

inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 196 - Dr. Deb Ortega, Dr. Ashley Hanna, and Dr. Badiah Haffejee: Lessons from the Immigrant Experience: Where the Erosion of Social Justice Begins (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to IN SOCIAL WORK the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at W W W dot. In social work. Dot org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. From Buffalo our whole team hopes you're having a relaxing and fun summer. We're doing our best. I'm Peter Sobota in the second of a two part podcast. Our guest Dr Deb Ortega. Dr. Ashley Hanna and Dr. Badiah Haffejee continue their discussion chronicling the experiences of immigrants refugees and asylum seekers and examine the history of U.S. policies addressing their needs. Our guests address common myths that characterize our popular and policy discussions about immigrants and explore how these policies affect life in our communities. They conclude with recommendations related to the skills needed by social workers to provide services to these clients and communities. Deb Ortega Ph.D. is professor at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work. There she is the founding director of the Latino Center for Community Engagement and scholarship a consortium of interdisciplinary faculty dedicated to creating and advancing knowledge that gives voice to the history politics culture and legacies of Latino communities. She teaches courses on issues of social inequality and her work focuses on the consequences of structural inequality across different systems client groups and diverse communities.

[00:01:59] She is the past president of the Association of Latino social work educators and the code editor in chief of Ophelia journal of women and social work. She is proud to be a first generation Latino college student Ashley Hanna Ph.D. is assistant professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Nevada Reno. Her primary areas of expertise are behavioral and mental health clinical social work practice school based interventions racial and ethnic disparities and the impact of immigration policies and practices on Latino individuals families and the community. Dr. Hannas research has concentrated on structural inequalities in the United States. In addition to continued research in the area of immigration her present research interests also include disproportionality and disparities in the education system related to discipline academic success and social emotional well-being as well as effective practices to increase equitable outcomes Badia Haffajee recently completed her Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. Her research examines the enduring impact of trauma self-sufficiency and resiliency including the ways that refugee policy institutional cultures and individual attitudes combined to negatively impact women refugees. Our guests were interviewed by our own Dr Sue Kim associate professor and Khoder rector of Immigrant and Refugee Research Institute here at the School of Social Work. They spoke in March of 2016. Can you discuss some of the myths that often used to describe immigrants and the research that addresses Ms. Yeah this is Ashley again. So when discussing myths about immigrants again it's so important to keep things in historical context and I'll keep saying that because we see recurring themes and recurring laws and views on immigrants throughout history in the United States. And like Dr. Gitega mentioned earlier is really the way we speak about immigrants today in the way immigrants are portrayed in political discourse in the media.

[00:04:21] Really there's no reality to that. It's just rhetoric and there's no truth behind a lot of the myths and stereotypes. So some current myths that you see and hear today that were present in the hundreds and have persisted over the last 200 years are that immigrants are invading or taking over the U.S. that immigrants are dangerous criminals that immigrants don't integrate into the U.S. and that they're an economic burden. And so all you have to do is really flip on the TV today and this Latino Threat narrative is described by Chavez. You know where immigrants are invading or taking over the United States. We're constantly seeing those images and hearing people speak like immigrants are invading the U.S. or taking over and it's so important to use critical thinking skills when whenever we're confronted with new information or information that we just assume to be true. So the reality is you know upon taking a step back and gaining some perspective is that immigrants aren't taking over the U.S. We are the U.S.. Immigrants are part of our social fabric and who we are as a nation as a nation of United States of America. So that country we know as the U.S. today wouldn't exist if it weren't for immigrants and just as the number of U.S. citizens has grown over time. So has the number of immigrants. But that doesn't mean that the percentage has changed and in all reality the percentage of immigrants that we have compared to U.S. citizen population is about the same now as it was in the 19th hundreds.

[00:06:11] Literature says that it was approximately about immigrants made up about 15 percent of the total population in the early 19th. That's about 13 percent today. Another common myth that is talked about is that immigrants are dangerous criminals. And so we hear this all the time again in these presidential primaries particularly and I hate to repeat the name. But as Donald Trump is speaking about immigrants saying that Mexican immigrants and I quote him are bringing drugs bringing crime and they're rapists. There's no literature to substantiate. It's simply false. Immigrants in general are actually less likely to commit crimes than native born U.S. citizens and unauthorized immigrants in particular are even less likely to commit crimes than those that have permanent legal immigrant status. And there is some random research that does state that immigrants have higher tendencies or a higher likelihood to commit crimes. But it's interesting because again when looking with a critical eye at the data and the research you can find that there are very flawed methods for example by going to jail and counting the number of immigrants who were in jails when in fact the jail is an immigrant detention center. So it skews the numbers making it look like there are high percentages of immigrants in our jail systems who have committed dangerous crimes. And that's not the case. Even government sources discuss about immigrant detention and deportation saying that the aim is to get rid of dangerous criminal immigrants but the government itself has said that that is not what's happening and people who are being detained and deported oftentimes have not committed crimes. And definitely the majority are not committing any dangerous crimes. So that's also another false myth that continues to be out there.

[00:08:23] Also this idea that immigrants don't integrate into the United States society is an interesting one because we're a culture of immigrants and it's a huge part of who we are. In the U.S. one thing or reason why I think this claim might be made a lot has to do with language. I mean yes it's true that immigrants speak other languages than English but many children of immigrants are often bilingual speaking. For example if you're talking about Latino immigrants both English and Spanish. However by the third generation most descendants of immigrants prefer to speak English. And in fact literature specific to English language development indicates that by the third generation just 5 percent of Latino students speak English with difficulty. So again that myth really there's no truth to that. And in terms of this idea that immigrants are an economic burden again overwhelming literature says that this is not the case. This fear that immigrants will be a

social or economic burden like is the case with the other myths I described really dates back to colonial times. So it's been perpetuated throughout history but there's really no truth to it. The reality is that immigrants are an essential part of the U.S. economy and throughout history immigrants have provided inexpensive labor to sustain businesses and the needs of U.S. citizens by keeping the cost to businesses down and the profits up.

[00:10:01] So again this benefits the dominant society also significant literature and that's including literature from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the U.S. Congressional Budget Office indicates that immigrants including unauthorized immigrants benefit the U.S. economy and even the president has spoken about this and the benefits of immigration to the United States to get back to shit shift something like that. With that it's like a miss and a debunking that Ms Sky does. Do you have it. Did you develop that. There are a lot of actually factsheets out there with information but then for my dissertation I went back and I researched a lot of them to be able to look at it because it was exceptionally concerning some of the names Camerata has done all this research so I was like wow look it does look like immigrants are committing war crimes in these areas and then when I really started to critically take a look at the methodology it was all very much skewed and biased. And so these reports are going out from immigrant. You know think tanks like fair and it's using his work in his research so especially to someone who's not in academia or who doesn't look at research so to just for example my brothers and sisters if they were to read that that would look valid. It would look like good data and it's used as propaganda and a scare tactic. So yeah it's it's really scary what's out there right now. Still so flaw you discussed immigration policies era toit's in the United States in which way how do they affect our communities. So there is a flake and let me count the ways right. In terms of a response to that question Ashley body and I have been involved in research projects gather separately and some and talk about three of these research projects that really talk about what's happening in our communities.

[00:12:16] So one project is actually came out from actually asking people in Denver about what it was like to be an immigrant. That was one qualitative study. We have another qualitative study the three of us have engaged in. That was about how immigration detention and increased policy enforcement affected people. And then Thursday I was involved with Lisa Martina's who's a sociologist here at the University of Denver and rissoles or who is a scholar in education. We asked the question of young adult Latinos what made them successful in education and even though that last research project seems like it doesn't really fit with the other two because we weren't asking specifically about immigration immigration policies the effects of immigration mirrored the other two qualitative research projects in what they talked about. So they talked about these things that I described as coded racial narratives. How people perceive them based on what is said about them for instance. We had one respondent who talked about how he worked. He was working. They did a verification on his Social Security number of another employee. And then what happened was the employee just didn't show up the next day. Right. So the person was working. They weren't authorized to be here. And so when they checked his Social Security number he knew there was going to be a problem. But the rhetoric that was talked about from the other workers about who that person was was very dehumanizing. So they talked about him being you know breaking the law and how horrible immigrants like that are even though he showed up regularly for work.

[00:14:08] You know he was young he was like the respondent we were interviewing which is he was brought here by his family when he was you know five or six. And so the consequence is that the respondent that was in our study didn't feel like he wanted to ever create relationships with people where he worked because he didn't know when he was

going to have to disappear because of the checking of the Social Security number. Before Dokka happened once Dokka happened there were still the same problem. Right. So for people who were eligible and could apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals the rhetoric is still the same. They still feel under threat. And actually if you think about ways that it affects everyone different policies like not having immigrants who don't have a home are not authorized to be here not having them be able to have access to driver's licenses is to me one of the most apparent policies. It's one of those policies where you're thinking wow I am so afraid of somebody else that I don't care how much it hurts me to try to hurt them. Right. So in many states people who are not authorized to be here can't get a driver's license if you can't get their driver's license that means you can't get insurance right. Driving insurance. So if you get an accident then you were uninsured. People have to drive. I mean I lived in Kansas for eight years. Let me tell you about having to drive right. There are circumstances in which people must drive in accidents or random. Right. So essentially a policy like no driver's license makes every person unsafe in their community.

[00:15:59] So in that sense we actually have made ourselves less safe because we're afraid of the people that are created from the myths that Ashley was just talking about right. There's also this increase of stress. We know for citizens and noncitizens alike we have to keep reminding ourselves that people who are not citizens in the United States live in families where their cousins and uncles a parent or have some other children are citizens. Right. So what was apparent in all three studies is the worry for the safety in their communities of family members regardless of their citizenship status so that their we have citizen children who are afraid of the police and they're afraid of the police because they have been in a situation in which maybe a family member or friends family member have been picked up and put in jail and then not seen again. We have a situation here in Colorado in which the safety resource officer which is like like a policeman is placed in schools they were using gang money to have him code trained. With ice. Right. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. So he would it after school hours nighttime go on home raids into people's homes in his in the area in which his school was they would pick up family members they would put them in immigration detention and the next day the children in those homes would have to be at school with this person. Right. Who is supposed to be keeping their schools safe so that we're really creating a situation in which people regardless if they have citizenship or not are concerned right about their own safety whether they're going to be targets of immigration. My friends my white friends actually kind of laugh because I never leave my house without my wallet.

[00:18:09] If I walk out the door and oops I forgot I turn around immediately because I knew at some level I actually am at risk myself because of how I look if I can't prove who I am that I also could at least be have complications in my life be detained have to explain about who I am whether I'm a citizen or not. Right. So these kinds of things affect everyone. Ultimately you have to think about who's in our families. What we've also seen is that U.S. citizen children their parents are returned to Mexico once they finish high school. They're put in this position about having to choose do they do they choose to go back to Mexico with their families. I'm sure many people who believe in these racist policies would be happy that citizen children are returning to Mexico so they return to Mexico is one option leaving their noncitizen siblings in the United States knowing they might not see them. So they return to Mexico unprepared to function in a country in which they have not really lived. They have been educated in the United States while their Spanish speakers aren't really educated to read and write at a professional level. We had several people in one of the studies that we looked at that were very high achieving students and they really struggled with this decision about do I stay. I have these rights.

And do I stay. I was the hope and dream of my family my family that I can't actually even see maybe on Skype I can see them right.

[00:19:57] Who if my dad gets sick as a citizen I can go down there knowing that they might if they have the money to go down to be with their family if they're sick but they're noncitizen siblings can never go back and see their families if they have their families here it's like this this wall where we completely separate families. The other thing that's happening is that he actually has been an eye opening experience for some citizen children who thought that it was a protection for them and their family like having citizenship meant something really important. So when their parents got deported and they realized they had no access to the decision makers about what happened to their family member and they were deported anyways. Actually recreated lots of depression and anxiety and anger about this thing they thought was special that turned out to be something that protected only them potentially but didn't protect them from the grief and loss from their family members. If you believe the way that Ashley body and I believe that dehumanisation of anyone allows for dehumanization of others in the end something like the immigration policies that we have that are a catch 22 for people that don't take into account their lived experience when they're brought to the United States as children or the fact that we use immigrant people for cheap labor right. Which is is the rhetoric that we talk about right. Like oh we should have immigrants here because we need them to support our economy regardless of the fact that they're experiencing these horrible horrible violence in some violence and poverty at some level in reaction to some of our involvements in say like the civil war in El Salvador or NAFTA.

[00:22:01] We don't look at our own contribution to the detriment of their countries. But we blame them for being here or we acknowledge that we want them here because frankly we don't want to pay for the products that they're engaged in producing at a rate of what it would cost to pay. And right it's often also the narrative. So in some ways these issues around immigration policy and the rhetoric is really about fueling racism. We're all worse actually for the way that we are unconsciously affected by who we are told immigrants are another example would be just watching TV. I was in Texas actually recently and I was watching the news and there were several crimes that had been committed but you know that what I saw was the crimes that were committed by people who were not authorized to be in the United States were sort of punctuated right. Like so personally was committed by illegal undocumented Mexican but when a white person committed a crime it was just a crime. So there are all these ways that if we allow these policies these rhetoric's to go unchecked we don't really recognize what they're doing to us as people. It becomes kind of absorbed and it affects the way that we see lots of different people. Right. We've become sort of unconscious in the way that racism that ageism homophobia drives our world and drives our thought process unchecked. I think that is one of the. There's like individual ways that it affects our communities but really ultimately everyone is affected by immigration policies. Even if you're in a small town where you say oh we don't have very many immigrants here. We're all affected by what we see on TV.

[00:24:07] We're all affected by how the media describes us and it becomes absorbed into our belief system. So sounds like immigration policies and rhetoric really affects every Leavelle Val lives. I think you mentioned the here and there. But as our last question I have to ask this question what information or skills does social workers need. To provide the services to clients and communities. Yeah so this is actually ag and I can speak to that a little bit. And I think it's important to keep this in context because one in four children is in an immigrant family. And those numbers are even higher for Latino families. So what that essentially means is social workers have had and will continue to have increased contact

with the immigrant families and their children. Unfortunately in general not enough attention is given to this in the social work curriculum. And so social workers are often ill prepared to effectively work with immigrant families particularly those Latino immigrants families. And I do think part of this is that disconnect where many social workers are white women. And so if the issues impacting Latinos or impacting immigrants or impacting Latino immigrants families is not only addressed in undergraduate and graduate schools of social work but also throughout life in the field as a social worker and ongoing trainings. There can be this disconnect that makes it very difficult to effectively work with immigrant families. So I think this question is very important. And the answer really what it comes down to is culturally responsive practice skills. That is what social workers need.

[00:26:11] And so we know that there's no end point that hey you have arrived and now you're culturally responsive. Just as we are continuing to grow and develop as human beings and this country of the United States is continuing to grow and develop so must our skills and our social skills specifically our practice skills when it comes to being culturally responsive. So this isn't something that can just be addressed in academia but needs to be actively addressed on an ongoing basis and clinical supervision and in outside trainings want full workers get into the field. This is also really important because generally speaking social workers don't just stay in you know only work in hospitals for their entire lives or only work in schools but there is this ability for social workers to move around and to practice in different settings. And so there might be additional skills needed based on that in terms of culturally responsive practice social work practitioners need to be aware of the heterogeneity not only within the Latino community but within the immigrant community. And even if you would break that down into the smaller group of the Latino immigrant community that population is very heterogeneous and there are numerous nuances between for example Latinos and U.S. native families or those who are families where there is an authorized immigrant family member or mixed citizenship status families. So it's important for practitioners to be aware of these differences. And it's also important for practitioners to not make generalizations so social workers need to have an awareness of how the U.S. citizenship and immigration status of family members might impact individuals differently specifically levels of fear the ability for a family to travel both domestically and internationally. And a family's understanding of the U.S. education system.

[00:28:24] Their eligibility for social services health care educational scholarships and other forms of aid the ability for family members to get state identification and passports. And also how the citizenship or immigration status of family members might impact their view of the police or immigration officials and social workers for that matter. In addition to this need for increased awareness about the immigrant population there is also a need for social workers to have an increased self awareness. Not only about their own biases but also how they might be perceived by their clients based on both the clients social location but also the practitioner or social location. And with that practitioners need to be very aware of power dynamics and how being part of the dominant culture so either being white or being a U.S. citizen might impact the relationship when working with an immigrant family. And this really highlights the importance of taking time to build relationships so kind of that old saying that you have to move slow to move fast that that truly is important to social work. You need to take the time to build a rapport and authentic relationships and to create an open and non-judgemental space when working with clients. I say that but it's also important for social workers to be aware that once clients feel safe they're going to be more likely to open up about struggles perhaps with immigration or talk about if somebody has an unauthorized immigrant family member. And I think one key thing that needs to be

highlighted is to all social workers is to never ever ever document the immigration status of a client or a client's family members.

[00:30:25] One of our goals of social workers is to keep families together or reunite families when they're separated. So by documenting that a family member is unauthorized. Once that's written down it's really could be out of the social workers hands if that information were to get into the wrong hands. Immigration officials could get involved a family member might go to immigrant detention and then the family would be in jeopardy of being separated. So that's a really important piece logistical piece of good practice. And then the final thing I'd really like to highlight is ethical practice. And so culturally responsive and ethical practice also demands an awareness regarding the current political and social context of immigration. And I talk about awareness but it's really not enough to have ethical practice you can't just stop being aware of the injustices that happen. But social workers must be willing to reject and confront unjust policies practices and laws whether those practices be found in their own organization local community local government state government or federal government. And I think many times when new social workers are going into an organization there might be policies and practices that they just decide to go along with. For example writing down risk factors of clients for example of this client is dealing with issues of immigration. But again that puts a family member in jeopardy by flagging them as dealing with immigration officials. So again it's really important for social workers to think critically about their practice about what they do and how that might impact the clients that they serve. Thank you so much. It's been really helpful. Thank you. Thank you.

[00:32:23] You've been listening to doctors Deb Ortega Ashley Hannah and Badia Haffajee discuss the experiences of immigrants on social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on ground jaggery and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at [WWW dot social work dot Buffaloe that edu](http://WWW.socialwork.edu). And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find it under the Community Resources menu.