

COVID and *Coraje*: Negotiating Latinx Immigrant Experiences of the Pandemic

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Introduction

In April 2020, I asked Adriana, a 50-year-old undocumented immigrant woman from Mexico, whether she thought that she and her son would get access to quality COVID-19 care if they became ill. Adriana said she hoped so, but that she had heard about hospitals “not treating people equally.” Rather, she said, they are “treating according to a person’s legal status.” Not only that, but in the eyes of the government, “we continue to be a burden for the country.” Adriana opposed this view of herself and other immigrants, pointing out the ways in which they contribute socially and economically and explicitly avoid asking for public support. “We work all the time, and we pay our taxes. We don’t ask for unemployment. We don’t ask for food stamps. We don’t ask for any of the supposed help that exists...I don’t feel that we are a burden.”

It turned out that even as Adriana was telling me this, she herself was suffering the debilitating symptoms of COVID. She had begun to feel ill in mid-March, before the school where she works as a janitor closed due to the pandemic. Adriana convinced herself that her throat and lungs hurt due to the cleaning chemicals she works with, and she forced herself to continue working despite being in excruciating pain. Although she has been employed at the same school for over a decade, Adriana has no job security, no paid sick leave, no access to unemployment insurance, and no way to pay the bills if she does not work. Nor was Adriana eligible for the first two federal COVID-related stimulus payments, which excluded undocumented taxpayers and their families.

Soon, Adriana's adult son became ill and believed himself to have COVID. He beseeched Adriana, who has diabetes and arthritis, to relocate to her brother's house for fear of infecting her. Because Adriana didn't think she had COVID, she complied. Then, her brother became ill, as well. As Sarah and I coordinated with Adriana to help her find a COVID test, drop off an emergency inhaler, and finally help her find care, Adriana confided in me the "terror" she felt: terror around having COVID, around going to the hospital or clinic to seek help for her symptoms, around being fired from her job for missing work and not being able to support her family, around possibly infecting others. Indeed, it was only when Adriana felt she could not breathe and as though her chest was going to explode from pain that she and her son went to the local safety net hospital.

Adriana's case reveals the particular forms of precarity that U.S.-based Latinx immigrants—particularly those without legal status—face and that have caused them to be disproportionately impacted by the ravages of the pandemic (Duncan & Horton 2020; Figueroa et al. 2020; Magaña Lopez & Holmes 2020; Williams et al. 2020). It also illuminates the intersections of public policies put in place long before the global pandemic that set the stage for inequality and avoidable suffering, fear, sickness, and death among Latinx and undocumented immigrants as the pandemic continues to unfold. At the same time, by laying bare such blatant forms of exclusion, racism, and xenophobia—and their human toll—the pandemic has activated some immigrants in our fieldwork sites to insist upon their rights, belonging, and deservingness in ways they may not have felt emboldened to prior to the pandemic.

In this paper we draw from our experiences accompanying immigrants as they seek assistance during the pandemic across two U.S. states (Colorado and Oregon). Just as the pandemic may have led to an emerging political consciousness among some immigrants, it has

also generated new advocacy-oriented modes of research among anthropologists—which we see as both a pragmatic and ethical imperative. In March 2020, our deep ethnographic engagements with our interlocutors necessarily shifted to a hybrid of interviews and advocacy work as we sought to link immigrants to resources they desperately needed to keep their families afloat and alive during the pandemic. In some instances, this “research-cum-social work” (Horton 2016) produces different results than the rich ethnographic endeavor that draws us to anthropology. However, it also illuminates how accompaniment—even when virtual—can act as an opening towards anthropological knowledge production and to new, more horizontal, relationships with participants and with communities.

Policy and Immigrant Precarity

“Projects of deservingness,” or, as Nolan Kline (2019) defines them, “policy efforts that undermine a group’s deservingness to social entitlements and forms of social stability” (Kline 2019:282), have pragmatic and material impacts—such as preventing immigrants from applying for help to which they are legally entitled and barring them from receiving economic relief despite working and paying taxes. However, as numerous scholars have observed, these exclusionary policies also have symbolic effects on immigrants’ moral assessments of their own belonging and sense of self-worth (Bloemraad 2005, 2013; Haas 2019; Horton 2004; Kline 2019; Willen 2012a, 2012b; Yarris and Castañeda 2015). Here, we examine both the material and symbolic effects of these “projects of deservingness” (Kline 2019). On the one hand, exclusionary policies and anti-immigrant discourses have exacerbated Latinx immigrants’ disenfranchisement and contributed to subjective experiences of fear, distress, and desperation. On the other, the pandemic’s fallout has crystallized a sense of outrage and indignation among

many immigrants and their allies, inspiring new assertions of self-worth and sociopolitical projects of belonging.

Although the pandemic is often referred to as a “natural disaster,” public policies in place long before 2020 have magnified the impact of COVID-19 on Latinx, immigrant, and other communities of color in the U.S. Undocumented immigrants have long been ineligible for unemployment benefits. Moreover, in October 2018, the Trump Administration proposed a change to public charge policy that would have penalized immigrants who used forms of public assistance including Medicaid, making it harder for them to adjust their immigration status. After its proposal, widespread confusion and misinformation around whom the rule would affect contributed to untold numbers of immigrant parents disenrolling their U.S. citizen children from Medicaid and food stamps—programs to which they are entitled (Horton, Duncan, & Yarris 2018, 2019).¹ This Trump-era public charge rule change went into effect on February 24, 2020, just days before the first reported instances of community spread of COVID-19 in the United States. While since rescinded, the public charge rule has had enduring effects, further discouraging undocumented immigrants from seeking public assistance—whether medical care or social support—they and their families have desperately needed during the pandemic.

Layered on top of these prior exclusions, the federal government has deliberately denied undocumented immigrants and their family members access to federal stimulus payments. Even though undocumented immigrants are overrepresented as essential workers on the frontlines of the pandemic (Svajlenka 2020), the Trump Administration excluded all those who pay taxes with

¹ Even as testing and treatment for COVID-19 has been explicitly excluded from the public charge rule and as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has explicitly encouraged immigrants to receive care, many immigrants had already acted to limit their interactions with medical institutions and their reliance on public assistance. (The rule change has now, as of March 20, 2021, been permanently blocked, but it will likely take years to rebuild the trust and enrollment numbers.)

an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN)—as opposed to a Social Security Number—along with their citizen dependents. These policies leave undocumented immigrants little recourse but to keep working despite the risk of infection, and—like Adriana—few options but to push on and work through symptoms and illness. Financially strapped and excluded from federal economic support, undocumented immigrants find themselves depleting their savings or taking out high-interest and sometimes informal or exploitative loans to pay for rent, healthcare, and utility bills. Many families have turned to food banks and other local sources of charity for mere survival. Public policies that have carved out exceptions for undocumented workers reaffirm these community members’ perceived “undeservingness,” leading them to internalize their sense of fear, isolation, and exclusion—but also to individually and collectively challenge such assertions of their moral unworthiness.

Lupe, for example, is an undocumented mother of two citizen daughters, 11 and 13, in the town of Edwards, on the Western Slope of Colorado. Formerly a cook at a restaurant in Vail, Lupe lost work for eight months when the restaurant shut down due to the lack of tourist traffic; her husband lost two months of work as well. When Sarah contacted Lupe in May of last year to try to connect her to public assistance, she found that she was struggling to put food on the table and seeking out emergency food distribution sites. Yet Lupe and her husband refused to seek food stamps and welfare for their children out of public charge concerns. “No, I don’t have food assistance—only what I can search out [*solo lo que voy a buscar*],” she said. As Lupe put it, her abandonment by the federal government had forced her to scavenge for survival at the margins of the state.

Ineligible for the federal stimulus and for unemployment, Lupe and her husband found they had to deplete their daughters’ college funds merely to pay their rent and bills. For the

couple, who has long paid taxes with the hopes of eventually adjusting their legal status, their children's exclusion from stimulus payments was a slap in the face. "My worry is that I'll have to spend their savings and I won't have funds to send my daughters to University so they can have a better education, better opportunities, than we do," Lupe said. Indeed, many immigrants have contested the notion of immigrant "undeservingness" embedded in the stimulus' exclusion, pointing out their key social and economic contributions. Sol, a Denver-based undocumented mother of three young citizen children, continues to be angry that she and her family weren't eligible for the first two rounds of stimulus payments despite paying taxes. It is "unjust," she said over the summer, "but we can't do anything about it, because it is the government that decides."

COVID & *Coraje*: Contesting Marginalization

Studies suggest that immigrants often internalize their "undeservingness" and exclude themselves even from the benefits to which they are legally entitled, leading in turn to low utilization rates of health care and other social services (Fassin 2004; see also Castañeda 2020: 162-4; Horton 2016: 154-155). In our work accompanying undocumented immigrants seeking relief during the pandemic, we have similarly observed the ways the criminalization, illegalization, and delegitimization of undocumented migrants help construct the "riskscapes" that further entrench COVID-related social and economic vulnerabilities (Lee 2021). For example, in their workplaces, undocumented migrants are often reluctant or unable to ask for workplace health and safety protections to be enforced, or for the paid sick time to which they may be entitled. Additionally, public constructions of the "illegitimacy" of immigrants' presence can lead to an internalized sense of powerlessness, expressed in embodied affective states such as "*terror*," "*nervios*," "*ansiedad*" and "*miedo*."

Yet as immigrants confronted the stark imbalance between the risks the pandemic posed them and their meager protections, we also observed how the situation has catalyzed *coraje*—or embodied rage. Here we use our participants’ narratives of righteous indignation and emerging political consciousness to point to the possible political outcomes of the extreme insults our interlocutors have suffered during the pandemic. *Coraje* can emerge as a “response to prolonged social struggles or moral indignations” (Kimmell, Mendenhall, and Jacobs 2020: 112), and is often associated with negative health outcomes (Behar 1993; Finkler 1994; Horton 2016; Mendenhall et al. 2012). Yet we also show that when externalized, *coraje* can also serve as a powerful agent of political change.

Indeed, since the pandemic’s outset, several of our participants have decided to speak out about COVID-related economic and health injustices. Adriana, whose story opened this paper, channeled her rage in the public sphere when she agreed to share her story on a podcast addressing barriers to COVID testing and treatment among immigrants. Afterward, she spoke to Whitney about how powerful the experience had been as an outlet for her rage and as a forum to call for more inclusive federal policies and worker protections. Karen, whose 47-year-old husband died due to suspected COVID, found an outlet in writing columns in the local Spanish-language daily newspaper and in participating in a health summit. Karen and Adriana are far from the only undocumented immigrants in our sample whom exclusionary and disparate federal pandemic policies have incited to action. Others have spoken to the press or contacted lawmakers to insist upon the need for more inclusive economic, health, and immigration policies.

While undocumented immigrants have keenly felt their own exclusion from pandemic relief, for many, their citizen children’s exclusion has acted as the last straw. Lupe was enraged that lawmakers went so far as to exclude her children from the first two stimulus payments—

anger she was sure her children would share once they came of age. As she put it, her citizen daughters would learn of their second-class status when they reached high school and found their college funds depleted. “Our children will grow up and it will remain stamped in their minds that they were discriminated against... And when they’re older, and they understand the laws better, they will understand that and they will feel the [sting of] rejection [*rechazo*],” she said. Lupe’s sense of embodied indignation at her children’s exclusion, or “*rechazo*,” and her righteous rage, in turn catalyzed political action. Last July, Sarah helped connect Lupe to a national immigrant rights agency, and Lupe participated in a press conference about the need to include undocumented immigrants in the stimulus.

These stories suggest the powerful role that immigrants’ righteous anger may play in the post-pandemic world. As Lupe suggests, her children will one day learn of their “*rechazo*,” this, in turn, may generate new forms of contestation and change. As the pandemic shines a bright line on the disproportionate risks and unequal rewards faced by undocumented immigrants, it has in turn encouraged their political engagement to resist public policies that assert their “undeservingness.” In short, socio-emotional states such as *coraje* are not only internalized and individualized forms of powerlessness; when externalized and collectively expressed, they generate productive rage and political resistance.

Moreover, as we, as engaged anthropologists, have witnessed and vicariously experienced the insults immigrants endured during the pandemic, this has also moved us—alongside many others—to blend research with new forms of advocacy. Whether dropping off food, cleaning supplies, and medicines to participants when they become ill; screening immigrants for worker relief funds; volunteering at free COVID testing sites; virtually “accompanying” our participants as they seek assistance; providing Spanish-language

interpretation so they can communicate with reporters; or meeting with legislators to insist upon immigrants' inclusion in the stimulus, this work has been richly provocative of the types of insights we present here. This work throws into stark relief the material and symbolic effects of exclusive pandemic policies, all the while illuminating—and opening the door to—new forms of contestation and political consciousness. Such forms of accompaniment, advocacy, and activism point to new possibilities for anthropological knowledge production as well as for working in solidarity alongside immigrants to channel indignation as we insist upon economic justice, health equity, and immigrant inclusion and belonging.

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