

"Lest They Multiply:" The Fear of the Other

Contributed by [Leora Falk](#)

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וַיִּרְעוּ אֶת־נֹדְדֵי הַמִּצְרַיִם--כְּמוֹ שְׂנֵאָמֶר "הֲבֵרָה נִתְחַכְמָה, לֹא: פְּוִי-יִרְבֶּה, וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסִף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ, וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ, וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ

Pacific Standard: Our Fear of Immigrants

Why did a group of fourth graders rally in support of an undocumented classmate while the citizens of Murrieta, California, tried to stop immigrant children from entering their town?

By JEREMY ADAM SMITH

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..After Wenger explained why Rodrigo would not return, the class of 10-year-olds, many of whom had known him since kindergarten, was shocked. "How is that fair?" she says they asked. "That's ridiculous!" The kids "tried to make Rodrigo feel better" by making him a video and sending him a Valentine in February—and their parents helped the kids to write to their Congressmen and speak out in the media.

More and more children like Rodrigo are crossing the border, many without parents or guardians. During the past nine months, 57,000 unaccompanied minors have been caught trying to cross the border, double what it was during the same period last year.

In the face of this humanitarian crisis—which experts blame on Central American drug wars—many native-born Americans have reacted with fear and revulsion.

Earlier this month in Murrieta, California, angry protesters blocked buses full of undocumented children and women on their way to a holding facility. "Send the illegals back," read a typical sign. GOP policy backs the protesters: The only immigration-related bill passed by the House is an amendment that would revoke a program that has given 600,000 youth legal status and deportation protection. All other efforts to reform the immigration system have been blocked by the GOP and a small number of Democratic allies.

Why do immigrants provoke such strong feelings of both empathy and revulsion, a polarization that pits fourth graders in Berkeley against the citizens of Murrieta? What characteristics and qualities do Rodrigo's classmates possess that the bus-stoppers do not? These are questions that psychologists and sociologists have been exploring for years—and their answers suggest how we can reduce the revulsion and foster a stronger sense of empathy with newcomers....

In fact, the research suggests that immigrant rights advocates face many, many psychological barriers in pursuit of their goals. Fear of foreigners might well be the most intractable of all human prejudices because it is so tightly linked to survival and natural selection.

"At the end of the day, we're motivated by resource-distribution," says University of California-Berkeley psychology professor Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, who studies stereotypes and intergroup relations. When newcomers arrive in the midst of a stable population that's already worked out who gets what, "the most common human reaction is to hog resources, not to share."

It's a problem that arises from one of our best, most unique qualities: Human beings are extremely social animals that are very dependent on our group membership for food, shelter, and security. "We care deeply about our in-groups," Fiske says. "But the downside is that you're then excluding people who are not in the in-group."

This is a social pattern that can be mapped in our bodies, down to a molecular level. Threat centers in the brain light up on perceiving an out-group member, while neurotransmitters like oxytocin seem to facilitate both in-group bonding and out-group exclusion.

The biological architecture of prejudice also hints at the fear that immigrants bring disease—people from faraway ecologies may carry different pathogens, activating knee-jerk disgust, as Mark Schaller and colleagues at the University of British Columbia have documented.

That's why many American cities are excluding immigrants based on health concerns. As Mayor Alan Long of Murrieta, who led the protests to stop the buses, recently said in an interview, "you don't ship people that are ill and contagious all over the country." His fellow protesters held signs reading "Save our children from diseases."...

CAN WE TAME XENOPHOBIA?

If xenophobia has such deep evolutionary and psychological roots, what explains Ms. Wenger's fourth-grade class, which rallied to support their friend Rodrigo after he was sent back to Mexico?

Both liberals and conservatives have claimed that the most important fact of the Berkeley case is that they are children. For some liberal commentators, Wenger's class stands as proof that children are born without prejudice, and that hate must be taught. Conservatives have a different take, suggesting that the embrace of an undocumented immigrant in their midst is just the result of an inexperienced, childish perspective. "That's what I want a bunch of fourth graders making legislation," wrote one commentator on the right-wing site newsbust.com. "MACARONI AND CHEESE EVERY DAY FOR SUPPER!!!!"

But both groups are wrong, the research suggests.

From a very young age, children start sorting themselves into in-groups and out-groups, so the potential for prejudice is there before social conditioning takes hold, contrary to what many liberals believe. But in this case, says the research, their age is not as important as the fact that many of them had *sat in the same classroom as Rodrigo for almost five years*, in one of the most racially integrated and culturally diverse school districts in the nation....

This is what social scientists call the contact hypothesis—the simple idea that contact between groups facilitates tolerance and cooperation. Research finds that its effects are deep and long lasting, which is why conservatives are wrong to malign Rodrigo's classmates as childish: They'll likely take that multicultural perspective into adulthood....

In Murrieta, the town's mayor led the anti-immigrant protests. In Berkeley, teachers and administrators never lose an opportunity to talk about the value of diversity. As the district's website says, "Berkeley Unified School District believes that diversity in our student population enriches the educational experiences of students." The leadership's framing emphasizes that newcomers strengthen the community with new ideas and energy, as opposed to threatening its integrity.

"The views and messages from authorities really matter," Mendoza-Denton says. "Because difficult intergroup situations are ambiguous—and in ambiguous situations people look to leaders to set the tone. That's got to be really consistent across different levels of leadership." As part of that leadership, people need to hear solutions, to mitigate the fear that compassion will lead to feeling overwhelmed....

"When shaping immigration policy, we should be holding in the front of our minds that we're talking about real families, real kids, who have hopes and incredible stories," she says. "If we can't hold those real people at the forefront of any discussion around immigration policy, then we just fall into rhetoric. We end up just saying 'A rule's a rule' or 'We have something that other people shouldn't be able to get' or 'We're going to be damaged because of these hordes of people coming through.'"

Wenger's advice to the protesters of Murrieta? "Sit down and have supper with immigrants," she says. "Ask them their stories."

It would be a start.