

Spotlight on Dr. Paulina Segarra

Best Critical Doctoral Dissertation:

“Neither Free nor a Slave: Three Essays on Subjectivity, Organization, and the Making of Exile”

(Award sponsored by Durham University Business School and the journal *Organization*)

The adversities that undocumented Latinx immigrants face while trying to achieve the coveted ‘American Dream’ have been highlighted in the last few years due to President Donald Trump’s hateful rhetoric against them. Trump made headlines all around the world when he described Mexican people as rapists, criminals, and drug dealers who migrate to the United States not only to break the law, but to take jobs from Americans.

Like millions of other Latinxs, I was shocked by the way in which he was describing my community. His statements motivated me to study what Latinx undocumented immigrants experience while in the United States. In September 2016, I moved to Southern California to conduct an ethnographic study of undocumented immigrants at work. It was a crucial time to be there, since my time in the field was immediately before and immediately after Trump’s election as president.

Gathering data proved to be a much more difficult project than what I had expected it to be. People, understandably so, were very worried and not very open to sharing their experiences. They were afraid of strangers approaching them, especially one who was asking them about their immigration status in the country. I had to take different ap-

proaches and started volunteering at a Church’s outreach office, where I would not only help immigrants but also homeless people. I also volunteered at various organizations devoted to immigrant rights, taught ‘Know Your Rights’ workshops, and protested alongside undocumented immigrants on several occasions. Not only did this provide me with a level of legitimacy with my would-be informants, but I felt like I was also giving back to members of the community, who were, in the end, incredibly generous with me when they shared their lives, their stories, and even their homes.

My research project

The first part of my dissertation allowed me to present a concept that would become pivotal to make sense of the collected data. I first encountered Hannah Arendt’s philosophy as a suggestion from my supervisor, Professor Ajnesh Prasad, and I found her life and story to be fascinating. Her resilience and passionate thinking during some of the most challenging periods in human history—the interwar years and World War II—is awe-inspiring. While reading different texts by Arendt, it became clear that the banality of evil is ever present and that people still get lost in ‘bureaucratic labyrinths’ (Arendt, 2006 [1963]: 84), which allow them to rationalize evil.



It was somewhat surprising, still, that I would soon encounter someone who epitomized Arendt’s concept in a very public arena: Donald J. Trump. I thought that the effect of his discourse against undocumented immigrants needed to be studied.

A number of researchers have underscored the pressing need to account for the experiences of undocumented immigrants in the backdrop of an increasingly hostile political climate (Chomsky, 2017; Ngai, 2017). In response, scholarship published since the U.S. presidential election has already come to offer preliminary findings, which illuminate the detrimental outcomes created by pernicious political discourses on the

experiences of undocumented immigrants. Critical aspects of life are affected, including their ability to have a steady job, and even being uncertain about being able to pick up their children from school if they are to run into an ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agent. More research that identifies the nexus between the discourse on illegal immigration and the consequences for targeted communities remains needed; this is particularly significant, as the crux of the discourse is tacit legitimization of racism and prejudice.

The number of immigrants without legal status in the workforce is likely to increase, and yet organizational scholars have largely overlooked the significance of this immigration status for their experiences at work. These immigrants often undertake the most physically demanding of jobs for very low wages and no health or other social benefits, while facing constant deportation threats. Their labor has long helped sustain the American economy, yet without recognition. Their stories, their hardships, and will-power needs to have a more significant place in the management literature. This project allows for their voices to be heard in order to help in the shaping of better work conditions and, therefore, better lives for those who have sacrificed everything for a dream.

Getting to hear undocumented immigrants' stories from their own perspective, was a life-changing experience. It allowed me to understand the difficulties that they face every day in an increasingly hostile environment. Furthermore, it made me feel even more committed to their cause. My time do-

ing fieldwork was certainly one of intellectual stimulation and introspection. I am certainly looking forward to getting deeper insights from my data, so that the voices of those who were so generous with me, can be heard.

Connection to the CMS AOM Community

I remember attending the AOM Annual Meeting for the first time in Vancouver in 2015. At the time, I was a first-year doctoral student and I was apprehensive as it was my first conference ever, and I hardly knew any one there. Ultimately, I was welcomed by a friendly community of scholars who feel passionate about their research and about the importance of critical thinking.

I am currently working on achieving a better understanding of Latinx undocumented immigrants' work experiences along with my former supervisor, Professor Prasad. Among other things, we are looking specifically at workplace violations and the effect that they have on this population. I am also working on another project with Professor Prasad and Professor Marianna Fotaki. We are looking at the lived experiences of journalists and reporters in Mexico, the most dangerous country to perform journalism in the world.

I believe that working with a supportive PhD supervisor makes a great difference in the PhD journey. I was indeed very fortunate to work with Professor Prasad, who was -and still is- incredibly helpful, patient, and generous. Having that experience has certainly encouraged me to be the best possible supervisor I can be when I am a supervisor myself.

A little over a year after starting my first academic job, I understand how challenging this stage can be. As junior scholars we are expected to teach, research, and take on admin functions and to do everything well, right after finishing our PhD programs. This can definitely be an overwhelming endeavor; however, I have realized that it is all about priorities and we have to do what makes us happy while juggling with all of our professional and personal roles. There have been a lot of discussions about mental health in academia, so I truly believe that it is paramount that we support each other, and that we work on projects that we are enthusiastic about.

Even when our supervisors are our main guidance when as students, I truly encourage PhD candidates to approach other professors if they have any queries. At the same time, it is very important for professors and senior academics to be as helpful as possible with those who ask for our advice. I have been incredibly lucky since CMS scholars have never denied their help or a word of advice. Belonging to the CMS community is a fantastic opportunity, since it is a group of cooperative and passionate students and professors alike.

Thank you to the CMS community for this Award and for the opportunity to share my academic journey.

Dissertation Abstract, Best Critical Doctoral Dissertation, by Dr. Paulina Segarra:

The three essays that comprise my dissertation are thematically unified by the 'banality of evil,' a concept developed by philosopher, Hannah Arendt.

The essays explore the origin of the concept and how it is operationalized, both theoretically and empirically. For Arendt, the banality of evil entails that '[t]he sad truth... is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good' (1978 [1971]: 180). This idea captures the remoteness from reality and thoughtlessness, which can lead to all kinds of immoral acts (Arendt, 2006).

Through her work, Arendt advocated for the political relevance of thinking. She argued that relying on tradition, morality or religion can pose catastrophic consequences as 'thinking is the only activity standing between ourselves and the most heinous of evils' (Berkowitz, 2011). Notwithstanding its importance, thinking (as Arendt defines it) is often absent in everyday life (Arendt, 1978). Arendt's concept is worthy of substantive engagement in today's social and political environment; especially given the discourse targeting those who, like Arendt, have had to migrate looking for better opportunities and safety.

The essays of this dissertation not only achieve a better understanding of the banality of evil and its detrimental consequences, but also applies it to understand the undocumented immigrants' experiences. As scholars, we are charged with the responsibility of responding to questions that are relevant to society (Adler & Harzing, 2009) and finding ways which may allow the voices from disenfranchised constituents of society to be heard (Durepos et al., 2016). I hope that this dissertation contributes to both aims.

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