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Deconstructing Perceptions of the Border Patrol at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Abstract

The U.S.-Mexico border is a space for public debate on the legal and political aspects of immigration. Politicization of the southern border has resulted in polarized public opinion regarding immigration, leading to discrepancies between public perceptions of the Border Patrol and agents' perceptions of their job. Agents' work requires emotional labor, and lack of training for difficult encounters, pressure within the agency to detach from emotions, and public outcry lead to dissonance in agent perceptions of their own role in immigration enforcement. In addition, economic, ethnic, and gender-based factors contribute to agent identities, which intersect with perceptions of their roles in immigration politics; public unawareness of these factors contributes to a cycle of scrutiny that leads to agent frustration and contention.

Keywords

Border Patrol, Perceptions, U.S.-Mexico Border, Border Patrol Agents, Woodward

Disciplines

Defense and Security Studies | Immigration Law | National Security Law

Comments

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Deconstructing Perceptions of the Border Patrol at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Claire H. Woodward

Since the 1990s, and especially after the September 11th attacks, the U.S.-Mexico border has become a space for public debate on the legal and political aspects of immigration. Politicization of the southern border has resulted in polarized public opinion regarding immigration in the United States. In addition to varied public opinion, immigration politics regarding the U.S.-Mexico border have also resulted in a discrepancy between public perceptions of the Border Patrol and agents' perceptions of their job. Agents' work requires emotional labor, and lack of training for difficult encounters, pressure within the agency to detach from emotions, and public outcry lead to dissonance in agent perceptions of their own role in immigration enforcement.

According to their official website, the job of U.S. Border Patrol agents is “preventing terrorists and terrorists’ weapons, including weapons of mass destruction, from entering the United States” (“Border Patrol Overview”). While this definition suggests that the Border Patrol has little role in the day-to-day migration patterns in the United States (the number of immigrants who participate in terrorist activity is historically very low) the Border Patrol today has over 20,000 agents, most of whom patrol the U.S.-Mexico Border, and is the largest U.S. law enforcement agency aside from the military (“Border Patrol Overview”; Schmid 42). Agents are armed and are often the first to encounter migrants of all types – legal, irregular, asylum-seeking, etc. – when they endeavor to enter the United States. In the last several years in particular, media portrayal of Border Patrol agents’ encounters with migrants has been largely negative, bringing ethical and humanitarian questions surrounding border security to the forefront of public discussion (Frazin; Rohrlich).

Public opinion toward the Border Patrol and its roles in immigration control has been thoroughly researched. In general, U.S. citizens' opinions on border security are based on political party affiliation and physical proximity to the border, with larger distances from the border and affiliation with the Democratic party correlating with reduced support for border security (Gravelle 112). In a study of 756 individuals along the Texas-Mexico border, Non-Hispanic White Americans are much more likely than Mexican Americans to support restrictive immigration policies; among Mexican Americans, the longer a person has been in the U.S., the higher their age, and the higher their income, the more likely they are to support immigration restrictions (Binder et al. 328). The official mission of the Border Patrol is to enforce security of the borders, so it follows that public opinion regarding border security inherently overlaps with public opinion regarding the Border Patrol and its roles in maintaining that security ("Border Patrol Overview"). Data from the 2010 Pew Hispanic Center National Survey of Latinos aligns with this assertion, demonstrating that native-born Latinos are 61% more likely to support increasing the Border Patrol, and that higher age, education, and income tend to correlate with support for increasing resources and manpower of the Border Patrol among Latinos (Stringer 709). As the largest group of Latinos surveyed were of Mexican origin, it seems that Binder et al. and Stringer thus agree on the factors that affect Latino opinion of the Border Patrol.

It can be argued that the politicization of the U.S.-Mexico border is a direct result of Border Patrol expansion, as allocating thousands of agents and funding the militarization of the border draws the attention of political opponents as an opportunity to question ethical, economic, and humanitarian motivations and outcomes (Nicholls 513). As Hainmueller and Hopkins argue, current research "frequently ignores the fact that arguments about immigration are associated with particular political parties and ideologies—and so risks overstating the uniqueness of

immigration attitudes” (244). In 2018, a study pooling data from surveys conducted by Pew Research Center, Ipsos Public Affairs, and the Monmouth University Polling Institute between 2006 and 2016 showed that public opinion of border security leading up to the 2016 presidential election significantly changed in a partisan manner: Democrats’ support for border security decreased while Republicans’ support increased (Gravelle 113). The data presented in this study demonstrates that the increased politicization of the U.S.-Mexico Border leads to a detectable change in public perception that correlates with political party affiliation.

Since 2001, the U.S. Border Patrol and other immigration enforcement agencies have rapidly expanded as a means to reinforce external borders and exclude undesirable immigrants, resulting in political attention and leading to drastic changes in public opinion. This is exemplified by the 2014 assertion that “U.S. Border Patrol agents are framed as benevolent humanitarians acting in opposition to racialized, foreign human smugglers who are identified as the cause of migrant injury, death, and general vulnerability” (Williams 31). In stark contrast, recent media portrayal of Border Patrol agents insinuates that violence toward migrants is a norm among agents (Macaraeg). This specific instance reinforces that political circumstances, such as the 2016 presidential election, drew public attention to the Border Patrol and entirely changed its portrayal in the media, causing a change in public perception of the role agents play in the immigration process.

While public perception of the Border Patrol has been reported, less work has been devoted to understanding the response to this political and public attention within the Border Patrol itself. Recent news articles detail personal stories of agents who have encountered harassment for their role in the aggressive immigration control actions taken in the past few years, and some have quit their jobs due to frustration with the policies they must enforce

(Fernandez et al.). It is therefore necessary to consider the factors that affect Border Patrol agents' perception of their own work and how this differs from public perception of their role in border security.

The job of a Border Patrol agent can be perceived by the public as “dirty work,” or work that society considers physically, socially, or morally objectionable (Rivera 202). Due to growing public perception of border security work as “dirty”, contention and controversy directed toward agents is rampant. The social construction of the “dirtiness” of work is inherently complex when considering the roles of government and politics in construing positive and negative perceptions (Rivera 203). As the U.S.-Mexico Border has become more politicized, the public increasingly perceives agents' work as dirty: those who support increased security see the constant interaction with “criminals” at the border as socially objectionable, while those who do not support increased security see agents' actions toward immigrants as callous and therefore morally objectionable. Agents are therefore criticized by both political ideologies and are simultaneously portrayed as too strict and too lenient toward migrants, although much of the criticism derives from those who portray them as inhumanely strict.

Border Patrol agents have demonstrated frustration with public perception of the “dirtiness” of their work due to lack of understanding of the emotional labor they perform. Agents “learned how to act during an arrest—such as not showing emotion at all or showing aggression—through formal organizational training and a culture that encouraged more ‘masculine’ emotions or ‘machismo’ displays” (Rivera 206). In interviews with 85 agents in various locations along the U.S.-Mexico Border, displays of compassion by Border Patrol agents were necessarily “silenced or privatized” while aggressive behavior was praised as a means of asserting dominance over migrants (Rivera 208). Collectively, this evidence exemplifies a

paradox among agents: while being encouraged to maintain a masculine, emotionless demeanor for which they are publicly criticized, Border Patrol agents are required to silently perform emotional labor for which they are untrained and unprepared.

Within this apparent discrepancy between public perception and reality of agents' work, there are both gendered and racial aspects of Border Patrol demographics that should be noted. Economic, ethnic, and gender-based factors contribute to agent identities, which intersect with perception of their own roles in immigration politics; public unawareness of these factors contributes to a cycle of scrutiny that leads to ongoing agent frustration and contention.

The demographics of the Border Patrol reflect economic and ethnic conflict among Latino agents. David Cortez, scholar of Latino Studies and Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, describes the disproportionate number of Latinos who work as Border Patrol agents: "Today, Latinos make up nearly 30% of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and 50% of Border Patrol... it raises this interesting kind of dilemma about Latinos actually policing an act that without which they would not be in the position they are today" (Cortez, *Understanding The Border Patrol*). Cortez goes on to describe that his research, including interviews with Latino agents at the U.S.-Mexico Border in Texas, Arizona, and California, suggests that Latinos' reasoning for becoming Border Patrol agents is out of economic self-interest (Cortez, *Understanding The Border Patrol*). Incentivized enlistment in immigration law enforcement jobs is made possible by the disproportionate number of Latinos living in poverty in border regions: while those who identify as Hispanic make up 39% of the Texas border population, they make up 51% of those living in poverty (Cortez, "I Asked Latinos Why They Joined Immigration Law Enforcement. Now I'm Urging Them to Leave."). The starting salary for Border Patrol agents, according to Cortez, is well above the average starting salary of Latinos

in that area and thus presents a rare opportunity for Latinos to partake in stable, well-paying jobs in immigration enforcement. These statistics imply an institutional oppression of Latino populations near the border by incentivizing Latinos to police their own actions.

The most recent data from a 2016 report shows that 51.13% of Border Patrol agents are of Hispanic descent (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 73). Latino Border Patrol agents are often met with accusations from other Latinos that they are “traitors”; some agents respond to this by emphasizing their humane approach to the job, while others affirm a commitment to immigration enforcement while also maintaining their Latino identity as part of their American identity (Prieto 504). From this, it is clear that a transnational identity spanning the U.S.-Mexico Border exists among many Latino agents, which may be usurped by a desire to assimilate and earn a living through establishing a nationalized identity. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the “dirtiness” of a Latino agent’s job is inherently compounded as a result of ethnic and economic background, especially when criticism is derived from agents’ own families and communities.

Another important identifier in Border Patrol demographics is the sizeable gender gap: in 2016, only 5.18% of Border Patrol agents were female (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 73). In light of increased public awareness of the crimes against women committed by immigration enforcement officers, including a long history of rape accusations against Border Patrol agents, it is not surprising that few women are drawn to this occupation (Luibhéid 103-136; Téllez et al. 525; Hernandez and Upton 2). More telling is the claim that a workplace “macho-man” culture ostracizes and marginalizes women on the force, leading to harassment and causing many women to quit (Neuhauser). In 2015, the Border Patrol launched a recruitment program intending to target women as new agent recruits after the 2014 surge in immigrant

women and children arriving at the southern border (Hennessy-Fiske). The continued lack of female agents, who are perceived as more approachable and understanding of migrant backgrounds, may contribute to public perception of agent callousness (Neuhauser). Female agents are also more often asked to work with rape and sexual violence victims who wish to claim asylum, but are prevented from outwardly expressing or coping with their emotions for fear of harassment by male coworkers (Neuhauser). This highlights a gender-specific nuance among Border Patrol agents: pressure on women to dissociate from the emotional labor of the job is exacerbated to compensate for a perceived “weakness” by male coworkers, thus increasing the emotional labor of female agents’ work while preventing them from acknowledging it. This pressure on female agents likely has psychological impacts and plays a role in low female agent retention, but more research must be done to further this understanding (Neuhauser).

As public opinion toward the Border Patrol has become politically charged and polarized, agents are trained to maintain authoritative behavior, which is codified as masculine and aggressive, leading to public perception of agents as callous and emotionless. While violent and aggressive actions of individuals should not be condoned, the above factors suggest the complicity of the Border Patrol as an agency in aggressive acts toward migrants. In the face of backlash from the general public, emotional labor and “dirty work” required of Border Patrol agents leads to frustration with public perception of agents’ work, which disproportionately impacts marginalized groups such as women and Latino agents. Agents thus find it difficult to cope with their own role in immigration enforcement, which may cause unwanted psychological and emotional outcomes.

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