

# La Violencia en Las Sombras: Epistemic Violence in The United States Immigration System and Its Implications

La violencia en las sombras:  
la violencia epistemológica en el  
sistema de inmigración en los  
Estados Unidos y las implicaciones

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## Background & Theory

The United States immigration system is an agency positioned to aid immigrants; however, this system perpetuates harm to those navigating its processes. The immigration system remains to be, even to the progressive identifying side of the population, too much of a mystery. The immigration system intentionally remains hidden so public attention to its issues is not raised. Although legal protections exist for immigrants, the lived experiences of people in the immigration system emphasize how these rights are not being upheld. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, and age is prevalent in the immigration system. There is pervasive inequality in the decisions and the treatment of immigrants by judges, prosecutors, and immigration officials. Re-traumatization of human beings is inescapable in the immigration system. The hidden violences of the immigration system must be defined and explored if they are ever going to be addressed. Therefore, this investigation examines how particular modes of epistemic violence manifest in the immigration system.

Epistemic violence is a form of symbolic violence where knowledge, or the lack of knowledge, is weaponized to oppress people or groups. Epistemic violence is based on pernicious ignorance and is commonly enacted in situations where there is an imbalance of power. For this investigation, epistemic violence is broken down into three main modes: dehumanization, criminalization, and removal of agency. Dehumanization is the process where human qualities, such as morality, civility, and higher cognition, are withheld from a target group. Criminalization is framing an individual or group as a criminal by framing their behavior as illegal. The removal of agency is defined as failing to see vulnerable groups or victims as capable agents due to a specific aspect of their identity.

## Methodology

This investigation is a content analysis of interviews. I conducted five interviews with service providers working in the field of immigration. These service providers could speak to the descriptive landscape of the different forces and processes of the immigration system.

The interview transcripts were analyzed to find evidence of the three modes of epistemic violence, and of the subsequent 12 forms of presentation, defined in the theory section. This analysis utilized a detailed coding rubric that outlines how each mode of epistemic violence is defined and could be exemplified.

### Simplified Coding Rubric

#### Dehumanization:

- denial of linguistic rights
- seeing people in roles or as their functions
- language that removes personhood
- expectations to follow United States cultural norms
- racialized stereotypes

#### Criminalization:

- forms of enforcement
- the language of documents
- structures of law
- racialized stereotypes

#### Removal of Agency:

- assumption of incompetence
- benevolent sexism
- presentation of victimhood

## Results

Coding the interview transcripts led to many examples supporting the existence and persistence of epistemic violence in the immigration system. There was an abundance of occurrences for each mode and form and both a breadth and depth of examples. These findings reaffirm my hypothesis that epistemic violence manifests in the immigration system through the modes of dehumanization, criminalization, and removal of agency.

The epistemic violence discussed, analyzed, and exemplified in this project is very real and very present in the lives of people across the United States. The issues with the immigration system are not just frustratingly high standards for relief and painstakingly long wait times for visas but the perpetuation of real violence against the people it was created to assist. Epistemic violence is a form of hidden violence, but its countless negative impacts are not something we can afford to leave hidden.