectively, we must work to understand the perspectives, fears, and other motives, not only of immigrants, but also of anti-immigrant policy makers, advocates and native citizens.

At the local organizational and political level, opportunities and active recruitment for meaningful community participation by immigrants and refugees is critical (Goodkind & Foster-Fishman, 2002). We can do our parts locally to oppose policies, practices, and benign ignorance that create barriers to full participation in society by immigrants and which may lead to apartheid-like conditions, worse problems of alienation, crime and potentially political violence.

Finally, at the individual level, as psychologists we are uniquely trained to address problems of fear, helplessness, and internalized oppression on the part of both immigrants and reactionary anti-immigrant groups. For the sake of our whole society, we must work to change individual behaviors and beliefs affecting immigrants and develop the human capital of immigrants as well as their social and political consciousness, activism, leadership, and self-efficacy and recognize and understand, and not disrupt, the strengths and social supports of immigrant families and cultures promoting personal wellness. Only then can we begin to turn widespread xenophobia into xenophilia, or the love, appreciation and strength of diversity.

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