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## Discourses of Exclusion: Immigrant-Origin Youth Responses to Immigration Debates in an Election Year

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### ABSTRACT

Political discourse on immigration policy often provides a window into a society's boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Here, we seek to understand how those in liminal positions respond to political debates that raise issues of boundary maintenance. Drawing from Bakhtinian concepts of *authoritative* and *internally persuasive discourses* as well as Gramsci's concept of *common sense*, we analyzed how a superdiverse sample of 26 immigrant-origin adolescents (from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe) responded to video segments of presidential debates from the 2012 U.S. election. Youth's responses to presidential video clips about undocumented immigration policies fell along a spectrum from inclusionary to exclusionary, with many voicing mixed responses to immigration policies. Half of the youth referenced their own family's migration experience when discussing immigration policy, most frequently in empathetic ways; however, this did not preclude them from aligning with discourses of exclusion. The theme of fairness was prevalent in their responses, yet it emerged in distinct ways. This work highlights the need to interrogate common-sense discourses of exclusion.

### KEYWORDS

Adolescents; discourse;  
immigrant youth;  
immigration; immigration  
policy; politics;  
undocumented

The presidential candidates' faces suddenly appeared on the projector screen in the civics classroom. And, as the candidates debated about immigration policy and the fate of an estimated 11.2 million undocumented people in the United States (Brown & Stepler, 2016),<sup>1</sup> adolescent immigrant students watched as their teacher asked them to think critically and share about what the politicians were saying (Field notes, October 23, 2012). From a wide array of countries, youth were naturalized citizens or children of immigrants voting for the first time in elections or without voting rights as "noncitizens." As the candidates' words, gestures, and images beamed into the classroom, there was little to discern students' perspectives on these political performances—performances that pitched particular ideas about what kinds of immigrants belonged within the nation and which did not. Immigrant youth's voices were missing as they watched silently.

Because voice tends to vary across contexts (Juffermans & Van der Aa, 2013), we reasoned that if we were not able to capture immigrant youth's voices in classrooms, then changing the context to one-on-one-interview settings might provide more access to their voices. The purpose of this article is to understand how immigrant youth articulated responses to discourses of immigration represented in presidential-policy debates that drew particular boundaries of inclusion and exclusion to the nation-state. In essence, immigration debates are a means for justifying systems of exclusion (Wodak, 2008, p. 55). Because of this, many scholars have analyzed public discourses about immigration policy (Chávez, 2008; Hamann & Reeves, 2012; Mehan, 1997; Santa Ana, 2002), and recent scholarship has especially focused on the role of children within immigration discourses (Orellana & Johnson, 2012; Wiley, 2013). However, still needed are the voices of immigrant youth

themselves. Including immigrants' voices allows for analyses that incorporate how those in liminal positions participate in and potentially contest the discourses that maintain boundaries of exclusion. In this article we ask to what extent immigrant youth aligned with inclusionary and exclusionary discourses, as represented in presidential debates on immigration policy? And, what themes emerged from immigrant youth's responses to immigration debate clips? Through this undertaking, we contribute to scholarship by including the "subjects," who are frequently the focus of debates and who often have the most at stake in immigration policy outcomes.

## Literature and theoretical framing

In this section, we situate our query by first discussing the concepts of discourse and voice broadly. Second, we discuss how authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981) relate to discourses of exclusion as they pertain to immigration discourses. We also highlight how ideologies, expressed through "common sense" discourses of "meritocracy," "fairness," and "innocence" create categories of immigrants that are more or less deserving of inclusion. Subsequently, we explore the need for a better understanding of immigrant youth's own subjectivities in relation to immigration debates.

### Conceptualizing discourse and voice

Discourses are reflections of sets of ideas and concepts that shift, overlap, or oppose one another, manifesting through language in their various forms. Our formulation of discourse here draws from previous scholars' work, including Bakhtin (1981), Menard-Warwick (2013), Santa Ana (2002), and van Dijk (1993). We see discourse as an important lens through which to examine the complex social interactions and workings of power (Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1984; van Dijk, 1993), politics (Wodak, 2011), media (van Dijk, 2013), and social exclusion (Wodak, 2008), all at work in the context of national political debates. A focus on discourse helps us understand the ways ideologies are constructed and maintained (Hall, 1981), and ideologies help us understand how the social order is maintained (Gramsci, 1972).

An important concept included in our understanding of discourse is the idea of voice. We employ a plural conceptualization of voice and recognize it as a complex, polyphonic construct (Juffermans & Van der Aa, 2013; Keane, 1999). Our assumptions are that (a) questions of voice are tied to inequality and power and, thus, processes of inclusion and exclusion; (b) voice is permeable and heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981); and (c) discourses and ideologies are manifested and expressed through voice, both in their presence and absence. By including voice, we are recognizing the possibility of multiple and alternative understandings of discourse and also the possibility for empowerment when "unrecognized or misrecognized" voices are heard (Juffermans & Van der Aa, 2013, p. 19).

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia helps to deepen understandings of discourse(s) and voice(s), explaining that discourses uttered by individuals can contain disjointed, contradictory, and complementary elements. And, each utterance is influenced by and in conversation with preceding utterances (Bakhtin, 1981). Among various layers of discourse, this study focuses on two Bakhtinian notions: *authoritative* and *internally persuasive* discourses. Authoritative discourse is one "located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). In contrast, internally persuasive discourse may be influenced by authoritative sources, but is not automatically accepted by the individual. Internally persuasive discourse can be seen as a process wherein the individual is "testing ideas and searching for the boundaries of personally-vested truths" (Matusov & von Duyke, 2009, p. 174). These notions of discourses help inform our understandings of how immigrant youth in our study made sense of political discourse on immigration policy as they "tested" their "personally-vested truths" in dialog with authoritative discourses. The following

section briefly describes key features of the authoritative discourses surrounding U.S. immigration debates.

### **Discourses of exclusion**

Immigration debates are not merely technical policy matters. They represent discursive constructions of immigrant “others,” separating “us” from “them” (Mehan, 1997; Wodak, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Wodak (2008) illuminates the relationship between discourse and exclusion:

Within a system of exclusion . . . discourse may be used to problematize, marginalize, exclude or otherwise limit the human rights of ethnic/religious/minority out-groups. Moreover, discourses can be employed to legitimize the processes and decisions of the politically powerful and/or the state. (p. 55)

Exclusionary forms of ideology and action are “produced and reproduced by means of discourse, and through discourse, discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, implemented, justified and legitimated” (p. 56). Exclusionary ideas about immigration become more potent in authoritative discourses when accepted as *common sense* (Gramsci, 1972). Hall and O’Shea (2013) elaborate: “Common sense is a compendium of well-trying knowledge, customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices. . . . It may be persuasive precisely because we think of it as a product of Nature rather than of history” (p. 9). Common-sense assertions ultimately serve the status quo and existing power bloc but find their way into the discourses and consciousness of subordinate-status groups (Gramsci, 1972). These discourses shape debates on the inclusion and exclusion of immigrants by constructing some groups as naturally belonging and deserving of inclusion and others not. By “othering” immigrants through discourses, larger patterns of racial hierarchy become normalized and assume a taken-for-granted status (Ngai, 2004). In other words, it becomes common sense to exclude those who are undeserving.

### **Immigration policy discourses**

Policy debates typically frame immigration as a problem plaguing the nation (Santa Ana, 2002). Moreover, immigration discourses in the mainstream media function to degrade immigrants, especially Latino immigrants, by semantically linking them to danger, invasions, and criminality (Santa Ana, 2002). Particularly dehumanizing are the discourses that semantically link Latino immigrants to animals or contaminating viruses (Chávez, 2008; Orellana & Johnson, 2012; Santa Ana, 2002). Dehumanizing discourses on the illegality of the immigrant-body serve to call into question immigrants’ basic humanity and rights, facilitating processes of exclusion and exploitation (Jefferies, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2012). As the “imagined national community” (Hall, 1996) grapples with the “immigrant problem” broadly, common-sense discourses reinforce exclusionary patterns; these discourses naturalize the ways in which immigrants become dichotomized into those who are deserving or undeserving of admission. Inclusion is conditional (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

### **Innocence, meritocracy, and fairness: The case of undocumented children**

While undocumented immigrants are generally dehumanized (Santa Ana, 2002), the children of undocumented immigrants may, at times, be legitimized in arguments for inclusion while simultaneously being framed as other. Compassion and leniency toward undocumented children is a common trope, particularly when children are portrayed as the innocent victims of their parents’ “crimes” (Orellana & Johnson, 2012). “Innocence” is closely tied together with the common-sense ideal of meritocracy, which demands that those who are worthy must “play by the rules” (Jefferies, 2009, p. 29) in order to “legitimately” gain membership. Also in dialog with discourses of “meritocracy” are those of “fairness.” An untroubled meritocratic system is seen as “fair.” Violation of meritocratic rules is then constructed as “unfair” (i.e., not “playing by the rules”). Left unquestioned is whether the rules are socially just (Dabach, 2015; HoSang, 2009).

### ***Situating immigrant youth's varied subjectivities***

While previous scholarship has added significantly to our understanding of immigration discourses in the public sphere, we have yet to understand immigrant youth's stances in relation to exclusionary immigration discourses. Here we seek to build on prior scholarship and attend to immigrant youth's subjectivities, particularly given current developments that complicate youth's liminal and varied positions vis-à-vis dichotomizing discourses. First, undocumented immigrant youth are increasingly demanding rights while also mastering discursive appeals of "American-ness" (e.g., Pérez, 2012; Vargas, 2012). Undocumented immigrants' acts of claims-making complicate "us" and "them" dichotomies; they shed light on how undocumented immigrants claim belonging to the nation-state, even in the face of structural exclusion. Rather than assuming an absence of immigrants' voice, undocumented activists are claiming voice in deliberate ways.

Second, there is currently greater acknowledgement of immigrant variation within societies, with *superdiversity* as a feature of immigration (Vertovec, 2007). Scholarship on superdiversity calls for complicating how we understand immigrant populations and the diversity within different ethnic and cultural groups (Vertovec, 2007), including variations in legal status, social class, racialization, and linguistic practices (Blommaert, 2013; Vertovec, 2007). What this means is that while immigration discourses are historical and long-standing, they are also occurring in real time to an immigrant audience of vast internal diversity.

And, while the participants in our study could likely call on the dominant authoritative discourses involved in boundary maintenance, there may be something more intimately at stake for them. Here we articulate the need to examine immigrant youth's perspectives on immigration debates, as those who are in liminal positions themselves. To differing degrees, their lived experience may provide them with knowledge about immigration and about insider/outsider and inclusionary/exclusionary processes. At the same time, given the great heterogeneity and status variations within immigrant groups, we would not anticipate a unified voice or set of experiences. Nor would we want to essentialize or romanticize immigrant subjectivities (see Eksner & Orellana, 2005). Rather, we try to illuminate what Sung (2015) describes as the complex and contradictory subjectivities of liminalized immigrant youth as they often simultaneously "negotiate, resist, and internalize the material and ideological structures that condition their existence" (p. 364).<sup>2</sup> So, while some scholarship has examined political speech and discourses of immigration restriction (e.g., Orellana & Johnson, 2012), and other work has focused more directly on immigrant youth who are already mobilized and politically active (Negrón-Gonzales, 2014; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014), our contribution, in part, is in expanding the research lens onto a wider sample of immigrant youth by examining how a superdiverse sample of immigrant youth responded to immigration-debate discourses.

### **Method**

As noted in the introduction, the genesis of this analysis emerged in ethnographic fieldwork in civics classrooms. Our project, the Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth (CLAIY) study, was a multisited ethnographic election-year study designed to better understand teacher and student navigation of citizenship in high school civics classes in immigrant contexts. We deliberately collected data before and after the U.S. presidential elections because we anticipated that immigration policy discourses would be most audible during the election cycle. Our data collection team consisted of five members (one professor and four graduate students). We collectively have (or had) family ties to the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, South Asia, East Asia, Africa, and North America. We are all immigrants, children of immigrants, or teachers of immigrants.

### **Participants**

Focal students participating in this study were selected from four case study teachers' classrooms; the teachers were all high school social studies teachers who taught civics during the presidential election

**Table 1.** Countries of origin of student participants.

Africa	<i>n</i>	Asia	<i>n</i>	Europe & Eurasia	<i>n</i>	Latin America	<i>n</i>
Ethiopia	2	China	2	Azerbaijan	1	Argentina	1
Kenya	1	Japan	1	Bosnia	1	Guatemala	1
Somalia	1	Korea	3	Russia	2	Mexico	3
		Thailand	1	Ukraine	1	Nicaragua	1
		Vietnam	3			Peru	1

in the fall of 2012. The participants included in this analysis were 26 focal students, ages 16 to 19, who represented 17 different countries of origin from Africa, Asia, Europe and Eurasia, and Latin America (see Table 1). Of these, 14 were first-generation immigrants, five were 1.5-generation immigrants (defined as immigrants who migrated before age 12), and seven were second-generation immigrants (the U.S.-born children of those born abroad).

For the protection of our participants, we did not ask our participants about their documentation status (nor do we disclose the specific U.S. region we worked in). And, we note that all names of students are pseudonyms. In some cases, students volunteered information about their family's status to us. Teachers in our study were also aware of and attuned to their students' challenges concerning undocumented status, adding evidence to the fact that we were in mixed-citizenship-status settings (Dabach, 2015; Dabach, Fones, Merchant, & Adekile, 2016).

### **Data collection**

During semistructured qualitative interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, we showed participants two 40-second clips from the second presidential debate on October 17, 2012, one from each major presidential candidate (Barack Obama and Mitt Romney). Video clips were selected to capture candidates' talk regarding their stance on undocumented immigrants and their policy solutions, especially regarding issues of citizenship for undocumented immigrant youth. (See Appendix for a transcript of the video clips.) After each clip, students were asked to describe what they thought each candidate was saying and whether or not they agreed or disagreed with what the candidate said and why. All 26 interviews were transcribed in their entirety for content and were verified for accuracy.

### **Data analysis**

To address the first research question about youth's degree of alignment with inclusionary/exclusionary discourses, we developed student case summaries and categorized students' alignment with undocumented immigrant rights as inclusive (with no evidence of exclusion), inclusive (with the exception of criminals), mixed (alignment with aspects of different categories), and exclusionary. Our choice to code for youth's alignment with inclusionary/exclusionary discourses was tied conceptually to our understandings of immigration debates as linked to discourses of exclusion. Our coding scheme evolved to better capture the complexity of participants' stances (i.e., to include more middle points in the spectrum to better represent our data). Through discussion and deliberation, the four coauthors reached consensus about which category students in our sample would be placed, pressing for evidence in each case.

Our second research question concerned the themes that emerged from youth's responses to the clips. Methodologically, conducting a thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) was important to us, given the gap we identified with the lack of research that includes immigrant youth's perspectives on immigration policy. Doing so allowed us to attend more carefully to what emerged from the ground up; epistemically we wanted to privilege what was most salient to the youth in our sample. Once we identified themes through open coding (both individually and as a team), we created a code book

and used qualitative analysis software (Dedoose) to code systematically. The categories we present in [Figure 1](#) were derived from this analysis and from our findings on the theme of fairness. We attended to the themes students indexed in response to the debate clips; this allowed us to account for things students brought up (i.e., their lived experiences) that were not necessarily in the candidates' speech but were part of what informed their dialogic responses to the debates.

### Limitations

Politicians' statements were brief and addressed specific aspects of policy, and the students' responses to these cannot completely capture the totality or nuance of their views on immigration policy. Presidential debates are, by their very design, intended to be persuasive (albeit to particular audiences). Nevertheless, had we asked students to comment more generally on their views, they may have articulated their stances differently. Also the debate clips chosen for this project were from majority party candidates and did not include the views of other parties' candidates (Socialist, Green, Libertarian, etc.). The inclusion of other candidates' stances would have enriched the study.

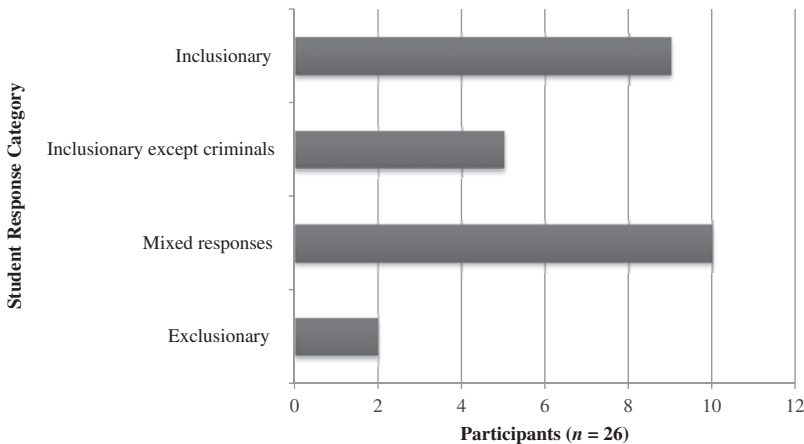
### Findings

Our findings address (a) the extent to which immigrant youth in our sample aligned with inclusionary and exclusionary immigrant discourses in presidential debates and (b) the key themes that emerged from immigrant youth's responses to the debate clips.

### *Spectrum of alignment with the rights of undocumented immigrants*

Our participants' talk fell along a spectrum into four categories: (a) alignment with undocumented immigrant rights without conditions; (b) alignment with including undocumented immigrants except for criminals; (c) mixed responses; and (d) alignment with excluding undocumented immigrants. (See [Figure 1](#).)

Here we present the extent to which students' responses to presidential-policy-debate clips aligned with undocumented immigrants' rights, including rights to citizenship, residence, school and work opportunities, and freedom from deportation. Across participants' cases, the spectrum categories highlight the extent to which immigrant-origin youth aligned with the inclusion and/or exclusion of undocumented immigrants.



**Figure 1.** Spectrum of youth's alignment with immigrants' rights.

The largest number of responses (10 out of 26, or 38%) fell into the mixed response category, expressing ideas that reflected aspects of discourse that were both inclusive and exclusive of undocumented immigrants. Luis's case (1.5 generation, Argentina) illustrates this. At first, he showed alignment with the rights of undocumented immigrants by expressing his disagreement with popular rhetoric that is often used against undocumented workers:

And people like say stupid stuff like, they're taking our jobs. No, they're doing jobs that nobody actually wants to do. No upper-class White, male would want to do and ... White males are the ones running our government so why are they complaining? You know? ... They represent a large part of our working class and especially illegal immigrants do a lot of like, almost the dirty work and a lot of under-the-table kind of work. Which is rather unfortunate 'cause that can develop a really abusive relationship. And illegal immigrants don't want to say anything, admit they're abused, they don't want to call the police 'cause they don't want to be deported, they'd rather take it. So yeah I think they should receive amnesty if they are trying to progress this, like, society. If they're trying to be educated and if they show that they're doing well.

However, even though Luis was able to critique racial dynamics and common anti-immigration tropes (especially surrounding labor issues), he also found Romney's discourse of fairness compelling:

But the thing with illegal immigration, you have like legal immigrants, people who did it more the right way, then you have illegal immigrants. So I have mixed feelings ... Romney did say there are a lot of people waiting to be legal immigrants so it's kind of like, why would you like reward these people for coming here illegally?

Luis's example was not only illustrative of the persuasive nature of the fairness discourse (which we discuss in subsequent sections), but it also demonstrated the common-sense assumption that undocumented immigration is wrong, referenced by his framing of undocumented people as "illegal." Additionally, his case illustrates that even when youth express empathy for undocumented individuals as well as understandings of racial dynamics, they still may internalize legal distinctions as inherently moral or immoral (i.e., that there is a "right" and "wrong" way to migrate).

In another example of a mixed response, Sam (1.5 generation, Japan) expressed that there should be limits on immigration, yet he also showed an awareness of wage exploitation of undocumented immigrants, which he thought was problematic:

You can't just let all the immigrants in and you don't want the criminals in the US. So, I think they both [Obama and Romney] have a good argument ... I think it's not race but it's just because they are from, they don't have the paper [documentation], they don't get the right pay or they don't get treated equally, maybe they don't get treated equally, but they should at least get paid the same.

Sam grapples with opposing sides of the argument, ultimately incorporating both in his response. Importantly, both youth raise the issue of race in their responses, in different ways. For Sam, immigrants' exploitation was not linked to race; he explicitly states "it's not race"; meanwhile, Luis draws attention to the way that immigration is racialized by highlighting the difference between the "White males" who are "running our government" and the immigrants who "represent a large part of our working class." This serves to highlight the variation within the mixed sample, as students articulated different understandings of race.

Additionally, 9 of the 26 (35%) students responded to the clips in ways that were inclusive of undocumented immigrant rights without caveats or expressions of exclusion. For example, Leo (first generation, Russia) articulated disagreement with Romney's policies and stated in response: "You have to support, like, all immigration" not just that of young people. In his case and in others within this category, students did not place conditions on who should be admitted or restricted from migrating.

Five of the students in the sample (or 19%) expressed alignment generally with undocumented immigrants' rights, but agreed with Obama's stance that criminals should be deported. This idea was articulated by Javier (1.5 generation, Mexico), who summarized Obama's stance, which he strongly agreed with:



He [Obama] basically said that maybe not to focus on the people, like on just Hispanics in general or immigrants, but you know, focus on immigrants who are doing bad, like the bad, like who are not contributing to society and ... to help students ... like kids that came against their will, not choosing to come, but considering America their home.

For Javier, there was an important distinction between criminals and those who were contributing to society. Moreover, he resonated with the trope of “kids” who “came against their will” who are “American.” Discursively this constructs adult immigrants who consciously made decisions to migrate without status (including his parents) as less deserving. At the same time, in Javier’s revoicing of Obama’s policy stance, he inserted his own ethnic group, in his words, “Hispanic.” In this way, Javier made distinctions between categories that have historically been bound together in immigration discourse: Latinos, criminals, and undocumented immigrants (Chávez, 2008; Santa Ana, 2002). Distancing his ethnic group from criminals serves the purpose of deflecting and separating the “good” from the “bad” immigrants. At the same time, it leaves unquestioned processes of the criminalization of immigration where small offenses constitute grounds for spatial removal (Golash-Boza, 2012).

Finally, only two students (or about 8%) expressed exclusionary views. For example, as Ban (first generation, Thailand) articulated, “Those [here] illegally should be deport[ed].” Her own status as liminal, a temporary visa holder with status that would be expiring shortly, did not make her more sympathetic. In fact, she felt a sense of distinction from undocumented people as she described her wishes for the U.S. government to help “people like us” with semilegal status:

We call it—I think they call it “non-immigrant alien? ... we have a social security number and we have the form that we, I always have, always have it with me ... [It] show[s] that I can stay for a certain time.

Ban’s use of personal pronouns (*we, they, I*) indexes her separateness from “those” who should be deported. Unlike undocumented people who should be deported, the group she identifies with has social security numbers, even though her membership is also conditional and temporary.

### Students’ indexing youth and immigration

Figure 2 summarizes the instances in which participants indexed specific ideas related to immigration debates. Given space limitations, we focus here on what was most prevalent in participants’ talk—what ideas, concepts, or phrases they mentioned as they responded to the debate excerpts, specifically (a)

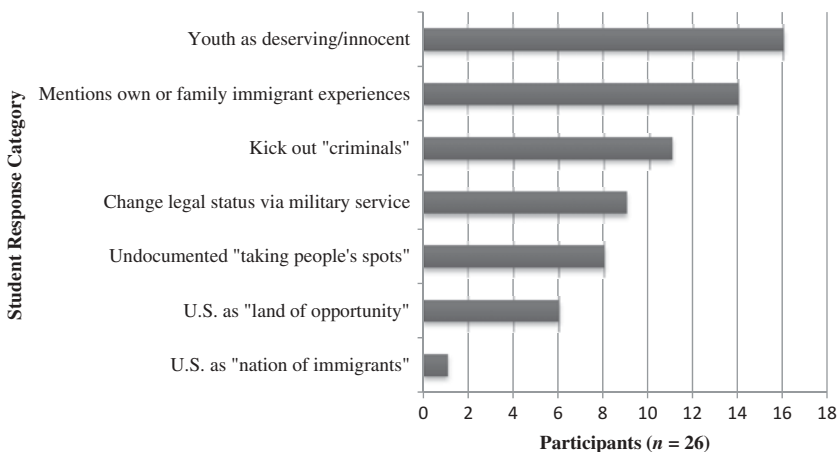


Figure 2. Youth’s indexing of presidential debates and their own families.

youth as a special category of deservingness or (b) their experiences as immigrants, either from their own journeys, their families', or their communities'.

First, nearly two-thirds of the student participants (16/26) mentioned children, youth, or students as a group of people for consideration in immigration policy; of those, 10 youth explicitly aligned with the idea that children and youth should have rights. For example, Rachael (second generation, Ukraine) responded: "I like how he's [Romney's] focusing ... on the kids, more than the adults because kids are, you know, the future generation. They should have opportunities, as many opportunities as possible so they can live a good life." Rachael articulates her alignment with a discourse that children are deserving of opportunities for inclusion, "more than adults." Her response reflects some aspects of Orellana and Johnson's (2012) work insofar as children are seen as a group to be granted special consideration.

Second, youth's experience and knowledge as immigrants appeared to figure into their meaning-making about immigration policy. More than half of our participants (14/26) indexed their own family, friends, communities, and countries of origin. When they did so they tended to discuss (a) their experiences with the immigration process (such as waiting for their papers or having a visa); (b) their experiences with the challenges of being undocumented; and (c) their experiences with the benefits of having legal status. In the majority of instances (11/13), students expressed understanding of the difficulties faced by undocumented immigrants, citing their experiences or those of people they knew. In this way, their experiences as immigrants served to mark closeness or empathy, rather than distance or judgment, with undocumented immigrants. In Mustafa's (1.5 generation, Somalia) words:

I can only imagine what they go through waiting for citizenship and stuff. 'Cause I mean I did go through all that stuff like trying to get citizenship but like, luckily my mom or my dad got it so that we all got it so we didn't have to go experience what they had to go through.

In this statement, Mustafa is both referencing his experiences in obtaining citizenship and expressing empathy for those who are going through the process.

When students indexed their experiences with immigration, another common theme that arose was that of opportunity and the potential benefits to be achieved by immigrating and obtaining citizenship. In this way, students were sharing their reasoning about immigration and also expressing understanding of the motivations for immigration. As Gabriela (first generation, Peru) stated:

Both my parents didn't have papers and then my mom worked really hard here... because she came through Mexico so she just, like, it was just really dangerous she didn't want me to go through the same things so I'm an immigrant, I can relate to people who want to get better opportunities.

At the same time that Gabriela narrates her mother's struggles and how she herself could "relate" to others who seek opportunities, her expressions of immigrant struggles (which included a 10-year separation from her mother due to legal status complications) still did not preclude her from expressing exclusionary feelings toward undocumented immigrants (as evident in the next section). In this sense, we see a complicated picture. Typically in moments of indexing their immigrant experiences youth were sympathetic toward immigrants' struggles. Yet the presence of sympathy did not necessarily mean youth aligned with immigrants' rights in their policy stances.

### ***Persuasive notions of fairness***

As we grappled with the complexity of youth's responses, we also noted how the theme of fairness emerged in half of their responses (13/26); however, how they expressed this theme varied. Fairness permeates the very questions raised by immigration debates: What is fair about immigration policies? For whom is the policy fair or unfair? These ideas were brought up by students in their responses. We coded for instances when students referenced aspects of fairness (or unfairness) in relation to immigration and immigration policy, especially in terms of the policy surrounding which immigrants are allowed to be in the United States, the various legal statuses of immigrants, how

immigrants could gain citizenship, and ideas about who “should” be allowed to immigrate. Youth’s expressions of fairness emerged in three ways: (a) discourses of fairness that were inclusionary, (b) discourses of fairness that were exclusionary, and (c) discourses of fairness that critiqued Romney’s assertion that the military service should be a pathway to citizenship.

### *The theme of fairness as inclusionary*

About half of the student participants who referenced fairness (7/13) did so in ways that were inclusive of undocumented immigrants. These students did so by speaking about equal rights for all people, including immigrants, the provision of chances and opportunities or noting the harsh circumstances or lack of opportunities in home countries that precedes migration in some cases. For example, when Ruthie (1.5 generation, Ethiopia) disagreed with Romney’s contention that undocumented people were taking the place of others, she stated why a more inclusive approach was necessary:

I disagree [with Romney] because I feel that everybody should have the opportunity to, you know, get papers. Like, it doesn’t matter whether you’re an immigrant or not . . . They should at least give them a chance, you know, to come here, too and get papers, too, because everybody should have equal rights.

In Ruthie’s talk, the idea of “equal rights” connects to long-standing notions of fairness and the ideas that all humans should have access to the same set of rights, regardless of country of origin or citizenship status in the United States. Another student spoke specifically about access to citizenship rights in the United States as part of the “American dream, and giving everyone a fair chance” (David, second generation, Vietnam). For students who voiced inclusionary perspectives of the fairness theme, there were not limitations on who should or should not be able to access citizenship.

### *The theme of fairness as exclusionary*

For four of the students in the sample, discourses of fairness served to justify undocumented immigrants’ exclusion (Wodak, 2008). These students took up Romney’s metaphor of “waiting in line,” a metaphor that itself taps into a particular notion of fairness. The logic is as follows: It is unfair to cut in line or take others’ spots. Or they indexed notions of fairness in which it was “unfair” to others for undocumented immigrants to live in the United States. Gabriela (first generation, Peru), who earlier expressed sympathy for immigrants, found Romney’s common-sense metaphor of “waiting in line” compelling, despite her mother’s dangerous border crossing and past struggles with documentation status:

This is going to sound mean, but I kind of agree with him [Romney] and it’s kind of ironic because he is right, I mean, there are legal people who are waiting to come and illegal people are taking those spots.

As another student, Tran (first generation, Vietnam), articulated in response to Romney:

Illegal immigrations is not acceptable . . . [T]hey have to be legal to live in the US—if they move illegally I think they are some like sneaky circumstances . . . I think that’s not a good way . . . ’cause it [is] kind of like, not fair to the other citizens.

For Tran, fairness implied that immigrants who were here “illegally” were distinct from those here “legally.” Like authoritative immigration discourses that semantically link undocumented people to criminality (Santa Ana, 2002), she indexed undocumented people’s sneakiness while drawing attention to the unfairness for those who “play by the rules” (Jefferies, 2009).

### *The theme of fairness in military service as pathway to citizenship*

The final category that emerged in students’ discourses of fairness was in reference to Romney’s proposal that military service should be a pathway to legal residence for undocumented immigrants. Over a third (8/26) of the participants mentioned this policy in their responses. Of these eight students, all expressed disagreement or critique of this policy regardless of whether they agreed with

other aspects of Romney's statements. And three students were specifically concerned about the unfairness of this policy. Rebecca (first generation, Kenya) compared the policy to slavery:

[Romney] should not say that they need to go to the army to do it [gain residency], 'cause that's using people, 'cause it's like saying "if you want to be a citizen of this country, you have to go to the army, if not, we're deporting you." That's using people to work for you. That's sort of like slavery, except [with] slavery you don't get stuff, but still, it's not right.

Additionally, Miguel (second generation, Mexico) also highlighted how the policy was "not right," an indicator of unfairness:

I think it's right to defend a country but that could also cost your life ... it's a lot of bad negative stuff going into the military so he's [Romney's] like basically just sending us there and then if you make it then you're an American, but a lot of bad things come out of that so I don't think that's right.

Though first acknowledging the value of "defending a country," he ultimately articulates a sense that Romney is "just sending us," using a collective personal pronoun, indexing a larger group membership that is being sent to the frontlines. His dissent with the proposed policy was not only at the general level but also personal, with potential implications for his own community, despite his own U.S.-born status.

## Discussion

As our findings in [Figure 1](#) suggest, our superdiverse participants' responses were complex and varied. Though inclusionary stances were common (9/26), even more common were mixed and conditional responses (15/26). Though very few youth only expressed exclusionary responses (2/26), the persuasiveness of exclusionary discourses (as they coexisted with inclusionary ones) remind us of the heteroglossic notion of plurality in discourse, including contradictions, tensions, and complexities all residing within our participants' responses to authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981; Menard-Warwick, 2013; Varghese, 2012). Bakhtin's notion of internally persuasive discourse not only allows for variation in voice, it also allows for internal dialogism in which ideas are "dialogically tested and forever testable" (Morson, 2004, p. 319). In other words, how the students responded to the authoritative discourses in the debate are not necessarily indicative of an unequivocal adoption of authoritative ideologies. They may continue to test these discourses out over time in dialog with their own intersectional subjectivities and experiences. That said, common-sense ideologies also permeated youth's responses; at times they echoed candidates' sound bites that, in practice, form the basis of exclusionary policies.

Through youth's moves to justify their positions, we caught glimpses into what discourses seemed most persuasive to them. Among these, discourses of fairness, deservingness, and conditions and criteria for inclusion were prevalent. Metaphors, such as Romney's construction of "legal" immigrants "waiting in line" while "illegal" immigrants take their spots, were persuasive for some of our participants. They speak of common-sense notions of fairness, where even children can relate to the experience of someone "cutting" in front of them on the playground. These discourses of fairness are linked to meritocracy (Jefferies, 2009). Those who do not "wait in line" are not "playing by the rules," and thus should not be granted entry. However, what this metaphor masks are the multiple asymmetries and historical inequalities that determine who ends up at the front of the line to begin with (Jefferies, 2009; Ngai, 2004). The fact that fairness emerged thematically in multiple ways across our data suggests the need to critically examine discourses of fairness—especially in relation to how immigration policies become justified. In analyzing anti-immigrant policies HoSang (2009) also noted the contradictions of fairness and the legal system. He highlights how the relationship between fairness and laws varies. When immigrants are not following laws they should be punished. When laws support immigrant rights, those laws are deemed "unfair" and should be altered. This highlights how discourses of fairness appear to be both contradictory and enduring.

At times our participants resonated with politician's constructions of fairness, and other times they contested them. Our point is not only that fairness as a theme was salient; in line with critical approaches

to discourse (Fairclough, 1989), we also examined *how* fairness was employed and for what ends. In other words, while some used the fairness frame to agree with exclusionary policies, others used the fairness frame to contest policies that they deemed “unfair,” in keeping with more inclusive perspectives.

Related to fairness is the idea of deservingness and that some immigrants are more deserving than others of social inclusion, whether for admission, residence, or citizenship (Gonzales, 2016; Orellana & Johnson, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2006). For our participants, conditions and circumstances under which people migrate played an important role in their justifications of deservingness. Students provided different reasons and motivations for immigration based on their knowledge and experience, and this functioned to justify their thinking about why people immigrate and also why they should or should not have access to citizenship. As in other studies (e.g., Orellana & Johnson, 2012), youth as a special category of deservingness was especially prevalent in our sample.

On the flip side of special categories of inclusion are categories of exclusion. In other words, if immigrant children are more deserving of inclusion, it follows that adults, especially those who consciously chose to cross the border, are less deserving of inclusion, even though adults and children coexist in the same households and children are nevertheless impacted by immigrant adults’ deportations and apprehensions (Dabach, 2015; Dreby, 2012; Gallo, 2014). Discourses of children’s “innocence” contrasted especially with guilt and criminality. Echoed by many of our participants was the common-sense notion that criminals should be the targets of deportation. On the surface this category of exclusion may not seem problematic. Yet the exclusion of criminals fits a classic definition of common sense; as Hall and O’Shea (2013) explain, “Its watchword is, ‘Of course!’” (p. 9). The discursive construction of criminality ultimately serves status quo interests. It does so by separating and dividing populations whose interests are aligned. Discourses that naturalize the exclusion of “criminals” justify policies that target and deport immigrants for minor offenses, including cases like shoplifting for baby clothes (Golash-Boza, 2012). While some are persuaded with common-sense ideas that criminals should be banished, left uninterrogated are the larger systems that profit in what has been termed the “immigration industrial complex” (Golash-Boza, 2009). And, as we see with youth’s take up of this category of exclusion, even those from communities subject to fear-based immigration deportation policies joined in the chorus of those arguing for the removal of “criminals,” despite the effects of the criminalization of immigration on communities and households (Stumpf, 2006; Talavera, Núñez-Mchiri, & Heyman, 2010).

## Implications

This article contributes to diversifying research on questions of immigration policy, discourse, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. While typically discourse is analyzed *about* immigrants and immigration policy, here we have put a superdiverse set of immigrant youth from 17 countries of origin directly in conversation with policies that impact immigrant communities.

The concept of superdiversity (Blommaert, 2013; Vertovec, 2007) outlines the complexity and multiplicity of intersecting diversities that are constantly shifting. Not surprisingly, the superdiverse immigrant youth in our sample expressed an array of stances about immigration policy, including responses that referenced politician’s authoritative utterances (Bakhtin, 1981) while simultaneously weaving in details of their lived experiences. For the liminalized youth in our sample, we saw moments of discursive alignment with immigrant struggles in inclusionary ways and distancing from them too. The diversity of stances in our study not only adds the voices of immigrant youth in dialog with immigration discourses but also demonstrates that immigrant youth are not a monolithic category for whom we can assume complete and total alignment with the rights of undocumented people. In some cases, we saw common-sense discourses of fairness serving status quo interests. At the same time, even if youth found Romney’s construction of “fairness” (as “waiting in line”) to be persuasive, they clearly rejected his proposal to offer residential status to those willing to join the military. As such, we saw their rejections of aspects of some policies even as many simultaneously accepted untroubled discourses of exclusion. The large number of youth’s mixed and conditional responses reveal a picture of conditional belonging that is not only reinforced by the larger

society (e.g., Ríos-Rojas, 2014) but also taken up by immigrant youth themselves. Nevertheless, some youth articulated stances of inclusion for all, without conditions.

Although this study does not provide an analysis of why some immigrant youth expressed total alignment with undocumented rights and why others did not, future work can investigate these questions. We see a need for scholarship that investigates the intersection between youth's alignment with immigrant rights along with their development of political and critical consciousness, such as Negrón-Gonzales' (2014) study that investigated undocumented youth activists' political consciousness and practices. Longitudinal scholarship that follows youth over time and documents the conditions under which youth develop critical consciousness will make a contribution in closing the gap between our study and that of Negrón-Gonzales.

At the same time that we interrogated the ways in which immigrant youth appropriated common-sense discourses that served status quo interests, we nevertheless highlighted instances wherein we saw immigrants' subjectivities emerge. In writing about the intersection of immigrants' subjectivities and language practices, Eksner and Orellana (2005) describe "the tensions of immigrant subjectivities" and the need for conducting such scholarship "without reifying and fixating immigrants in stable identity categories, or normative host–newcomer dualisms" while also noting how "liminal practices may play out in very different, possibly contradictory ways" (p. 7). Acknowledging these cautions, we continue to see a need for increased understanding of how immigrant youth's subjectivities develop in relation to discourses of inclusion and exclusion, especially in how immigrants' narratives of their experiences relate to how they articulate their stances of inclusion and exclusion towards others.

Here we also raise the issue of schools and classrooms as sites that could offer a platform for a more robust understanding of inclusion and exclusion. As some undocumented youth mobilize across the country in sites of protest (including at deportation centers and college campuses), we also see a need for dialog within K–12 schools. This study suggests that research is needed on how teachers may equip students to deconstruct political rhetoric and critically analyze immigration discourses. Students who are able to recognize how they are being positioned by political discourses, and are positioning others, can potentially develop more critical stances regarding policies of exclusion. Moreover, a critical approach would also involve deconstructing common-sense ideas (Gramsci, 1972) and question whose interests are served (Apple, 2014; Sung, 2015). In particular, we call for interrogating common-sense notions of inclusion, exclusion, and fairness—especially given how these concepts intersected repeatedly through politicians' and participants' voices. Research on how this can occur (and under what conditions) is needed in future scholarship.

## Conclusion

This article contributes to addressing a gap: Although research analyzing discourses of immigration have proliferated (Chávez, 2008; Mehan, 1997; Orellana & Johnson, 2012; Santa Ana, 2002; Wiley, 2013), we rarely get a glimpse into how immigrant youth respond and position themselves in relation to these discourses, except in the most visible cases (e.g., Vargas, 2012). We began this project with concerns of representation and voice, noting both the silences in the literature as well as the silences in the classroom. Through our work, we sought to understand how a superdiverse set of immigrant-origin youth responded to immigration-policy discourses expressed through presidential debate clips. We also sought, more broadly, to uncover how those in liminalized positions engaged with discourses that raise issues of boundary maintenance, exclusion, and belonging (Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Wodak, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The findings of this article demonstrate that expressions of affinity with migration experiences do not necessarily lead to overall alignment with inclusion for immigrant populations, even though their immigrant experiences were most frequently invoked in inclusionary ways. Moreover, we highlighted how discourses of fairness emerged in distinct ways, including at times to argue against rights for undocumented people but also to raise critiques against policies of exclusion.

In examining the complexity of immigrant youth's voices in relation to immigration debates, we join with Paris and Alim (2014) in recognizing the significance of attending to youth voices, while

simultaneously critiquing the ways in which they may reinforce common-sense discourses of exclusion. Placing youth directly in conversation with public dominant immigration discourses as we have done here, we continue to call for increasing depth, nuance, and critique as sound bites about immigration policy continue to move across the airwaves at a time of growing tension surrounding immigration policies worldwide (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2012). What is at stake is not only the inclusion of voices from those who are underrepresented but also the transformation of discourses, ideologies, and, ultimately, systems of exclusion.

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## Notes

1. In this article, we use the term *undocumented* to reflect our stance that no human being is “illegal.” When we use the term *illegal* we are quoting others' language. We also make a distinction between discourses that frame humans as illegal versus *illegality* as a construct that intersects with systems and practices of exploitation (De Genova, 2002).
2. On this issue, also see Varghese (2012) for a nuanced illustration of enduring tensions within immigrant youth's self-representation.

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## Appendix: Transcript of debate clip excerpt

(Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/16/163050988/transcript-obama-romney-2nd-presidential-debate>)

### **Excerpt from Barack Obama's response shown to participants:**

What I've also said is, if we're going to go after folks who are here illegally, we should do it smartly and go after folks who are criminals, gang bangers, people who are hurting the community, not after students, not after folks who are here just because they're trying to figure out how to feed their families, and that's what we've done.

And what I've also said is, for young people who come here, brought here oftentimes by their parents, have gone to school here, pledged allegiances to the flag, think of this as their country, understand themselves as Americans in every way except having papers, then we should make sure that we give them a pathway to citizenship.

### **Excerpt from Mitt Romney's response shown to participants:**

We should make sure that our legal system works. Number two, we're going to have to stop illegal immigration. There are 4 million people who are waiting in line to get here legally. Those who've come here illegally take their place. So I will not grant amnesty to those who've come here illegally.

What I will do is I'll put in place an employment verification system and make sure that employers that hire people who have come here illegally are sanctioned for doing so. I won't put in place magnets for people coming here illegally, so for instance, I would not give driver's licenses to those that have come here illegally, as the—as the president would.

The kids of—of those that came here illegally, those kids I think should have a pathway to become a—a permanent resident of the United States. And military service, for instance, is one way they would have that kind of pathway to become a permanent resident.