

People or Political Pawns? The Dehumanization of Undocumented Immigrants

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Abstract

This paper uses a critical discourse analysis to examine how the language used by popular news outlets when discussing undocumented immigrants constructs a culture in the United States that diminishes the importance of immigrant health, resulting in poor health outcomes. By sampling three texts from late 2022 by CNN, this paper analyzes the specific rhetoric used by a mainstream news outlet and discusses the cultural implications of said rhetoric. Through its analysis of the sample texts, this paper found that the language used to discuss undocumented immigrants dehumanizes them, passes the blame onto political opponents about what we should do with them, and frames them as liabilities to the government. All these factors lead to poor health and well-being outcomes for undocumented immigrants, further perpetuating otherizing tropes. To improve these outcomes, a shift in discourse must occur in congruence with pro-immigration legislation. Further research may include an analysis of the language used by other mainstream news outlets such as ABC News, CBS News, and Fox News.

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The existence of undocumented immigrants has long been a point of contention in the United States. The topic came to a head in the wake of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, where he campaigned with the promise to build a wall on the Mexican border to keep immigrants out of the country (Baxter & Nowrasteh, 2021). Since then, the topic of undocumented immigration has continued to grow in popularity, covered relentlessly by popular news outlets in the United States. Because this issue is widely debated, the social discourse around undocumented immigrants often dismisses the reality that these immigrants are real people, not political pawns (Matalbert, 2021). In this way, the language used to talk about undocumented immigrants socially constructs how we view, treat, and understand their experiences. Consequently, undocumented immigrants see poorer health outcomes, experience worse standards of living, and are seen as less than human. This paper will examine the discourse surrounding undocumented immigration, uncovering how language perpetuates a culture in the United States which dehumanizes undocumented immigrants, in turn creating poorer health outcomes for these individuals.

Literature Review

There is a wealth of prior research conducted on the issue of undocumented immigration. To build the foundation for this paper's discourse analysis, the following key themes were examined in scholarly articles: the role of language in building cultural perceptions, the impact of media framing, and evidence of harm to undocumented immigrant health. These articles provide theories corresponding to these key points, in turn providing evidence to frame the following discourse analysis.

The Role of Language in Building Cultural Perceptions

The specific language used to discuss undocumented immigration has an impact on how our culture views undocumented immigrants. According to Webson et al. (2020), the specific connotations and denotations of certain terms used in the political sphere serve to further partisan goals. Webson et al. (2020) provide the following example: “undocumented workers” and “illegal aliens” refer to the same group of people, meaning they have the same denotation, but they express different connotations. This study found that left-leaning news sources tend to use more terms with neutral connotations (e.g., “undocumented”), while right-leaning news sources tend to use terms with negative connotations (e.g., “aliens”).

A study by Pearson (2010) expands on the importance of connotation. By testing an integrated threat theory (ITT) model and an instrumental model of group conflict (IMGC), Pearson surveyed undergraduate students on their perceptions of the two terms, “illegal aliens” and “undocumented workers.” The study found that the term, “illegal aliens” elicited more prejudice than the term “undocumented workers,” in turn confirming that the negative term “alien” points to the idea that immigrants are dangerous and a threat to Americans.

Lastly, the article by Cunningham-Parmeter (2011) examines the language used to discuss immigrants in the legal field. By analyzing Supreme Court opinions, the article finds that there are three prevailing conceptual metaphors that tend to be found in legal documents: “immigrants are aliens, immigration is a flood, and immigration is an invasion” (Cunningham-Parmeter, 2011). The article goes on to apply its findings to the broader discussion about immigration, explaining that discourse has a real-world damaging effect on immigration reform.

The Impact of Media Framing

Popular news outlets create, perpetuate, and reinforce dominant social constructions. A study by Viladrich (2019) conducted a qualitative analysis of articles from the New York Times, examining the media framing around 2010, when the Affordable Care Act was signed. The study found that instead of appealing to the basic humanity of immigrants, media outlets justify giving healthcare to immigrants by explaining that it would economically benefit the United States. These results illustrate how popular media outlets “frame undocumented immigrants’ right to health care on the basis of deservingness” (Viladrich, 2019).

According to Aalberg & Beyer (2015), media outlets “have a strong tendency to frame political issues with a focus on personal and emotional cases.” This study performed a content analysis of news coverage of irregular immigration, finding that left-leaning audiences tend to prefer emotional news articles with a personal and narrative slant (Aalberg & Beyer, 2015).

Ommundsen et al. (2014) explore the use of language by media sources when discussing undocumented immigrants. The article conducted a study that surveyed undergraduate students, testing commonly used terms by United States media outlets such as “illegal aliens,” “illegal immigrants,” and “undocumented immigrants” to evaluate the attitudes brought on by said terms. The study found that the term “illegal immigrants” tended to elicit fewer positive attitudes toward immigrants than the term “undocumented immigrants.”

Undocumented Immigrant Health Outcomes

Given that this paper’s discourse analysis is based on the premise that undocumented immigrants have poor health outcomes in the United States, various scholarly articles were used as evidence to prove that these immigrants do indeed have worse health outcomes than American citizens. Garcini et al. (2022) examine the well-being of undocumented immigrants using a

social determinant of health (SDOH) framework. The article explains how common stressors related to being an undocumented immigrant can have a negative effect on health outcomes. Garcini et al. (2022) find that “undocumented immigrants face challenging living, social and work environments, have less economic stability, and have restricted access to opportunities.”

Garcini et al. (2021) explore the mental health outcomes of undocumented immigrants. Using a systematic review of 44 studies, the article found that psychological distress is a pervasive factor in the depression, anxiety, and trauma that affects undocumented immigrants. The study goes on to explain that the uncertain socio-political climate has a profound negative effect on the emotional well-being of undocumented immigrants (Garcini et al., 2021).

A study by Morales & Farago (2021) looked at Twitter discourse on undocumented immigrants during the health crisis of COVID-19. By analyzing data from March to July 2020, the study found that “economic productivity is a prerequisite of deservingness,” and “anti-immigrant frames that scapegoat immigrants are flexible to the political and public health conditions of a historical period” (Morales & Farago, 2021). This type of social discourse found on Twitter is a window into how American culture views undocumented immigrants, especially in times of health crisis.

Arbona et al. (2010) conducted a study to explore the differences in acculturative stress between undocumented and documented Latino immigrants. By comparing the two populations, the study found that undocumented immigrants had higher levels of stress due to immigration hardships, familial separation, language barriers, and fear of deportation.

Methods

Studying how we understand and view the world is a complex process; a discourse analysis provides an avenue where we can evaluate social constructionist topics. As previously mentioned, this paper's specific area of focus is on how language constructs a culture that harms undocumented immigrants. This research will conduct a critical discourse analysis because it is the best method for examining social constructions using language (Johnson & McLean, 2020). Using this method, I will analyze the specific rhetoric used to discuss undocumented immigration, subsequently identifying recurring themes which inform and perpetuate dominant American cultural attitudes.

There is no better indicator of popular political discourse than news stories from mainstream media outlets. Therefore, I have chosen to analyze three news articles by CNN. CNN reaches approximately 80 million households in the United States, and CNN Digital is the number one online news destination, routinely registering more than 200 million unique visitors globally each month (CNN Press Room, 2023). Because of its overwhelming popularity, CNN's rhetoric reflects the common discourse in the United States, therefore providing a meaningful sample of texts for discourse analysis.

I sampled three texts by searching the keywords "undocumented immigrants" in the CNN online news database for articles about immigration published in the second half of 2022. I chose to sample news articles from this period because they showcase the most recent discourse surrounding undocumented immigration. Each article is approximately 1500 words in length, providing a wealth of text for detailed analysis. In order of publishing date, the articles are as follows: "Misery in El Paso: Hundreds of homeless migrants live in squalor amid deportation fears" by Flores & Suarez (2022), "Everyone can now agree – the US has a border crisis" by

Collinson (2022), and “A ‘radical shift’ at the border is making things tougher for Biden” by Shoichet & Hickey (2022). These articles were published in 2022 on August 30, December 16, and December 31, respectively.

In the sampling process, I determined that a discourse analysis of CNN will be more complex than one of a right-wing news source. CNN is politically more left-leaning than other news sources such as Fox News, and therefore CNN will use politically correct terms when discussing issues of immigration. In this way, CNN frames itself as an objective news source with minimal bias. This lends itself well to CNN’s manufacturing and maintenance of the dominant culture.

Results

Upon detailed inspection of the sample text’s language, I uncovered several recurring themes that serve to undermine the legitimacy and humanity of undocumented immigrants. Using a more insidious type of rhetoric which, on its face, does not necessarily condemn undocumented immigrants, CNN calls into question the humanity and deservingness of these people, insinuating that they are liabilities to the federal government. Furthermore, the articles mention conservatives and illustrate them as the true enemy of immigrants, in turn shifting blame away from CNN and other seemingly liberal news outlets. In sum, when discussing undocumented immigration, the articles convey the themes of dehumanization, passing the blame, and immigrants being a liability to the United States.

Theme #1: Dehumanization

The theme of dehumanization stems from the specific language used in these articles, rather than outright saying that undocumented immigrants are less-than-human. Collinson (2022) uses a telling quote from Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez that compares immigrants to a

water leak: “‘**We have a leak,**’ Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez said on ‘CNN This Morning’ Thursday. ‘We need a plumber to come and **stop the leak**. And instead, what we’re doing is we’re sending us more buckets to hold the **water**.’” (Collinson, 2022). A water leak is an unwelcome, irritating issue that is more of a nuisance than a threat. This displays CNN’s ostensibly objective language: while the article could use more incendiary terms, such as “invasion,” it instead uses the more subtle dehumanizing term “water leak.”

Dehumanizing language is found in the other sample texts as well. Shoichet & Hickey (2022) reference a quote by a credible figure, David Bier, the associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute. Bier explains to CNN that “‘We don’t have the infrastructure to **expel people as fast as they come in**.’” (Shoichet & Hickey, 2022). Using the word “expel” to describe deportation minimizes the severity and ruthlessness of forcing undocumented immigrants to leave the United States. Furthermore, this quote describes undocumented immigrants as people who are entering the United States quickly, alluding to the idea of an invasion.

The third article by Flores & Suarez (2022) takes a different approach to the theme of dehumanization. Instead of framing immigrants as a nuisance like Collinson (2022) or framing them as an invading force like Choichet & Hickey (2022), Flores & Suarez (2022) use an emotional-driven narrative approach, also including various photos of undocumented immigrants living on the streets without clothes or shelter (see Appendix). Flores & Suarez (2022) say that “‘hundreds of homeless migrants live in **squalor**’” at the El Paso border. The word choice of “squalor” dehumanizes immigrants by painting them as filthy and poor.

The theme of dehumanization found in these three articles serve to construct our cultural discourse that disregards the health and wellness of undocumented immigrants. By regarding

immigrants as less-than-human, it is easy to dismiss their necessity for health care and their demonstrably poor health outcomes.

Theme #2: Passing the Blame

Throughout the articles, CNN frames Republicans as the main villain against undocumented immigrants. Hence, the theme of passing the blame shifts attention away from Democrats and supposedly unbiased, left-leaning news sources like CNN. Collinson (2022) talks about how Republicans are sending undocumented immigrants in buses to liberal states, explaining how “... Republican governors like Florida’s Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott of Texas meanwhile seem **keener to score points with potential Republican presidential primary voters by using migrants as political pawns** than to draw attention to the burden borne by states in this crisis.” Interestingly, CNN indicates in this quote that the real issue is how states are burdened by the number of immigrants arriving on buses, not how immigrants themselves are suffering in this humiliating process. While both sides of this argument disregard the humanity of undocumented immigrants, CNN claims the moral high ground by claiming that Republicans are using immigrants as “political pawns.” Ironically, by not calling attention to the hardship of immigration, CNN is using undocumented immigrants as partisan talking points just like Republicans are.

The article by Shoichet & Hickey (2022) also passes the blame onto the Republicans, explaining that the Biden administration is struggling with criticism from GOP leaders and the Republican voter base. The article goes on to claim that “...more than 50% of Republicans, according to a recent NPR-Ipsos poll – say they believe it’s completely true that the ‘US is **experiencing an invasion** at the southern border.’ And some **Republican candidates are emphasizing this message** as midterm elections loom, pledging they’ll do more if elected to

crack down on illegal immigration” (Shoichet & Hickey, 2022). This article only uses terms with negative connotations such as “invasion” and “illegal” when discussing Republican sentiment. This subtly implies that it is only Republicans who would use derogatory language, not an objective news source like CNN.

Passing the blame is a theme that perpetuates liberal-democratic stagnation. By portraying Republicans as the main villains against undocumented immigration, left-leaning news sources allow the Democratic party to stay idle, blocking progressive policy changes that could create positive change for the well-being of these undocumented immigrants. Reforming the refugee system, streamlining the immigration process, and providing health care to immigrants are all policy changes that Democrats could be fighting for to greatly help immigrants across the country.

Theme #3: A Liability to the United States

The sample texts use language implying that the existence of undocumented immigrants is costly to the federal government. There is an emphasis on monetary cost, therefore implying that American tax dollars are paying for the existence of these immigrants. This theme subtly weaponizes the American sense of nationalism against undocumented immigrants by claiming that these people are subtracting value from the United States, not adding to it.

Although the article by Flores & Suarez (2022) uses an emotional approach, seemingly placing itself on the side of the undocumented immigrants of El Paso, its rhetoric implies that these immigrants as liabilities to the government: “Migrants who enter the country illegally are not offered city-provided shelter because **federal dollars are being used to foot the bill**” (Flores & Suarez, 2022). The idea of “footing the bill” has a negative connotation implying that immigrants are a burden to the United States and are wasting federal resources. This is telling of

how we view immigrants, not as human beings who work and pay taxes just like Americans, but rather as freeloaders who use government money that does not belong to them.

Shoichet & Hickey's (2022) article includes a statement from Yuma Border Patrol Sector Chief Chris Clem, who claims that "the large number of nationalities crossing the border was **straining his agents**." Because Clem is a Border Control Chief, his quote indicates that immigration is putting stress on government resources. The article does not address the other side of the discussion, which involves how immigrants are under stress from the poor conditions they are subjected to when they make the trip to cross the border. By not providing any counterarguments to Clem's statement, CNN dismisses the hardship that immigrants endure at the border, instead choosing to focus on how the immigration process is consuming government resources.

The theme of being a liability to the United States is a subtle but damaging one. By conveying undocumented immigrants as liabilities, American culture deems them undeserving and diminishes the importance of their health. This disincentivizes providing federal healthcare to these people, and in turn, these immigrants experience higher levels of stress and poorer health outcomes.

Discussion

Because CNN is regarded as a relatively objective, left-leaning news source, its rhetoric is indicative of the dominant national discourse. With a detailed examination of the language of three selected CNN articles, this discourse analysis uncovered the themes of dehumanization, passing the blame, and being a liability to the federal government. In turn, undocumented immigrants are delegitimized, shrugged off as an unsolvable problem, and regarded as a threat to

national prosperity. As a result, undocumented immigrants suffer severe levels of stress, prejudice, and poor health outcomes.

The results of this discourse analysis are supported by evidence from the literature review. For example, according to Viladrich (2019), popular media outlets often frame undocumented immigrants' right to healthcare based on deservingness. This concept of deservingness is related to the themes of dehumanization and being a liability to the government; if immigrants are deemed less-than-human, and if they are wasting American tax dollars, they do not deserve to be treated as equal people.

For the theme of dehumanization, the article by Flores & Suarez (2022) uses emotional writing that appeals to readers looking for a more narrative-driven article. As discussed in the literature review, Aalberg & Beyer (2015) explain that left-leaning audiences tend to prefer news articles about irregular immigration with a personal, narrative slant. This would correspond with CNN's political stance, and it is telling of how liberal Americans view immigrants as charity cases rather than as fellow human beings.

The undocumented immigrant experience involves untold levels of stress and prejudice which could be improved by passing pro-immigration legislation. Unfortunately, the partisan nature of American politics perpetuates a system that hinders progress. The Republican party pushes its agenda against any forward social movement, instead opting to promote conserving or even regressing to old norms. The Democratic party bases its appeal on the fact that it is not the Republican party, claiming that it is the Republicans that are blocking meaningful legislation. Oftentimes, the Democratic party throws up its hands in defeat without putting up a fight against regressive legislation. Although the Democratic party paints itself as the progressive option for

Americans, it only serves to conserve the status quo. The discourse used by CNN is indicative of this Democrat attitude which feigns helplessness against Republican attacks.

There needs to be legislative action to make meaningful changes to the well-being of undocumented immigrants. The way to achieve this is to educate oneself on the subject and put pressure on elected representatives. Because American culture is heavily based on capitalism, the most successful way to help undocumented immigrants is to cater to the profit motive: by giving undocumented immigrants legal paperwork, corporations will be forced to pay them a living wage, in turn creating competition between employers and raising all wages for workers. This argument could serve to combat the perception that immigrants are stealing jobs from working-class Americans, therefore creating solidarity for workers based on class, not ethnicity or immigration status.

Although immigration reform has been a necessity in the United States for decades, the 2016 election popularized the issue of undocumented immigration as a main political talking point. Subsequently, mainstream news outlets have come to cover the topic often, and depending on their political leanings, they take certain stances for-or-against undocumented immigration. By examining the language used by CNN, a seemingly objective news source, this paper's discourse analysis exposes how the language we use to discuss undocumented immigrants dehumanizes them, passes the blame onto political opponents about what we should do with them, and frames them as liabilities to the government. All these factors lead to grievous health and well-being outcomes for undocumented immigrants, further perpetuating these otherizing tropes. By shifting the discourse, we may change the way American culture views immigrants; however, this vicious treatment of undocumented immigrants is an issue that also needs to be addressed at the legislative level.

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Appendix

Photos and Captions from CNN News article, “Misery in El Paso: Hundreds of Homeless Migrants Live in Squalor Amid Deportation Fears” by Flores & Suarez (2022).

Figure 1

“Anthony Blanco poses with his wife Glenda Matos and 1-year-old Brenda in the cold of El Paso, Texas.”



Figure 2

“Brenda's tiny feet bear a rosary while on the asphalt of an El Paso parking lot.”



Figure 3

“Evelyn Palma sits with her five children in the streets of El Paso, Texas.”

**Figure 4**

“Evelyn Palma receives gifts for her children in the streets of El Paso, Texas.”



Figure 5

“Anthony Blanco holds a hand-written sign asking for a job while his wife, Glenda Matos, plays with Brenda in the streets of El Paso, Texas.”

