

## **Adopting a Target Perspective in Undocumented Immigrants Research**

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*This collection raises concerns over whether restrictive U.S. immigration policies are necessary and just. In addition to such concerns, I argue that more studies of a target perspective are needed in order to reveal undocumented immigrants' experiences and voices. By adopting a target perspective in undocumented immigrants research, the implicit assumption of restrictive U.S. immigration policies may be questioned, and divergent ways of dealing with illegal immigration and assisting undocumented immigrants may be proposed.*

The current collection is dedicated to the topic of illegal immigration in the United States, in which the bulk of research raises the question of whether the adoption of the restrictive immigration policies is necessary or even just. Although the current collection covers a wide range of topics, most of the studies examine the American perspective (e.g., the general public, communities, law enforcement, college students). Only three articles target undocumented immigrants (Levers & Hyatt-Burkhart, 2011; Sarabia, 2011; Trujillo & Paluck, 2011), and only one article reveals the first-hand experiences of undocumented immigrants (Sarabia). The inclusion of research on undocumented immigrants' experiences and voices in the discussion of immigration policies is dearly needed, because it helps maintain a humanitarian perspective on undocumented immigrants; it also questions the implicit assumption of restrictive immigration policies.

The implicit assumption of restrictive immigration policies is that undocumented immigrants make hasty immigration decisions. By intimidating immigrants with dangers and increasing the costs of illegal border-crossings, U.S. policy makers believe that fewer Mexicans would consider illegal immigration a viable option. Ironically, Cornelius and Salehyan (2007) found that the more

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Mexicans know about the dangers of crossing the border, the more likely they are to consider immigration. One plausible explanation for the ironic finding is that undocumented immigrants have pondered long and hard before making the immigration decision. Thus, the more they consider immigration, the more they collect information regarding immigration, including the assessment of dangers of crossing the border.

Research into the first-hand experience of immigrants, or a *target perspective*, may help reveal important reasons that Mexican immigrants consider illegal immigration. For example, undocumented immigrants may consider unification with their families and unemployment or underemployment in their hometown the most important reasons for considering immigration (Martin, 2002). Hanson (2006) showed that there are community connections between the immigrants' hometowns and the locations in which they settle. In Sarabia's field notes in the current collection, "criminal aliens" told vivid stories of how their lives were torn apart because their families had settled somewhere in the United States, while they themselves were deported and prohibited from entering the United States. The existence of these *mixed-status families* is perhaps one of the primary reasons that undocumented immigrants are determined to enter the United States, regardless of the dangers of crossing the border or the harsh punishments if they get caught.

Another important reason that Mexican immigrants may consider is economic concerns, such as labor recruitment in the receiving countries or unemployment or underemployment in the sending countries (Martin, 2002). Hanson (2006) estimated that hourly wage differentials ranged from \$4.53 to \$9.77 between Mexican immigrants in the United States and residents of Mexico, depending on their education levels. Hanson and Spilimbergo (1999) found that average wages in Mexico and the United States both predicted apprehensions of undocumented immigrants. A young Mexican immigrant with a lower than average education level by Mexican standards can expect to work for a relatively short time (about 8 weeks) in order to recoup border-crossing costs (Hanson, 2006). Thus, the more that Mexicans are expected to earn in the United States than they can earn in Mexico, the more likely they are to immigrate, legally or illegally.

In addition to the decision processes before immigration, research using a target perspective may help reveal situations that undocumented immigrants go through or expect to go through. Due to the lack of studies adopting a target perspective, it is not clear whether undocumented immigrants expect a high level of stress and adjustment problems after immigration. Mexican undocumented immigrants may experience more stress (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007) and have more difficulty in seeking medical care (Ortega et al., 2007) than Mexican legal immigrants. Moreover, undocumented immigrant Mexican women report poorer health and fewer sources of care than legal immigrant Mexican women, suggesting that the evaluation and assessment of the undocumented immigrants should not be taken as a whole. It may be that certain individuals with

subordinate-group status (e.g., women, the elderly, the poor) among undocumented immigrants suffer the most. By adopting a target perspective, researchers may be able to reveal the experiences of undocumented immigrants before (e.g., motives for illegal immigration), during (e.g., at border-crossings), and after (e.g., negative effects on mental and physical health) illegal immigration. In particular, such research may help discover the different expectations and experiences held by different subpopulations of undocumented immigrants. Information based on a target perspective is crucial to developing ways to assist undocumented immigrants and to providing alternatives that may meet the needs of those who consider illegal immigration.

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