

Anti-Immigration Rhetoric in the United States: Veiled Racism?

Mona M. Shattell and Jose Villalba

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It seems like a day does not go by in the United States without hearing about immigration on televised news broadcasts, print news stories, radio talk shows, or Internet blogs. Immigration, more specifically “illegal immigration,” is a hot topic in the U.S., perhaps fueled by the fact that 2008 is a presidential election year. Furthermore, since the issue of illegal immigration tends to divide constituents into two distinct camps (i.e., those opposed to it and those tolerant of it), political candidates for local school boards and county commission vacancies to gubernatorial and U.S. Congress and Senate seats continuously stir political debate with unfounded sound bites, and quick “facts.” Consequently, much of the immigration rhetoric is anti-immigration. We contend that this anti-immigration sentiment is not a true fervor for the law, but instead is veiled racism. There is no doubt that the U.S. needs to address immigration through immigration reform, but the strong, and at times vitriolic, discussion is eerily similar to the anti-non-White, non-Protestant, rhetoric “discussions” of the past. This type of negative, hateful, sentiment has contributed to a 40% increase in the number of hate groups in the U.S. since 2000 (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2007).

The post- 9/11 U.S. and its “war on terror” assuredly contributes to these anti-immigrant sentiments. Take, for example, a letter to the editor that appeared in Greensboro, North Carolina's daily newspaper, the *News & Record*. In this letter to the editor (Moschetti, 2007), the author implied that a homogenous city is a better city (and the author was not advocating for an all-Hispanic or Latino/a, or an all African American city). Moschetti's not-so-veiled implication that non-diverse, that is, White people, are not “dropping out of school, doing drugs, joining gang[s], [and] having multiple children that they cannot afford” points toward ignorance, xenophobia, and racism. Interestingly, most individuals who align themselves with these opinions and patterns of thought would reject the notion that these statements are “racist,” opting instead to explain that they are simply stating “the facts” and that there is nothing discriminatory about their stereotypic comments.

Unfortunately, the negative impact on U.S. immigrants of examples of veiled racism, like the one above, pale in comparison to the detrimental nature of institutional racism prevalent in social systems, such as schools, media outlets, the justice system, and the health care system. One need not look too far to see the manifestations of racism, discrimination, and prejudice as they take the form of mental and physical health disparities, staggering poverty rates, and higher illiteracy rates for members of minority groups (including immigrants) when compared to their Caucasian peers.

A more specific, vivid example of institutional racism would be how some local law enforcement agencies interpret the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agreements of Cooperation in Communities to Enhance Safety and Security (ICE ACCESS) partnerships. ICE ACCESS partnerships provide additional training and resources to local law enforcement agencies to exercise “latitude to pursue investigations relating to violent crimes, human smuggling, gang/organized crime activity, sexual-related offenses, narcotics smuggling and money laundering; and increased resources and support in more remote geographical locations” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, n. d.). Unfortunately, this latitude has led some law enforcement agencies to solely target Mexican restaurants, African Taxi Cab companies, and non-Judeo-Christian places of worship in their efforts to deal with undocumented workers. In other instances, police officers making routine traffic stops will ask Latina/o or Middle Eastern-appearing individuals to present a passport or immigration visa, when these same police officers would not think to ask a Caucasian-appearing traffic law violator for their passport or green card. Although to some people these examples may not appear to be of much harm, and to others they may be justified because of the “war on terror;” to us they are blatant examples of racial profiling and singling out of individuals solely because they look or sound different.

To most immigrants and members of minority groups, these veiled forms of racism are indeed blatant. In fact, many immigrants and minority group members living in the U.S. agree that they are victims of macro and microaggressions on a regular basis (Sue et al., 2007). Unfortunately, these constant experiences with racism and intolerance can lead to stress, trauma, depression, and to a host of other psychological ailments (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005).

As agents of change, nurses must ensure that they hold themselves to a standard of practice that is not obstructed by a veil of racism, disguised as “a fair immigration policy to deport them all,” or “facts about illegal immigration that I heard from presidential candidate so-and-so.” As noted by Sheryl Tyson (2007) in her recent column in this journal, nurses must increase their self-awareness as it relates to cultural racism, consider the hidden benefits of “White privilege” and beware of an over identification with clients and patients who are similar. Acknowledge ethnocentrism and then let us get past it.

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