

Immigrants and Welfare: Policy Constructions of Deservingness

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ABSTRACT. The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, H.R. 3734, ended eligibility for all immigrants to federal means tested entitlements including federal cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. Underprivileged elderly immigrants were specifically targeted. This article examines how older immigrants are constructed as "undeserving" of federal means-tested entitlements such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI). In particular, it focuses on the frames used in various congressional policy hearings leading up to the passage of the welfare reform law and examines how older immigrants become unworthy of receiving SSI. The sample consisted of the 1994–1996 U.S. Congressional hearing transcripts on SSI and immigrants. Through a content analysis of these transcripts, themes and frames were identified. The findings demonstrate that immigrants were constructed as fraudulent and immigrating to the U.S. to receive public assistance. Their families were portrayed as irresponsible and negligent and these elders were portrayed as "noncontributing" members of society whose number were increasing and becoming a burden to U.S. tax payers. These constructions of

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"undeservingness" evolved to make both young and old immigrants ineligible from federal safety nets such as SSI. This study has implications for how immigrants are construed in policy circles in times of cutbacks. The finding of this study demonstrates that the notions of deservingness are constructed through dialogue and discussion that happens in policy hearings.

KEYWORDS. Policy, welfare, immigrants

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, H.R. 3734, was passed by the House of Representatives on July 31, 1996, and by the Senate on August 1, 1996. President Bill Clinton signed the bill on August 22, 1996, thus "ending welfare as we know it." This legislation radically altered America's welfare program. Although the Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) was the ideological focus of this legislation, the debates over the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, an entitlement program that provides monthly cash assistance to low-income older adults and disabled individuals, was particularly targeted because of the high number of elderly immigrant recipients. From 1988 to 1996, SSI program use by immigrants was heavily scrutinized and debated in U.S. congressional hearings with the eventual passage of the PRWORA legislation.

This PRWORA legislation had major implications for older and disabled immigrants. From 1986 to 1994, the number of immigrant SSI recipients grew by about 15% annually; by 1994, legal immigrants represented 12% of all recipients (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996). Approximately 70% of these legal immigrants on SSI were elderly. Anti-immigration advocates, aware of the increasing numbers of immigrants on public assistance, helped push the PRWORA legislation as well as other state referenda such as Proposition 187 in California which banned undocumented immigrants from social services including public education, all non-emergency medical care, and prenatal clinics.

In the PRWORA legislation, cuts in payments to legal immigrants accounted for \$13.5 billion of the law's \$55 billion in long-term savings (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998). At the time, 500,000 legal immigrants who were aged or disabled would have been affected by the impending cuts to their cash and health assistance. Prior to federal welfare reform, SSI provided a monthly check of about \$530 per month (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998) to low-income aged or disabled individuals, regardless of citizenship status. With the passage of this legislation, panic

ensued in immigrant communities through the U.S. (Fujiwara, 2005; Yoo, 2003). Intense concerns were for the elderly and disabled immigrants who could lose cash assistance and Medicaid (Yoo, 2003). In 1997, Congress and the Clinton Administration moved to restore many of the safety net benefits to those who had immigrated on or before 1996.

Although Congress and the Clinton restoration restored a federal safety net to immigrants who had arrived prior to August 22, 1996, those immigrants who had arrived in the U.S. after August 22, 1996 were still ineligible. In terms of eligibility of federal safety nets, there were now two categories of immigrants that determined eligibility, those "qualified" and those "unqualified." Unqualified immigrants were undocumented or those that immigrated after August 22, 2006 and were only eligible for emergency Medicaid. Qualified immigrants were immigrants who were in the U.S. prior to August 22, 2006 and were still eligible for some federal safety nets. The federal government allowed states the power to extend Medicaid and cash assistance to those that immigrated before August 22, 2006. As to be expected, since the passage of federal welfare reform, there has been much confusion about eligibility. Many immigrants now feel uncertain of their rights and as a result forego benefits to which they might be legally entitled to (Neeraj & Robert, 2007; Estes et al., 2006; Hagan, Rodriguez, Capps, & Kabiri, 2003; Park & Yoo, 2000; Yoo, 1998).

This article examines how older immigrants are constructed as "undeserving" of federal means-tested entitlements such as SSI. In particular, it focuses on the frames used in various congressional policy hearings leading up to the passage of the welfare reform law and examines how older immigrants become viewed as unworthy of receiving SSI. Furthermore, this article examines recurring themes in these policy hearings, and how subsequent themes build on prior ones. Ultimately, this article seeks to answer the following question: How were older immigrants on SSI portrayed in U.S. Congressional policy hearings prior to and during the passage of federal welfare reform?

Theoretical Perspectives: Framing Recipients in Social Welfare Policy-Making

When analyzing the construction of social policy, the concept of framing may provide a useful explanation as to why welfare state cutbacks target certain groups. Rooted in the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, framing is a discussion of "what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).

Claims making, like framing, utilizes a symbolic interactionist perspective to views social problems as a collective construction (Best, 2001). Social problems are not seen as objective in nature, but are fabricated to be issues. According to the social constructionist perspective, policy is based on the social construction of meaning at an institutional and individual level (Gansson & Modigliani, 1989). Framing in policy making incorporates cultural resonance, the notion that specific ideas resonate with American cultural values of hard work, independence and individualism. Such cultural themes are dialectic and cannot operate without a counter-theme. For example, in terms of welfare and immigrants, "welfare causing dependency" is a theme, while "welfare meaning self-sufficiency" is a counter theme. These themes can also be used to determine whether a specific population is "worthy" of benefits. The portrayal of a target population helps determine its image as worthy or unworthy, and, consequently, as deserving or undeserving of the benefits of a particular policy.

Past studies looking at policy-making suggest that the way in which recipients are framed influences policy decision-making (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). Rochefort and Cobb (1994) find that if problem populations are already framed as alien and threatening, policy cutbacks to the group ensue. As a result, blaming vulnerable populations for current woes is politically popular (Edelman, 1988). Cook and Barrett (1992) note that public support for certain recipients relies on whether they are seen as worthy of aid, and lacking in all other resources. Recipients must be perceived as being in their situation due to forces beyond their control, and must possess the will to be independent. Welfare recipients in the U.S. have been portrayed as individuals with moral or psychological deficiencies, to the extent that the "term [welfare recipient] carries strong emotive and visual associations, and a powerful pejorative charge" (Fraser & Gordon 1994, p. 111). In policy formation, eligibility for certain kinds of federal or state programs involves this kind of labeling and stigmatization (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Thus, policy debates deciding eligibility for cash assistance programs and other government assistance involve images and symbolic representation of recipients (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994; Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this article were the result of a content analysis of all documents pertaining to SSI and immigrants from the U.S. Congress

TABLE 1. U.S. Congressional Hearings on SSI and Immigrants: 1994-1996

Title of U.S. Congressional Hearing	Date
SSI fraud involving middlemen (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means)	February 24, 1994
SSI Modernization Project (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means)	March 1, 1994
Contract with America-Welfare Reform, Part 1 of 2 (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means)	January 27, 1995
Growth of the SSI Program (U.S. Senate, Committee on Finance)	March 27, 1995
Use of SSI and Other Welfare Programs by Immigrants (U.S. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary)	February 6, 1996
Welfare Reform (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means)	March 23, 1996

and Senate, including all subcommittee and committee hearings between 1988 and 1996. The transcripts from these hearings were obtained from the Congressional Information Service (CIS), and the Congressional Universe Internet database (<http://www.cispubs.com>) using the following criteria. The sample included all hearing transcripts and submitted testimony from 1994 to 1996, a total of six hearings (See Table 1). Only those with the subject headings "immigrants and Supplemental Security Income" were used. 1994 is considered the "beginning" of these hearings since the first congressional discussions on public assistance appears in this year, while 1996 culminated the search since this was the year that federal welfare reform passed.

The content analysis of these hearings identified the themes and frames that appeared during this time period. In turn, this added to the chronological understanding of how the types of dominant frames developed, and how alternative frames emerged from these policy hearings. The purpose of this approach was to understand the types of themes associated with U.S. policy hearings that ended eligibility of federal safety nets to immigrants.

Dominant Frame: Fraud and Immigrants

The dominant frame in all six of the hearings on immigrant SSI recipients upheld the belief that these immigrants fraudulently obtained federal cash assistance. Within this dominant frame, there are four ways that exemplify how these dominant frames were developed and constructed. They are:

1) immigrants come to the U.S. to obtain SSI, 2) immigrant families do not play by the rules, 3) elderly immigrants are non contributing members of U.S. society, and 4) continued growth in immigrant numbers impacts U.S. taxpayers. Ultimately, these constructions provide a picture of immigrants as not deserving and not needy. This dominant frame ultimately says that immigrants are not entitled to a federal safety net because they have obtained it fraudulently.

1) Immigrating to the U.S. to obtain SSI

Federal legislators first addressed the issue of immigrants and SSI use in 1994, focusing on fraudulent SSI applications. On February 24, 1994, the House Committee on Ways and Means convened a hearing on SSI fraud involving middlemen. The Subcommittee on Oversight and the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and Means held joint hearings on fraud and abuse of the SSI program. These investigations uncovered "middlemen" from immigrant communities who coached individuals to feign a disability such as mental illness in order to qualify for SSI. According to these hearings, interpreters, doctors, and pharmacists from immigrant communities committed these fraudulent activities. Nevertheless, the focus of these investigations was on allegedly disabled legal immigrants because they instigated the fraud and abuse of the SSI program.

According to the witness testimonies in this hearing, Southeast Asians were the focus of attention, and not other immigrant or refugee groups. Southeast Asian refugees were being depicted as utilizing the welfare system to commit SSI and Medicaid fraud. One investigator testified that "repeated efforts to educate and assist Southeast Asian refugees with their applications for social programs were being hampered by greedy community opportunists" (*SSI fraud involving middlemen*, 1994, p. 7). Investigators believed this type of fraud was widespread among immigrants. Franco, a Medi-Cal Fraud investigator, elaborated:

We only deal with crooks. We deal with these individuals that are going to get something for nothing. I cannot say that some of these individuals would not have normally qualified if they would have gone through the normal process (*SSI fraud involving middlemen*, 1994, p. 57).

During this hearing, Mel Hancock (R-MI) raised the concern that immigrants and refugees might be intentionally leaving their country to obtain cash assistance in the United States:

What I am curious about is whether this is pretty well known with refugees that are coming into the United States prior to the time they arrive, that this is available. In other words, it being promoted in these countries, where they are met at the airplane or however they get here and they are just being recruited more or less? Is that going on? (*SSI fraud involving middlemen*, 1994, p. 66).

These themes lay the groundwork for subsequent themes that portray immigrants on SSI as deceptive. The issue of fraud committed by immigrants becomes become part of the initial framing around welfare and immigrants. Subsequent hearings convey similar themes and fail to discuss the difficulties of adjusting to a new country, a new way of life especially for immigrants who are poor, and older or, disabled. Although focused on fraud and Southeast Asians, these hearings fail to discuss the psychological distresses and high rates of severe mental illness found among Southeast Asians (Boehnlein, Kinzie, Ben, & Fleck, 1984; Kinzie, Fredrickson, Ben, Fleck, & Karls, 1984; Kroll et al., 1989; Kinzie et al., 1990).

2) Immigrant families not playing by the rules

Two weeks after the hearings on SSI fraud and abuse by immigrant middlemen, hearings began about the SSI program. The SSI Modernization Project on March 1, 1994 by the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means was the first comprehensive review of the SSI program since its beginnings in 1974. This hearing brought to light the notion that immigrant families did not play by the rules since they tried to cheat U.S. taxpayers by acquiring SSI. Professor Norman Matloff at the University of California Davis Computer Science Department testified on his knowledge of SSI use among immigrants. As in the previous hearing, Professor Matloff reiterated the theme of people intentionally immigrating to attain SSI. He presents information suggesting that older immigrants did not solely immigrate to reunite with family members, but to take advantage of a generous welfare system. Citing the book, *How to live life in America*, Professor Matloff claimed that Chinese immigrants used this book to learn how to acquire benefits such as SSI, disability, Medicare, and Medicaid. He contended that

the Chinese language press also regularly provided information on how to acquire public assistance.

Like Franco's testimony, Matloff focuses on fraud, except now the target are elderly immigrants and their adult children. He asserted that elderly immigrants on SSI are actually wealthy. He states in his testimony:

We heard earlier witnesses talk about people who really are desperate, who really are the people who don't know whether to buy food or medicine, that is a tradeoff, they can't buy both. We are not talking about that in this case. We are talking about people who travel internationally. It is typical for them to go back home to Asia once a year. Some of the people I talked to had gone on cruises, Mediterranean cruises. They have been to Europe. They are living comfortable lives. Again, they don't need the money (*SSI modernization project* 1994, p. 139).

Matloff discusses how access to federal safety nets destroys "traditional Chinese extended family." The adult children "victimize" their parents, abandoning them because federal safety nets are available. Moreover, Matloff suggests that these adult children are quite able and have the ability to support their parents:

Their children are generally well off. They are upscale people, professional people. You go to the Silicon Valley, [where] there are a lot of Chinese immigrant engineers there. It is very, very, very common for both husband and wife to be let's say computer engineers, for their combined income is in the upper 3 to 4 percent nationally, and yet their parents are on SSI (*SSI modernization project*, 1994, p. 139).

Matloff's testimony is used to suggest that elderly Chinese immigrants want to be cared and taken care of by the government. There is no discussion of how elderly immigrants often enable their adult children to be productive workers by being involved in childcare responsibilities and domestic duties such as housekeeping (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004). After Matloff's testimony, the Chair of the Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources, Clay Shaw (R-FLA), seemed shocked by the numbers and anecdotal information Matloff presented. Like the earlier hearings on immigrant middlemen and SSI, the hearing discussions eventually turned to the discussion of fraud and taxpayer burden:

Mr. Matloff, if your testimony is even 20 percent correct, and I am sure it is, and I am sure it is much more than that, we have got massive fraud that Uncle Sam is being duped out of—and the taxpayer is being duped out of lots of money at a time when we look so desperately for dollars to try to pass legislation and we resort to accounting gimmicks and everything else in order to squeeze out a few more bucks. Now we find that there are plans of playing the system. I think this is just horrible (*SSI modernization project*, 1994, p. 156).

Clay Shaw steers the discussion from U.S. taxpayer burden to elderly immigrants who cheat the system. Unfortunately, even though Matloff's testimony is about Chinese elderly immigrants, there is no distinction between non-citizens who are fraudulent, and those who are not. Blanket statements are made about all elderly non-citizens on SSI: all are dishonest in some way and are, therefore, not deserve. As a result, the Congressman Shaw recommends simply cutting off all SSI assistance to immigrants:

I think criminality is there, and I think that for aliens to come to our shores and demand welfare payments when we are not adequately taking care of our own is horrible, I think we need to cut it off. I think for us to continue these payments to non-citizens are outrageous (*SSI Modernization Project*, 1994, p. 156).

3) *Elderly immigrants: Non-contributing members of U.S. society*

On March 27, 1995, the Senate Committee on Finance conducted a hearing devoted to the discussion of the growth in the SSI program. The "Growth of the Supplemental Security Income Program," examined the growth of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program for needy, aged, blind, legal immigrants, and disabled persons, including drug addicts undergoing treatment. The hearing discussed reasons and recommendations for responding to the increase in SSI Program recipients. Ultimately, these hearings responded to claims that "the program is growing like gang-busters, and unbeknownst to many, serving a population very different than the population originally served" (*Growth of the SSI program*, 1995).

Although elderly immigrants are portrayed as non-contributors and as those that burden tax payers, there is no discussion in these hearings of the paid and unpaid work that they do. At the same time, some of the themes that do not become part of the framing of this issue include the reason for many elderly immigrants obtain SSI, i.e. in order to access

Medicaid coverage. Many older Mexican immigrants who arrive in the U.S. have poorer health than those born in the U.S. (Angel, Angel, & Markides, 2000). This theme does not become part of the framing because of the complexity of attaining health insurance for older adults. Rather, the discussion turns to keeping sponsors accountable. Those testifying feel that the responsibility for the support of immigrants rests firmly with those sponsoring their entry, not with the U.S. taxpayer. Sponsors should be responsible for their elderly parent's basic income, and medical and nursing care. There is some discussion of getting immigrant sponsors to buy health insurance for their aged relative. Yet, committee members are fully aware of the exorbitant costs that would be prohibitive for poor immigrants trying to sponsor older family members.

Another first in this hearing is the discussion of attaching citizenship to eligibility of all federal safety nets. Several witnesses discuss that the logic for citizenship is that it would "strengthen the civic fabric" but also decrease the number of aged relatives who immigrate for the sole purpose of attaining SSI. Again like in the earlier hearing, the discussion of fraud is linked to the belief that older immigrants and their adult children are not playing by the rules.

4) *Continued Growth and U.S. Taxpayer Burden*

On January 27, 1995, the U.S. Committee on Ways and Means convened a hearing on welfare reform, also known as "Contract with America." A discussion of SSI users, disabled children, substance abusers and immigrants evolved as part of the Contract with America. The hearing came to the conclusion that immigrants were on the welfare rolls in crisis proportions. Both Jane Ross of the General Accounting Office, and Carolyn Weaver of the American Enterprise Institute testify that the growth of immigrants on SSI was astronomical and needed to be stopped. "If the historical growth rate of legal immigrants on SSI continues, this number could reach 2 million by the year 2000" (*Contract with America*, 1995, p. 422). Again, growth is attributed to immigrants who fraudulently apply for the SSI program. Congressman Clay Shaw (R-FLA) reiterates his concerns of fraud among immigrants:

It even appears that this is so organized that much of that starts in the country of the origin before they even get here with regard to gaming the system and the fraud that is in there. It appears that actually it is a form of organized crime with the fraud being perpetuated on the

Federal Government through fraudulent translators and other people who are fully aware of the right things to say with the applicant sitting there and muttering some words that the counselor doesn't even understand himself or herself (*Contract with America*, 1995, p. 444).

Members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate continually constructed claims of fraud and abuse committed by immigrant recipients on SSI. The U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary examined the use of SSI and other immigrant welfare programs in a subsequent hearing held on February 6, 1996. The chairman of this subcommittee, Senator Alan Simpson (R-WY), investigated the large numbers of older immigrants relying on SSI. Alarmed by the possibility that the Social Security system might go "broke" in the year 2029, Senator Simpson attributed this rising number of immigrants on SSI as the root of the problem.

Those who testified (at the *Contract with America* hearings) focused on the long-term dependency of elderly immigrant welfare recipients and the burden on U.S. taxpayers. Once again, the testimonies depict elderly immigrants as non-contributing members of society:

[Even] . . . if they do not contribute in any way to the system which is supporting them . . . doesn't that become a serious problem in the United States to those people who are so worked up about the issue? . . . If you come to the United States and you are a parent of 60 or 65 and you have put nothing into Social Security or SSI and suddenly you begin to draw and you receive the same benefit that a citizen draws? (*Use of SSI and other welfare programs by immigrants*, 1996, p. 47).

Senator Simpson suggested that "freeloading" among large immigrant populations' results in anti-immigration policies such as Proposition 187. Meanwhile, Senator Grassley (R-IA) echoes similar opinions, stating that immigrants are coming into this country to intentionally receive SSI: "Uncle Sam appears to be an 'uncle sucker' for everybody to drain the economic blood from" (*Use of SSI and other welfare programs by immigrants*, 1996, p. 50). Robert Rector, of the Heritage Foundation, supports these observations about the unethical behavior of elderly immigrants on SSI: "In short, the U.S. welfare system has already become a form of deluxe retirement home for many elderly from the third world" (*Use of SSI and other welfare programs by immigrants*, 1996, p. 109). Rector stresses that elderly

immigrants are a burden to U.S. taxpayers and recommends limiting the immigration of older immigrants to this country:

Immigration should not be an avenue of welfare dependence and an avenue of a burden to the U.S. taxpayer. The U.S. taxpayer should not be expected to support the costs, medical or otherwise, of elderly non-citizens coming to this country and I think that we need to make fundamental changes in the system in order to protect the taxpayer (*Use of SSI and other welfare programs by immigrants*, 1996, p. 110).

The last hearing was convened by Congressman Clay Shaw, Jr. (R-FL), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committees on Ways and Means on May 23, 1996. Initially, this hearing discussed welfare reform and immigrants but now Republican lawmakers were turning the policy discussions into debates about eligibility of federal safety nets. The hearings were now conveying the message that welfare should be for only U.S. citizens. Shaw's opening statement confirmed his stance on welfare: "To me, this is common sense, America is and will always be a land of opportunity for immigrants, but no one should come here looking for a handout" (*Welfare Reform*, 1996, p. 6).

Alternative Frames

Although the frames outlined above paint a picture of immigrants as overwhelmingly unworthy of receiving SSI, alternative frames do become part of the debate. The alternative counterthemes include the view of immigrants as deserving of SSI because they play by the rules and fall on hard times. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), these frames are counterthemes to the policy debate on SSI and immigrants. Like earlier themes, these counterthemes also tug at the American cultural values of fairness.

1) Immigrants do play by the rules

In the U.S. congressional hearings between 1995 and 1996, alternative frames are also interjected in the debate on SSI and immigrants. In the welfare reform hearing known as "Contract with America," Lawrence Fuchs, an academician from Brandeis University, makes an effort to frame the issue from an alternative perspective. He draws upon the American values of justice and compassion to elicit support for elderly immigrants who may be in need of financial assistance:

Do we want to take SSI benefits away from legal immigrants, says a blind 70 year old man who collects no retirement benefits? Here is the problem. Over three-fourths of the elderly legal immigrants receiving SSI do not receive Social Security benefits, compared to one-third of the elderly native born recipients. But we are not going to say to such persons: "Go back to where you came from" (*Contract with America*, 1995, p. 460).

Fuchs attempts to put the focus on immigrant eligibility, rather than a discussion of fraud, and makes a distinction between illegal and legal immigrants in the policy discussion on limiting safety nets to legal immigrants. He states that legal immigrants entering this country play by the rules and make economic contributions to the U.S.. Responding to the alternative solutions proposed in these hearings, such as naturalization, Fuchs protests this unjust requirement since it singles out individuals who may not be able to pass the naturalization test. He strongly suggests that these safety nets must be available to all who are members of the American society, including non citizens. Thus, Fuchs advocates a substitute frame of immigrants as not simply partakers, but contributors to U.S. society.

2) *Immigrants fall on hard times too*

Like Fuchs, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) attempts to reinforce the theme that immigrants play by the rules. Moreover, Kennedy stated that immigrants are not immune from injury and illness, and thus should be entitled:

I am always interested in listening to those who are prepared to draft permanent resident aliens, send them overseas to get shot and die for this country. . . . That has happened in this country; and talks about stripping away food stamps for their children or, if they have some disability, another member of the family, cut them out, too. . . . So I think we can all play this card and be funny about it and laugh about it and joke about it, but we are talking about real people and real people's lives, and we are talking about children, we are talking about parents, we are talking about loved ones, we are talking about families (*Use of SSI and other welfare programs by immigrants*, 1996, p. 58).

Senator Kennedy attempts to provide a different picture of immigrants as hard-working, but in need of a safety net. These immigrants arrive to the U.S. late in life, and have low-paying jobs that do include health care or other benefits.

In the final hearing on welfare reform, SSI, and immigrants on May 23, 1996, Congressman Xavier Becerra (D-CA) testified in an attempt to change the committee's sentiments. He reiterated that immigrants like his mother played by the rules, made contributions to the U.S., and therefore deserved a federal safety net. In addition, Becerra stressed that immigrants were just as susceptible to financial difficulties as U.S. citizens:

There are occasions when an immigrant happens to be in an accident not of his or her own making, gets hit by a car, or gets hurt on the job, or gets laid off unexpectedly, and there are times when the immigrant, like any [U.S.] citizen who pays taxes, would like the benefit of being able to turn to the government for help in a temporary circumstance (*Welfare reform*, 1996, p. 56).

Becerra continually emphasized that immigrant, even though not American citizens were part of the social community in the United States:

Do we, as a country, wish to exclude and completely ban people from access to a service when the only distinction between that person and someone else who is a U.S. citizen is the fact they have not yet reached the point of being sworn in? (*Welfare reform*, 1996, p. 66).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis in this paper of U.S. congressional hearings on SSI and immigrants reveals that the idea of the "undeserving immigrant" resonates with policymakers. A dominant frame in these hearings is that immigrants are not worthy of federal assistance. Moreover, immigrants are viewed as not needy but, as immigrating for the sole purpose of attaining SSI. Their families are believed to be neglecting them so they can qualify for assistance. Moreover, another theme emerges in these hearings focused on the escalating numbers of elderly immigrants on SSI and the subsequent concern that SSI program escalating out of control.

The primary message in these policy hearings was that elderly immigrants and their adult children have not played by the rules. In policy

constructions around welfare fraud, criminalizing the poor for fraud is not an old theme, but one that has been used before in times of welfare cutbacks (Chunn & Gavigan, 2004). At the same time, the connection of welfare fraud and immigrants feeds into stereotypes of immigrants being seen as different, foreign and criminals (Preston & Perez, 2006). Throughout the world, newcomers have been seen as different and not necessarily welcomed and often seen as a threat to resources. In the U.S. anti-immigrant movements that have emerged in U.S. congressional hearings immigrants are portrayed as different and as a threat to the U.S. way of life (Stefancic, 1997). In fact, in the state of California, which has experienced the great demographic shift with its growing immigrant population, backlash against immigrants has been waged through ballot initiatives. California's passage of proposition 187, banning school, health and social services for undocumented immigrants, ultimately fueled the development and passage of the 1996 welfare reform law.

Although this paper discusses policy constructions on immigrants on SSI, this study has implications for how immigrants and public assistance are constructed in policy circles in times of cutbacks. Worthiness is constructed through dialogue and discussion that happens in policy hearings. Key witnesses and experts play an instrumental role in how particular groups are framed in terms of worthiness. These notions of worthiness are closely connected to American cultural values of independence, individualism family responsibility and work (Poppo & Leibhninger, 2007; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The constructions, of elderly immigrants as criminal and different, did not resonate with Americans values of patriotism, self-sufficiency, the work ethic, and independence. Rather, elderly immigrants were framed as non-contributors to the system, and as individuals who have not worked in this country, and who were highly dependent on the system to support them. According to this construction, they have not earned the right to obtain SSI.

On the other hand, policy constructions that show support for immigrants and public assistance resonate with values around compassion and the inclusion of immigrants as active and contributing members to U.S. society (Poppo & Leibhninger, 2004). The lessons learned from the passage of PRWORA are that practitioners working with immigrants at both the advocacy and service level need to be vigilant and critically assess how immigrants on public assistance are framed. As demonstrated, immigrants can easily be depicted as non-deserving. The frames that are unheard and unvoiced need to be brought to the forefront by advocates. The stories of hard-working immigrants falling on hard-times can evoke compassion

and empathy. Actions like paying taxes and serving in the military also demonstrate contributions of immigrants. Moreover, frames of immigrants that illustrate their hard work and their value for family resonate with U.S. policymakers. For example, the informal contributions that elderly immigrants make within families, such as taking care of grandchildren, did not even enter these hearings. Rather, the dominant image of the elderly immigrant on SSI throughout these hearings is that of a "freeloader" who is not American and therefore not entitled to SSI.

This paper illustrates the power of framing and the need for organized, present voices to move debates from "immigrants as undeserving" to "immigrants as deserving." The implementation of this legislation spurred many immigrant advocates and service providers to voice the hidden frames that were not heard in policy hearings (Fujwara, 2005). The utter despair their clients were facing with the imminent cuts became a catalyst for re-examination of certain elements of this bill (Fujiwara, 2005; Yoo, 2003). As a result, a powerful social movement developed that brought many diverse communities together to work on addressing the needs of immigrants, but also re-framing "immigrants as deserving." Ultimately, these new, alternative frames of immigrants elicited empathy and compassion and a re-examination of the welfare reform law."

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