Hate groups targeting unauthorized immigrants in the US: discourses, narratives and subjectivation practices on their websites

Marco Gemignani & Yolanda Hernandez-Albujar

To cite this article: Marco Gemignani & Yolanda Hernandez-Albujar (2015) Hate groups targeting unauthorized immigrants in the US: discourses, narratives and subjectivation practices on their websites, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 38:15, 2754-2770, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2015.1058967

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1058967
Hate groups targeting unauthorized immigrants in the US: discourses, narratives and subjectivation practices on their websites

Marco Gemignani and Yolanda Hernandez-Albujar

(Received 5 August 2014; accepted 21 April 2015)

The narratives and images on websites of US hate groups that oppose undocumented immigrants represent and reproduce discourses that contribute to the subject formation of group members, who feel ethically obliged to counter unauthorized immigration. Left alone by the government, which is seen as unreliable and uncaring of patriotic values, they position themselves as heroic saviours of the nation. We argue that these hate groups’ ‘games of truth’ develop in response to the perception that irregular immigration threatens specific social orders and values, for instance about citizenship, national identity and otherness. This article helps to understand the ways in which anti-immigrant narratives serve the functions of countering these threats and of asserting the group members’ ethical obligation as a form of care of the self. In other words, from a Foucaultian viewpoint, we interpret the problematizations of ‘illegal’ immigration as discursive practices for the subject formation of hate group members.

Keywords: hate groups; undocumented immigrants; narratives; discourses; subjectivities; Foucault

Introduction

At a nation’s borders, orders and relations are enforced through specific definitions, rules and laws that delineate both the inside and the outside of a state or territory. In this context, narratives and discourses of power are generated and maintained in ways that mirror dominant political discourses that are internal to a nation (e.g. citizenship, patriotism, or sovereignty) and that relate to ‘the other side’ (e.g. constructions of foreigners, border-crossing policies, diplomatic relations, or economic interests). Sometimes, a border is the physical or geographical separation between two countries. Other times, a nation’s border is seemingly less structured and concrete, such as an immigration agent on the streets of a US city or a ‘micro-aggression’ that creates, for the migrant, the ‘truth’ of feeling and thinking of oneself as an outsider to a nation or society (Sue 2010) and, for the aggressor, the privilege of belonging as an insider.

From the perspective that we adopt in this study, a border is a discursive and relational site at which different social agents (e.g. border crossers, law enforcers, regular citizens, other immigrants) craft exclusion or inclusion both in response to migration discourses and to recreate such discourses (Nicholls 2013). As relational sites of performance and performativity, borders and their discourses are both social
(as they influence the social constructions of migrants and the relations with and among them) and personal. For individuals performing the ‘border spectacle’ (De Genova 2013), migration discourses become internalized through the formation of specific subjectivities, which simultaneously partake and respond to discourses of inclusion and exclusion of immigrants.

In this manuscript, we explore the main narratives and subjectivation practices adopted and showcased by hate groups¹ that actively oppose unauthorized immigrants who cross the US–Mexican border. Hate groups are organizations of individuals who ‘have beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics’ (Southern Poverty Law Center 2015), although mutable aspects, such as religious or political views, can also be targeted by these groups. In general, in the USA, members of these groups tend to follow extreme-right (Adamczyk et al. 2014) and white supremacist (Mulholland 2013) ideologies.

Our data come from these groups’ websites. Through a discursive narrative analysis (Tamboukou 2008), we aim to gain a better understanding of how these organizations craft ‘illegal immigration’ as a problem and how their problematizations and narratives contribute to the subject formation of hate group members. In our explorations of these narratives, we pay particular attention to the discursive and material practices (Barad 2007) through which hate group members are, become, or position themselves as subjects of their views of migration.

Theoretical framework

Borders as sites for the construction and performance of subjectivities

In the border spectacle, the invisible boundary between an inside and an outside transcends its geographical dimension. Rather, an entanglement of performativity and identity unfolds through boundaries of acceptance and acculturation (Berry 1997), cultural identity (Hall 1996; Rosaldo 2003), fear, deportability (De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010) and subjectivation practices (Donato and Armenta 2011; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Wilson and Donnan 2012). Within this context, a number of ‘actors’ perform the existential spectacle of the border: law-enforcing agents and institutions, politicians, commercial traders, border crossers (with or without inspection), human traffickers, smugglers, and the various enactors of push-and-pull factors that are at the bases of transnational migration. All are, directly or indirectly, linked to each other by a discursive formation that constructs specific social dynamics and realities. For instance, borders and performances contribute to create identities, social constructions and dichotomies, such as natives versus foreigners, or legal versus undocumented migrants.

An immigrant’s identity is at least partially defined by the existence of a border that creates the migrant condition and by the presence of a group of natives, citizens, or permanent residents that position themselves as being different from the newcomer. The constitution of identities and subjectivities develops from the ongoing dialogue between figures and backgrounds, which are constituted through constructions of ‘I am/I am not’ and ‘you are/you are not’ (Stuart Hall 1996).
It follows that the narrative construction of ‘the other’ is also a narrative construction of ‘the self’ (Gemignani 2014).

It seems appropriate to assume, therefore, that for members of hate groups targeting ‘illegal’ immigrants, migration discourses play an important role in their own subjectivity. Differently from lay citizens who may strongly oppose unauthorized immigration, members of these hate groups are activists – their passion, dedication and sacrifice is remarkable and almost heroic (Chavez 2013). In their own words, they see themselves as ‘controllers of the border’ who engage in pseudo-militaristic actions against ‘invaders’, ‘aliens’, ‘drug dealers’, ‘parasites’ and ‘prostitutes’ threatening the pre-established social order. In the same way as undocumented immigrants can hardly ignore their status, the seriousness of these haters’ worries is also impossible for them to ignore. In other words, both groups are subjects of an exclusionary migration discourse that contributes to the respective subjectivations of their members.

**Websites as narratives**

For this inquiry, we see the various components of a website as narratives that select, organize and communicate the realities that authors construct. Through the processes of constructing and telling, narratives are performed to create and make public specific knowledges and possibilities (Riessman 2002). In particular, as the first author of this manuscript discussed elsewhere (Gemignani 2011, 2014) in relation to 100 narrative theory (Ricoeur [1969] 1974), narratives have a constitutive power for the creation of subjectivities. In the process and context of telling, in fact, authors necessarily adopt and become subject of particular discourses (Benozzo, Bell, and Koro-Ljungberg 2013) and therefore possibilities for their subject formation.

In their constitutive practices, narratives do not operate in isolation. They relate to other texts on the website as well as to larger political, cultural and historical contexts. For instance, when anti-immigrant activists describe themselves as heroes, saviours and protectors of American values, or when they categorize unauthorized immigrants as illegal criminals, they create a specific order or structure of power/knowledge for at least three interconnected actors and audiences: first, for the teller, who positions him or herself as acting for the service of legality and justice; second, for the immigrant, whose humanity and becoming are reduced to his/her border crossing; and third, for the potential readers or listeners, who – regardless of whether they agree with the hate group’s views – find now possible interpretations and references in these public websites.

**Problematisations, games of truth and subjectivation: The creation of the subject through discourses**

Discourses and narratives represented in hate groups’ websites both respond and contribute to the conditions through which unauthorized immigration becomes problematized and ‘enters into the play of the true and the false, and constitutes it as an object for thought’ (Foucault 1984, 18). Although these extremist groups could be seen as peripheral to the array of social and political discourses on migration, they nonetheless participate to the creation of a game of truth that problematizes ‘illegal’ immigration as a plausible concern (Foucault [1975] 1977, [1984] 1990).
Once internalized, problematizations and games of truth create referents through which ‘people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations’ (Foucault [1983] 1997, 264) and their practices of self-monitoring and ‘self-formation of the subject’ (Foucault [1984] 1997, 282). It is inevitable that, in the process of creating, embracing and acting accordingly to specific truths, individuals both constitute themselves and learn to govern themselves as subjects of a specific discourse and of the values and practices attached to it. They engage, in other words, in practices for the care of the self.

The interest in hate group members: a Foucaultian angle on the research question

Hate groups and extremists in general are interesting to social and human studies because, first, they present ideas, beliefs and feelings that, even if unmitigated caricatures, could nonetheless represent unspoken concerns of other social sectors. Second, those who create and maintain extreme views of the border and its crossers play the subtle and yet important role of extending the range of possible interpretations, making plausible thoughts and actions that would otherwise be difficult to entertain. In other words, within a specific cultural and historical frame of discursive formation, extremist groups push the limits of mainstream discourses. Instead of discounting hate groups’ positions as minor or extreme, and therefore not representative of a society’s perceptions, we suggest that the margins are crucial to create the centre (Gemignani and Peña 2008), both because extreme groups partially contribute to the normalization of views and opinions that would otherwise be seen as radical, and because looking at extreme positions may help us delineate some of the dominant discourses or common narratives on migration.

Paraphrasing Foucault ([1984] 1990, 4), we are interested to understand how (through the self-presentations and practices expressed on their websites) members of these anti-immigrant hate groups come to see themselves in relation to discourses on irregular immigration. By constructing unauthorized border crossing and immigrants’ ‘illegality’ as problems that cannot be ignored and that directly affect their lives, hate group members become subjects of undocumented immigration, and create and participate in a discourse that establishes ‘a set of rules for the production of truth’ (Han [1998] 2002, 170). We therefore wish to understand the consequences that this problematization of immigration, in particular ‘illegal’ immigration (e.g. the criminalization of a population or the reduction of persons to their immigration status), has for the subjectivity of members of anti-immigrant hate groups, as expressed on their websites.

Method

Selection of websites

For this research, we read and analyzed the websites of nine of the ten hate groups targeting undocumented immigrants identified in 2013 by the Southern Poverty Law Center – a reputable and important watchdog organization ‘dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice’ (SPLC 2014): American Border Patrol (formerly Voice of Citizens Together/American Patrol), US Border Guard, California Coalition
for Immigration Reform (CCIR), Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Concerned Citizens and Friends of Illegal Immigration Law Enforcement (CCFIILE), Social Contract Press (SCP), Americans for Legal Immigration (ALIPAC), New Yorkers for Immigration Control and Enforcement (NYICE) and American Immigration Control Foundation/Americans for Immigration Control (AIC Foundation). United for a Sovereign America (USA) was not analyzed as this association’s website could not be found. For the US Border Guard, we also looked at pictures on their Facebook page.

**Method of analysis**

Our analysis is an exploration of the process through which, for members of anti-undocumented-immigrant hate groups, illegal immigration becomes an undeniable, moral issue, upon which they need to act. For them, this issue is important enough as to influence their subjectivities, which are expressed and constructed through their actions. We first read, observed and, when audios and videos were available, listened and watched to the information provided on the websites. After collecting and saving the data, we used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify the main themes, patterns and narratives that were most common on these websites.

Then, through Foucaultian narrative inquiry (Gemignani 2011; Tamboukou 2008), we situated these particular statements within a wider discursive matrix related to the subject formation of hate group members. In other words, we explored the ways in which these narratives contributed to the views that group members have of themselves both in response to and as part of a dominant discourse (Foucault [1975] 1977, [1984] 1990, [1982] 1994) on unauthorized immigration. For instance, we asked questions about the possible role that the particular narrations of a theme played for a construction of subjectivity (e.g. ‘How does proclaiming that members are “chasing for illegals” contribute to specific formations of subjectivity?’).

For our inquiry, we assumed that authors actively chose to make public texts and pictures for their ability to symbolize specific issues or practices that were significant to the person, group, or community. We therefore treated website text and images as first-person narratives. Instead of considering these themes and narratives in isolation, we explored the links to other narratives that may participate in the constructions of various identities and subjectivities (Riessman 2002). For instance, the ‘active chaser’ narrative receives further validation from viewing these ‘chasers’ as people who heroically and patriotically sacrifice themselves for the good of US society. Rather than debating the truthfulness or accuracy of specific views on immigration, we explored the ways in which themes and their narrations contributed to problematizations and games of truth concerning migration.

**Critical analysis of website themes and narratives**

**Military strength, sacrifice and heroism: ‘This is a war we must win for all of us!’ (US Border Guards 2014)**

The homepage of the US Border Guard’s (2013a) website showcases a big picture of a group of its members wearing military gear and holding weapons. A black dog lies
in the centre, in front of a first layer of three crouched men carrying rifles, binoculars and camouflage clothing. Behind them, to further convey their nationalist pride, two other men hold a large US flag. In its furthest layer, the picture showcases a Betsy Ross flag, representing the original thirteen colonies and often used to symbolize ‘that America is adrift, her core values and principals are under attack’ (‘Betsy Ross Flag’ 2014). Some of these men wear a bulletproof vest and a helmet: a message about the enemy’s dangerousness. Camouflage fully covers the head of another man; the faces of two other fellows are also partially covered.

In this organization’s Facebook page (US Border Guard 2014a), a similar picture suggests the adoption of a martial grand narrative that stresses loyalty, sacrifice and a strict code of honour (Wasinski 2011). In the Facebook photo, however, more people are covering or disguising their faces, further contributing to the invisibility granted by the camouflage clothing. This is a tactic of both self-protection and intimidation since these covered soldiers can surveil and attack without being seen or recognized. Anonymity is a power strategy since it grants impunity and challenges the already-slim hopes for the human rights of border crossers (Chavez 2013).

In the ‘About Us’ and 'Member Section' of their website (which was made unavailable in 2014), the US Border Guards portrayed themselves as a group of individuals committed to the fight against undocumented immigrants. Defiant of natural and bodily limits, narrating their strength and power is an important aspect of their glorified self-representations. Resting is not necessary for them: as they state, they ‘can easily stay up for 24 hours’ (US Border Guards 2013c).

Many of them are veterans from the Vietnam, Gulf and Iraq wars. Their military training and practice is also evident in the strategic method in which the US Border Guards conduct their militia operations. The organization is structured hierarchically, in four tiers (U.S. Border Guard 2011). Each tier is in charge of specific operations and ‘to win the war’, all of them need to ‘collaborate and rely on each other’ in order to ‘destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver thus taking the fight to the Narco-terrorists wherever they may be’ (US Border Guards 2013b). This group’s selective use of military language and showcase of their combat attires and weapons legitimize their personal and group views of themselves as active soldiers who are simultaneously searching for and proclaiming their authority, cohesion and power.

Othering 1: objectification and dehumanization of unauthorized border crossers as terrorists

The narratives on power, sacrifice, militarism and heroism are functional to give authority to these groups. Their public telling ‘gives rise to a possible corpus of knowledge … [which] extends and reinforces the effects of power’ (Foucault [1975] 1977, 29) and delineates the object of concern. Through narratives that are directed both to themselves and the audience of potential website visitors, ‘illegal’ immigration and immigrants are constructed as worrisome enough as to justify war and fear, and consequently the defender’s authority.

A crucial step towards the goals of first creating a corpus of knowledge about an issue and then claiming the ability to alleviate it, is the dehumanization of the opponent. Reducing the other to a less-than-human status is common practice among
hate groups as this process helps find a rational justification for their actions and to reinforce their moral superiority (Ezekiel 2002). The American Border Patrol (2013a), for instance, reports that both its members and the official Border Patrol are or go ‘hunting for illegals’. Sharing a goal and practice with a governmental agency may increase the Border Patrol’s legality. In addition, the border crosser is reduced to a faceless target, prey, or object of cruel chasing expeditions, as suggested in this photo by the American Border Patrol (Figure 1). Here, the use of the dog also contributes to the dehumanization of the immigrant (Ana 1999), while reaffirming the power advantage of the chaser.

On most websites, the dehumanization continues by frequently referring to undocumented immigrants as ‘terrorists’. In the post-9/11 USA, this is one of the most effective strategies for conveying that the ‘illegals’ are a real danger for the nation. An article on the Social Contract Press website, for example, is plainly titled ‘Mideast Terrorists Exporting Violence to U.S.: Role of South American nations indicates active participation’ (Hull 2011). Since illegal immigration is constructed as a direct physical menace, it becomes logical to eliminate it through the use of the strongest means and most effective practices available, such as paramilitary gears, structures, and jargons.

The word ‘terrorist’ has two additional implications. First, it indicates that this is not a traditional war, in which the strongest party will win. If the conflict were based

![Figure 1. Photo of the day (American Border Patrol 2012) (permission granted for reuse by the copyright holder).](image-url)
on strength, this would be reassuring to the US audience, which is likely aware of its military hegemony. Rather, it is a conflict in which the enemy is invisible, may already be hidden among us, and can strike anywhere and at any time. This narrative of suspicion and fear is another common strategy adopted by hate groups to generate sympathy in the general population (Ezekiel 2002). The more people feel unsafe and think of undocumented immigrants as ruthless criminals and terrorists, the more likely they will endorse the mission of these hate groups (Don and Lee 2014). Second, the label ‘terrorist’ objectifies the subaltern Other by constructing it as an extremist, with whom it is not possible or worth entering in a dialogue. The subaltern is silenced (Spivak 1985) and constructed as evil, in contrast to the similarly stereotypical oversimplification of the protector as ‘good saviour’. The objectivation, criminalization and dehumanization of unauthorized immigrants give legitimacy to the missions and practices of these hate groups. Caricaturizing the other creates internal forms of group identification by contrast: every inside needs an outside to create a sense of community, identity and cohesion (Hall 1996).

**Othering 2: unauthorized immigrants as ‘criminals’ who will ‘corrupt our kind’**

All of the groups analyzed in this study underscore the risks that undocumented immigrants pose to the security of US citizens. The two most cited crimes committed by Latino irregular immigrants are ‘job stealing’ and physical aggression, in particular, rape. According to these websites, the implications of these crimes extend beyond the direct victims: eventually, the major casualty will be US society and the loss of American values, which ‘are being strained and abused by those who are willing to break the law and take our jobs and our tax dollars’ (ALIPAC 2014d).

One section of the website of the New Yorkers for Immigration Control and Enforcement (NY ICE 2013) is dedicated to the ‘Special Victims’ of illegal immigrants’ crimes and accidents: ‘25 Americans are killed every single day by someone illegally in our Country’ (NY ICE 2014). Similarly, ALIPAC argues: ‘the main problems caused by illegal immigration are lost jobs, depreciated wages, stolen taxpayer resources, and increased numbers of crimes and domestic terrorism’ (ALIPAC 2014d). The generalization that all illegal immigrants are criminals is also common on other websites. The NY ICE takes a step further by blaming ‘illegals’ criminality on their Latin American origins. Illegal Latino immigrants are seen as a double threat for being Latinos and for being illegal.

**Justified use of force**

Implicit in the criminalization of undocumented immigrants is a warning about their dangerousness, against which hate group members feel the need to take extraordinary measures to protect themselves. For instance, a photo on the American Border Patrol (2014a) website shows five of the seven German Shepherds needed to protect the organization’s headquarters. The caption reads: ‘Nice to have them when you’re only 1,000 feet from the Mexican border!’

The US Border Guard (2013b) states that, under Arizona law, it is ‘legal to carry firearms, automatic weapons …, and destructive devices … and to employ justified
use of deadly force’. Thanks to this, this organization is ‘the first line of freedom on our borders and in combat patrolling the US/Mexico FEBA (Forward Edge Battle Area)’. Descriptions of warlike scenarios and uses of military language are strategies to communicate the hate group members’ competence and to persuade viewers about the need for a militia that will protect from the invaders: ‘illegal immigrants’ carry ‘small arms, fully-automatic crew served weapons including .50cal, grenades, up-armored HMMV’s [high mobility military vehicles], helos [helicopters], shoulder fired missiles, and I.E.D.s [improvised explosive devices].’

The CCIR (2013) seeks a historical validation to its practices by proclaiming the need to ‘preserve the rights and freedoms for which our forefathers fought and died’ and which are supposedly threatened by unauthorized immigrants. In line with the strategies adopted by the other groups, CCIR attempts to trigger a strong, emotional response in its website viewers. The ‘situation’ that undocumented immigrants create is ‘unbearable’ and jeopardizes the ‘basic values’ and ‘human rights of U.S. citizens’: the right to protect themselves if attacked; the sacrifice of the nation’s ancestors; or the unconditional condemnation of the supposed assassination of a baby by the hands of illegals.

Progressively, the CCIR’s narrative evolves towards making a claim for the justified use of force. In line with the theoretical assumption that narratives help narrators to construct their subjectivities, the particular ordering of reality that is here presented positions these groups as the last defenders of US values and safety. To an extent, hate group members are both judges and executioners. Parallel to Foucault’s description of the public, medieval execution, in which ‘the executioner communicated the truth of the crime to the assembled crowd’ (Dumm 1995, 91, emphasis added), the quest for justice in these hate groups’ websites communicates the strong and impacting truth of illegal immigration. In the same ways as the executioner was the visible agent of the king and, as such, benefitted from great power but also responsibility to perform the execution, the ‘justified use of force’ advocated by these hate groups is both a response to and a practice of self-governance and subjectivation.

*Mistrust in the government: suspicion and responsibility*

All of the hate groups directly blame President Obama’s government for the loss of safety and the perception of danger, which make them feel under attack and motivate some of them to organize a militia and enter in a state of war. According to ALIPAC, for instance, the US government ‘refuses’ to protect the country and its ‘innocent citizens from this deadly and destructive illegal immigration invasion’ (ALIPAC 2014a). ALIPAC calls President Obama ‘a traitor [who] should be impeached, put on trial, and incarcerated for … the great deal of death and destruction our citizens are enduring at the hands of the illegal immigration’ (ALIPAC 2014b). Members of the CCIR claim that elected representatives are not hearing their concerns and waste tax dollars that should instead benefit American citizens who are struggling: ‘Billions of citizen tax dollars fund free goods, services and medical care to illegals (many of which are denied to citizens)’ (California Coalition for Immigration Reform 2013). A similar ‘us versus them’ narrative is adopted by the American Patrol Report (2013), which states Congress needs to help ‘22 million American citizens who do not have
jobs’ by forbidding illegal immigrants to ‘take American jobs’. Unemployment is also a major source of resentment for the AIC Foundation: ‘America has 12 million illegal aliens and 22 million unemployed Americans, guess which group is getting help from Congress?’ (American Immigration Control Foundation 2013).

On the website of CCFIILE (2013), a provocative cartoon shows President Obama sleeping against the border wall while immigrants are crossing and stealing the purse of Arizona Governor Brewer, who hopelessly cries for the President’s help (Figure 2).

These groups’ criticism targets the overall federal government, instead of single parties. For instance, the AIC Foundation is careful to clarify that it is not just liberals but conservatives as well who help undocumented immigrants. NY ICE (2013) states that it ‘is not a ‘Tea Party’’ and that it ‘welcomes all legal New Yorkers into our Membership, no matter what their political affiliation’. This message suggests that the problem is almost universal, above contingencies and factions. It is not, in other words, the failure of a government as composed by specific parties, but the failure of the government as an institution that is seen as unable to police the nation’s borders and protect its citizens.

A consequence of uncovering the government’s failures is that these groups feel responsible to replace the institutions concerned with regulating immigration. That is, ‘doing the job the federal government won’t do’ (NY ICE 2013). For these hate
groups, this narrative is twofold: it entails the need to be continuously suspicious of official organizations and institutional representatives, and at the same time, it underscores the moral obligation to prevent ‘a national disaster’ resulting from the void left by the government.

**Strategically ‘saving the USA’ to avoid ‘a national disaster’**

There is no doubt, in the eyes of these hate groups, that illegal immigrants are causing harm to the country. For instance, FAIR suggests that illegal immigrants have overtaken the USA in every aspect of life, from education to the environment and healthcare (FAIR 2014). According to FAIR (2014), if more illegal immigrants are let into the country, the USA will become an ‘over populated, destitute, gang ruled, and third-world nation’. According to the CCIR, ‘illegal’ immigrants are causing ‘moral and social decay’, not only ‘by violating our borders’ but also ‘by bringing their values and culture to our midst’ (California Coalition for Immigration Reform 2013). Here, the narrative on fear and criminality becomes entangled with discourses on patriotism and purism/whiteness. As the NY ICE claims, ‘the illegal who comes from Latin America … is bringing his “culture” with him’ (NY ICE 2014, original emphasis).

While on the one hand irregular immigrants are discredited, their value for capitalist and neo-liberal economies is strategic (De Genova and Peutz 2010). From a utilitarian view, immigration is typically seen as a means to promote the economy, pay taxes, sustain the natives’ pensions, occupy vacant houses, or enter low-status and low-salary jobs that citizens do not typically want to do (Seglow 2005). In this regard, ‘the Federation for American Immigration Reform believes America can and must have an immigration policy that is designed to serve the social, economic and environmental needs of our country’ and that is ‘consistent with the national interest’ (FAIR 2014, emphasis added). Consequently, to safeguard the interests of Americans, ‘immigration should not be permitted to undermine opportunities for America’s poor and vulnerable citizens to improve their working conditions and wages’ (FAIR 2014).

**‘We are not the real racists’: a response to critics**

It is interesting that some of these organizations expect to be criticized for their racism and stereotyping. For instance, FAIR (2014) argues that its actions and intentions are ‘not hateful or mean spirited’, because ‘illegal immigrants will keep coming to America until enough Americans put their foot down and demand that our government protect all states from invasion’. The NY ICE takes instead a more reactive position: ‘illegal immigrants are trespassers’ and those who ‘do not support protecting American soil from the illegal immigrants are the real racists’ (NY ICE 2013). In connection to the above-mentioned narrative of American purity or authenticity, some of these hate groups believe that illegal immigration will result in forms of discrimination for those defending ‘the American culture’. Fearing their own weapon, these hate groups are concerned about being discriminated.
Conclusions

Hate groups that oppose irregular immigrants socially construct both themselves and the target of their concerns through discursive practices that are informed by specific games of truth, which first identify and describe the problem and, then, by proclaiming a supposed ability to address it, develop specific positions of power for themselves. From these positions, group members feel the moral responsibility to respond and act upon the threat that illegal immigration poses to supposed US values and orders. Through these moral positions and practices, particular subjectivities are created, supported and exercised for the members of these groups. It is alongside narratives of reification (e.g. the creation of the ‘illegal’) (Chomsky 2014), opposition (us versus them), exclusion, superiority (e.g. of the native citizen over the undocumented immigrant), problematization, instillation of fear, and depicting undocumented immigrants as disposable, second-class members of society that we can interpret the self-proclamatory narratives of these hate groups.

Beyond personal needs and goals, which may nonetheless be important for specific group members, the general social design of these sites aims at othering and subjecting irregular immigrants – a population that is already vulnerable and disenfranchised – in an attempt to control migration fluxes both directly, through policing or chasing immigrants, and indirectly, through raising public awareness of the social consequences of unauthorized immigration. The hate groups’ websites and practices link together a number of parallel narratives that operate at the personal (e.g. group cohesion, self-positioning as patriotic saviours of the nation, or making good use of the military background of many group members) as well as at the discursive, political and economic level (De Genova 2002).

As De Genova (2013, 1181) writes, the border spectacle ‘sets the scene – a scene of ostensible exclusion, in which the purported naturalness and putative necessity of exclusion may be demonstrated and verified, validated and legitimated, redundantly’. The border spectacle engages and creates practices of self-regulation that, to an extent, constitute both subjects: the anti-undocumented-immigrant group member and the undocumented border crosser. While the ongoing assertion of otherness serves as a main referent in the world of these hate groups, fear and suspicion contribute to the reification of immigrants’ experiences and the formation of their subjectivities.

More than the direct repression or reporting of unauthorized border crossing, these groups’ main functions are trifold. First, anti-undocumented-immigrant hate groups operate as biopolitical agents that influence public opinion through problematizing and discrediting unauthorized immigrants. Second, hate groups exercise a Panopticon-style, disciplinary power (Foucault [1975] 1977) by influencing the undocumented immigrants’ own awareness of feeling or being observed, targeted and deportable. Labels such as ‘illegal’ or ‘criminal’ do not simply describe the immigrant from the viewpoint of the observer, but they are also likely to constitute a particular subject and subjectivity that place the unauthorized border crosser in a specific social location. This positioning of undocumented immigrants regulates not only their possibilities in society, but also the ways in which they may come to think of themselves in the context of the host society as subjects of the labels and discourses that construct them. In other words, intimidation, criminalization and the anxiety and disposability of
deportability are likely to become self-governing strategies for undocumented immigrants (Gonzales and Chavez 2012). For instance, perceptions of discrimination and cultural hostility are strongly correlated to self-esteem, psychological well-being, anxiety and depression in immigrants (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013; Joseph 2011; Salas, Ayón, and Gurrola 2013; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, and Abdulrahim 2012).

Third, a similar subjectivation process occurs for hate group members: power-based practices such as discriminating, chasing, instilling fear, creating or joining a militia, and heroically defending the nation represent specific possibilities and directions for the formation of members’ subjectivities. Through narrations of these organizations’ political views and action, websites allow speakers, writers and participants to draw links between subjectivity and experiences. They help group members understand their own experiences and, as in any form of representation, be socially recognized for them (Gemignani and Peña 2008; Hall 1996). Website narratives also situate concerns within a game of truth, praxis and course of action that, from the perspective of hate group members, form an ethical imperative and a call for social justice.

Whether discriminatory or heroic (depending on the viewpoint), these hate groups’ activities do not simply result from the choices and values of individuals or groups. Rather, they also respond to ‘a larger set of concerns over immigration …; the meaning of citizenship; and the power of media spectacles in contemporary life’ (Chavez 2013, 3). Broadening the spectrum, it could be argued that these hate groups are part of a larger and more pervasive discourse of neo-liberal discrimination that systematically creates distinctions between insiders and outsiders, winners and losers (or, legals and illegals), and full citizens and second-class newcomers; and that, in the same neo-liberal logic, sees human beings as potential capital and commodity.

These groups respond to a real perceived danger with a renewed nationalism that is inevitably affirmed against the other, the subordinate, or the alien. Their performances aim to reshape a border that is both physical (e.g. through patrolling or chasing ‘illegals’) and relational (i.e. by creating public websites, selecting information that confirms their theories, and reproducing stereotypes). They are part of a border enforcement and ‘spectacle [that] relentlessly augments and embellishes … “unauthorized” migrants … with the mystique of an obnoxious and unpardonable transgression of the presumably sacrosanct boundary of the state’s space’ (De Genova 2013, 1183) – a border that is concerned with practices of inclusion/exclusion and with the symbolic power that derives from feeling not only entitled but also ethically obliged to participate in the discursive formation of games of truth, problematizations and subjectivities and to assert tiers of citizenship in which some people can be ‘illegal’ and deportable so that others can feel ‘authorized’ and purer.

To justify their actions and concerns, the hate groups described in this article find and construct complex narratives invoking ‘warlike’ and apocalyptic social scenarios in which they feel they already live or fear they will. They interpret their practices not so much as animosity against immigrants, as rational and ethical heroism. More than the specific content of their messages, it is the careful staging of national insecurities and threatened social orders that legitimizes these group members’ acts and contributes to their views of themselves as ethical and caring subjects.
Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Ms Stephanie Confer for her early contribution to data collection and Mr Daniel Gruner (Psychology Department, Duquesne University) for his reflections on Foucault’s concept of biopolitics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. For the sake of brevity, in this manuscript, we use ‘hate group members’, ‘hate groups’, ‘group members’, or ‘haters’ to refer to individuals who belong to or identify with US-based groups or associations that actively oppose undocumented immigrants.

2. In this manuscript, we will refer to immigrants who entered the USA without inspection as unauthorized, undocumented, or irregular immigrants. While these expressions are not free from prejudices and misconceptions, they are preferable to the label ‘illegal’. We use the terms ‘illegality’ and ‘illegal immigrant’ only to refer to the positions, constructions and political discourses made by the hate groups that are discussed in the paper.

References


MARCO GEMIGNANI is Associate Professor in the Psychology Department at Duquesne University.
ADDRESS: Psychology Department, Duquesne University, 600 Forbes Av., Pittsburgh, PA, 15282, USA.
Email: gemignanim@duq.edu

YOLANDA HERNANDEZ-ALBUJAR is Adjunct Faculty in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh.
ADDRESS: Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, 230 South Bouquet Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15213, USA.
Email: yolehern@gmail.com