Resource Document on Xenophobia, Immigration, and Mental Health

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Prepared by the Committee on Hispanic Psychiatrists

While prejudice is defined as an evaluation (usually negative) of a social group or individual that is significantly based on their group membership, xenophobia can be considered a form of negative prejudice directed against a national or ethnic group. Historically, xenophobia has been associated with various large scale destructive acts of violence between peoples or by persons against other persons belonging to the "other" group. These include wars (from the Crusades to both World Wars and beyond) and genocidal acts and disasters (such as against defenseless peoples such as the indigenous peoples of the Americas, African slaves across the Diaspora, Jews during the Inquisition and during World War II, Armenians (during World War I), Gypsies (during World War II), and, in the last 20 years, Hutu tribesmen in Rwanda, Muslims in the Balkans, Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, and Saharan Africans in Dharfour and Sudan.

The United States has had xenophobic experiences and periods in its history. These have included the pervasive attitudes about indigenous populations found by European settlers and about imported Black slaves, the anti-immigrant feelings during late 19th and early 20th centuries (against Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Chinese, and other early immigrant groups), paternalistic attitudes about Mexico and Latin America over the decades (as exemplified by the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny"), and the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. More recently, during the 1980's to the current time, xenophobia has fueled much of the anti-immigrant feelings of the late 20th and early 21st Century, which are directed largely against Mexican and other Latino immigrants. Such feelings have been extremely negative to the point that they distort objective economic findings that demonstrate economic benefits to this nation and to border states from immigration, even by undocumented immigrants. For example, the State of Texas Office of the Comptroller (Strayhorn, 2006) published an analysis that clearly demonstrated a net economic benefit of billions of dollars for that state from so-called illegal immigration. After 9-11, people of Arab/Middle Eastern and Muslim origins have been the target of much xenophobic behavior, commonly termed "Islamophobia," which has resulted in assaults which are commonly designated as "hate crimes" (Sheridan, 2006). Unfortunately, xenophobia has contributed not only to individual violent action such as property destruction, assaults, and murder, but has also led to the adoption of controversial U.S. foreign and domestic policies and political positions.

Xenophobia usually has a number of underlying conditions and overarching contexts. Since it involves prejudice against a nationality or ethnicity, it is usually associated with assumptions of cultural/ethnic or racial superiority. It is also often rationalized when a group of people is perceived as being a threat to the way of life of the person or the people who experience it (Chen & Park-Taylor, 2006). It is usually experienced as a group phenomenon, but it can also be experienced and acted upon by individuals in daily life and in relationships in the workplace, schools, and other community settings. It is also used to justify warfare or negative action against a group of people (which often disguises more utilitarian motivations). It can become a convenient device to project blame for adversity (including economic adversity, adverse social change, or even personal misfortunes). Xenophobia is easily exploitable by narcissistic charismatic leaders (e.g., Adolf Hitler) to mobilize public opinion and solidify/reinforce total control and power, which ultimately undermines democracy and free speech and choice.

Xenophobia can be considered as a defense against individual or mass anxiety resulting from social or individual adversity. It involves the use of pathological defense mechanisms such as projection and displacement and even splitting, with the "other" hated group ending up on the negative side of the split, and the group practicing it on the positive side. It also involves a certain degree of depersonalization, with the individual characteristics of "other" people involved being blurred or subsumed by stereotypes. It contributes to mass hysteria or "group-think," especially when it becomes incorporated into ideology (including political, religious, nationalistic, etc.). In totalitarian regimes or nations at war, it is fueled by propaganda (e.g., Nazi mass rallies; depiction of enemy solders as "baby killers" in war bond posters in the US in World War II). However, these days xenophobia is fueled by modern mass media seeking sensationalism.

There is some research basis in the social and even biological sciences for understanding xenophobic behaveiors. Animal models using multiple separations can produce social discrimination and xenophobia, such as in baby chicks (Rajecki, Ivins, and Kidd, 1977; Rajecki, Lamb, & Suomi, 1978) and monkeys (Suomi, Harlow, & Domek, 1970; Sackett, Holm, & Ruppenthal, 1976). Research has shown that negative prejudice is damaging and disruptive to social interactions and social justice (Brown, 1995; Jones, 1997). Prejudice has been shown to be common across cultures, time, languages, and national boundaries (Brown, 1995). Some research has supported the

hypothesis that prejudice is an affective state and as such it has a motivational force, usually to discharge tension or anxiety (Brehm, 1999). Prejudice is associated with stereotypes, which are beliefs and categories that are readily available and established in children's minds before they are taught to critically evaluate perceptions (Devine, 1989). In more recent times, Western Europeans have been shown to have xenophobic prejudice that has evolved from "blatant prejudice" to "subtle prejudice," which has been shown to have a combination of genuine prejudice and social norms which proscribe blatant discrimination (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995).

Based on these findings, researchers have proposed a Justification Suppression Model of Prejudice. This model proposes that several social, cultural, cognitive, and developmental factors create a variety of prejudices in a people. These forces create a "genuine prejudice," which is a powerful negative affective reaction. However, other countervailing forces suppress this prejudice (social norms, personal standards, beliefs, and values; what we would commonly call "political correctness"). Justification processes, however, can undo these suppressing factors and "liberate" public communication and private acceptance of normally suppressed prejudices without guilt or shame. Such justification can be provided by ideology, beliefs, and attributions (Crandall and Escherman, 2003). In xenophobia, ideology and mass media are usually the mechanisms through which prejudices are disinhibited and provide justification and release.

In a nation primarily comprised of immigrants, xenophobia leads to many adverse psychosocial consequences. Beyond its fueling of violence and bullying, a xenophobic environment inhibits assimilation into a new culture and contributes to the further margination of immigrant populations, which leads to the very result that xenophobic proponents complain about (Quiles, et al, 2006; with Moroccans in Spain). It has significant adverse impact on child/adolescent ethnic identity formation (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006), which can result not only in margination but also negative identity formation and deviant behavior (as proposed by Erickson, 1965). Studies have shown that limited English proficiency and English as a Second Language programs may contribute to social isolation and xenophobia (Tsai, 2006; with Taiwanese youth in US; Blackledge, 2005 in Britain). Xenophobia certainly leads to increased acculturation stress when different cultures clash negatively (Berry, 2006). It has also led to practices such as the incarceration of child and family asylum seekers and the separation of children from parents (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003, in Australia; Ziegler, 1976, Operation Babylift from Vietnam), thus aggravating posttraumatic stress and adverse mental health outcomes for immigrants. For the nonimmigrant, xenophobia leads to negative behaviors which are not consonant with civilized culture, such as breaking the law and the perpetration of hate crimes in the heat of passion, with adverse consequences for the nonimmigrant.

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