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 approaches 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 immi-
grants. Critical aspects of life are affected,
including their ability to have a steady
job, and even being uncertain about be-
ing able to pick up their children from
school if they are to run into an ICE [Im-
migration 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 legitimation 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 expe-
riences at work. These immigrants often
undertake the most physically demand-
ing of jobs for very low wages and no
health or other social benefits, while fac-
ing constant deportation threats. Their
labor has long helped sustain the Amer-
ican 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 sacri-
ficed everything for a dream.

Getting to hear undocumented im-
migrants’ stories from their own per-
spective, was a life-changing experi-
ence. It allowed me to understand the
difficulties that they face every day in an
increasingly hostile environment. Fur-
thermore, it made me feel even more
committed to their cause. My time do-

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, re-
search, and take on admin functions
and to do everything well, right after
finishing our PhD programs. This can
definitely be an overwhelming endeav-
or; 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 incredi-
ably 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 devel-
oped 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.

References: