

Chasing Respectability: Pro-Immigrant Organizations and the Reinforcement of Immigrant Racialization

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate the role that pro-immigrant organizations play in immigrant racialization. Drawing on a critical case study from the longest standing immigrant rights organization in North Carolina, we demonstrate how immigrant rights organizations can racialize new Latinx arrivals even as they advocate for them. We interrogate the organization's multi-year, state-wide campaign to counteract mounting public characterizations of Latinx immigrants as drunk drivers. Analyzing a critical juncture in this campaign, we demonstrate how El Pueblo, in their effort to contest the mainstream racialization of Latinxs, unintentionally doubled down on that same racialization, buying into respectability politics and reinforcing derogatory stereotypes of Latinxs. We outline three central maneuvers that grounded this particular respectability politics campaign and demonstrate the utility of respectability politics as a framework for understanding organizational racialization processes. These findings suggest the need to shift focus toward community organizations as key sites of immigrant racialization and highlight the need for inquiry into the racialized assumptions of pro-immigrant forces.

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Introduction

Public characterizations of immigrants feature prominently in immigration politics, shaping both public attitudes and policy options (Bloemraad et al., 2016; Branton & Dunaway, 2008; Brown, 2013). Consequently, pro and anti-immigrant forces engage in contestations over meaning as they work to frame immigrants in ways that promote their political objectives. While the mainstream media and anti-immigration forces depict immigrants as racial threats to the economy (Deckard & Browne, 2016) and public safety (Menjívar, 2016), immigrants and their allies contest this racialization by framing immigrants as hard workers deserving of human (Fujiwara, 2005), economic (Deckard & Browne, 2016), and civil rights (Brown et al., 2018).

Existing research outlines the racialized terms on which immigration forces contest non-citizens' incorporation yet leaves room for additional inquiry. Existing studies rely on analyses of the mainstream media and legislative debates, but the racialized framing of immigrants also occurs as immigration organizations execute their everyday work. In this article, we use a case study from the longest standing immigrant rights organization in North Carolina, a prime new immigrant destination, to elucidate how immigrant rights organizations can racialize new Latinx arrivals even as they advocate for them. We interrogate the organization's multi-year state-wide campaign to counteract public characterizations of Latinx immigrants as drunk drivers. After a series of high-profile DWI accidents involving Latinxs, the mainstream media and state policy elites racialized this population as reckless, ignorant, and irresponsible. In response, El Pueblo launched a public education campaign designed to curtail Latinx drunk driving and better the public image of Latinx residents. Analyzing the entirety of the organization's internal files for this effort, we outline three central maneuvers that grounded this campaign and demonstrate how El Pueblo, in their effort to contest the mainstream racialization of Latinxs, unintentionally doubled down on that same racialization by embracing respectability politics.

These findings suggest the need to examine community organizations as sites of immigrant racialization and highlight the need for critical inquiry into the racialized assumptions of pro-immigrant groups. Although social scientists have investigated respectability politics as an individual-level strategy to achieve upward mobility or avoid racist interactions (Lacy, 2007; Sue & Lambert, 2021), we theorize it as a structuring force in group racialization and demonstrate its utility as a framework for understanding racialized organizations (Ray, 2019).

Immigrant Racialization and Respectability Politics

Racialization describes “the processes by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon” (Murji & Solomos, 2005, p. 1). U.S. research on racialization has focused on native-born Black and White citizens; however, a growing body of work examines immigrant racialization, focusing largely, although not exclusively, on Latinxs. Public policies and the mass media play a crucial role in immigrant racialization (Calavita, 2007; Lee, 2002b; Molina, 2013). As McConnell (2011) notes, the mass media construct metaphors, ideologies, and beliefs about nonwhites, emphasizing a narrow range of negative topics that link racial minorities with social problems. The news media and policymakers have constructed Latinxs as existential threats to U.S. culture and the nation state (Chavez, 2008; De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003; McConnell, 2011; Rodriguez, 2000; Santa Ana, 2002), framing them as economic and criminal threats (Brown et al., 2018; Chavez, 2008; Deckard & Browne, 2016; Kibria et al., 2017). In response, Latinxs work to characterize themselves as hard workers deserving of rights (Bloemraad et al., 2016; Browne et al., 2016; Voss & Bloemraad, 2011), and construct racial identities that reflect their own understandings of the U.S. racial hierarchy and their position in it (Jones, 2019).

This research demonstrates the interwoven nature of racialization and immigration; however, it largely focuses on either micro-level racial identification or macro-level media and policy elite characterizations (for critiques see Ray, 2019; Saperstein et al., 2013). Less studied is the meso-level: the organizations and institutions that serve as “race brokers,” connecting macro-level racialization and micro-level realities (Korver-Glenn, 2021). To the extent that immigration scholars study the meso-level, they investigate organizations¹ as part of the context of reception or as structuring immigrant assimilation and mobility (Bloemraad, 2006; De Graauw et al., 2013). These studies largely assume that organizations are racially neutral; however, understanding the role of organizations in immigrant racialization requires recognition of the fact that race is a constitutive part of organizations and that organizations are inherently racialized (Ray, 2019). Race affects how organizations develop programming, distribute resources, and interact with people (Ray, 2019). As a result, organizations shape broader racial meanings and hierarchies. They serve as engines of racialization processes, influence the policies of racial states, and shape individual-level racial animus (Brown, 2020; Jones Gast et al., 2020; Ray, 2019; Saperstein et al., 2013). In other words, organizations are arbiters of immigrant mobility and the meso-level that connects macro-level racial ideologies and micro-level lived realities.

Understanding the role of organizations in immigrant racialization is crucial because of the central role these institutions play in the lives of non-citizens. Absent national institutions for facilitating immigrant incorporation in the U.S., meso-level institutions and immigrant-serving organizations are key players in immigrant incorporation, channeling resources and opportunities to immigrants and directing policy advocacy (Brown et al., 2016; De Graauw et al., 2013; Ramakrishnan & Bloemraad, 2008).

While researchers have grappled with the role that anti-immigrant organizations play in racializing Latinxs as threats (Brown, 2013; HoSang, 2010; Jones & Brown, 2017), in this article, we turn our attention to the role that immigrant-serving organizations play in Latinx racialization.

Our analysis foregrounds respectability politics as a key avenue by which pro-immigrant organizations racialize Latinx immigrants. The term “politics of respectability” was first used to describe middle-class African-American women’s promotion of polite manners, sexual purity, temperance, and cleanliness in the Black Baptist Church during the Progressive era (Higginbotham, 1994). As Harris (2003, p. 2013) explains, “the politics of respectability entailed ‘reform of individual behavior as a goal in itself and a strategy of reform.’ Respectability was part of “uplift politics,” and had two audiences: African-Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and White people, who needed to be shown that African-Americans could be respectable.”

Contemporary work on respectability politics analyzes it as a strategic response to racism (Dow, 2016; Turner, 2020) or of upward socioeconomic mobility (Harris, 2014; Sue & Lambert, 2021). Both approaches conceptualize respectability politics as an individual-level effort to demonstrate that oneself or ones family, as individuals, are worthy of inclusion in social institutions or, at the very least, not deserving of ostracism (Cohen, 1999; Luna, 2017; Sue & Lambert, 2021; Turner, 2020). In conceptualizing respectability politics as an individual-level tactic, these studies treat it as akin to an assimilation approach. However, in its original formulation respectability politics is distinct from assimilation. Like assimilation approaches, respectability politics is inwardly focused and oriented towards and accepting of the dominant culture and existing social structure. However, assimilation approaches aim to promote individual-level mobility via the provision of resources whereas respectability politics, as outlined in foundational studies (Harris, 2003; Higginbotham, 1994), aims to reform *group image*. Respectability politics is also distinct from assimilation in its reliance on shaming as a strategy for group social control, leveraging shame’s unique ability to control behavior and prompt individual self-monitoring (Goffman, 1986; Scheff, 2000, 2003). Because racialization is fundamentally a process involving group-based racial meanings and hierarchies, restoring the group-centered focus of original theories is essential to understanding respectability politics and its relationship to racialization.

We return to these original formulations to demonstrate that racialization is a cause and a consequence of respectability politics. We also demonstrate the conceptual utility of respectability politics as a framework for understanding racialized organizations. In embracing respectability politics, marginalized populations accept the dominant group’s racial stereotypes as true and work to ameliorate behavior within their group rather than challenge existing structures of racial domination. Racialized populations double down on existing stereotypes and demand conformity to dominant notions of racial authenticity. In this sense, respectability politics is also distinct from racial ascription or identification, other notable forms of racialization (see Brown & Jones, 2015) and takes on particular consequence when embraced in organizational settings that mediate between the racial state and racialized individuals (Omi & Winant, 1994).

In what follows, we examine respectability politics as embraced by pro-immigrant organizations, illustrating how this strategy can manifest in organizations' programmatic work and furthers Latinx immigrant racialization.

Case Study and Methods

Our analysis focuses on North Carolina, a key new immigrant destination where questions of racialization are prominent (Jones, 2019; Marrow, 2011). We examine one of the longest-standing immigrant rights groups in the state, El Pueblo, which formed in 1994 amidst a demographic transformation. In the 1990s and 2000s, geopolitical and economic shifts like NAFTA set off unprecedented migration and growth in the U.S. Latinx population (Jones, 2019; Massey et al., 2003). Thanks to new economic opportunities and heightened immigration enforcement in some traditional destinations, Latinx immigrants began settling in large numbers in small towns and suburbs nationwide (Massey, 2008; Singer et al., 2008). Southeastern states like North Carolina saw massive increases in their Latinx and foreign-born populations, coming to rank in the top 10 states with the highest population of unauthorized immigrants (Massey, 2008; Singer, 2004; Singer et al., 2008).

El Pueblo formed in this period of rapid Latinx population growth. Based in the state capitol, Raleigh, the organization's founders hoped to "create a bridge" between local citizens and new Latinx arrivals whom they characterized as "severely divided communities" (El Pueblo, 2005, p. 1). Early on, El Pueblo launched the first-ever Latin American festival in North Carolina, La Fiesta, which became a mainstay on the statewide scene. In its early years, the organization also initiated a campaign to reduce smoking rates in the Latinx community, a health advisory program to connect Latinx new arrivals with health resources, and a breast cancer education program. By the early to mid-2000s, El Pueblo had established itself as the premier immigrant-serving organization in the state.

In this article, we examine one of the organization's longest standing campaigns, a public safety initiative known as *Por Nuestra Seguridad* (For Our Safety), designed to curb drinking and driving among NC Latinxs. To understand the racial meanings produced and circulated by this campaign, we draw on El Pueblo's internal materials from the project, obtained from the El Pueblo, Inc. Collection at Duke University's Rubenstein Library. Although the program ran for over a decade, we focus here on the peak years of the campaign 2005–2008, the "critical juncture" during which El Pueblo built, tested, and institutionalized its campaign (Pierson, 2004).

We use process tracing to analyze archival data from this project. A tool for within-case qualitative data analysis, process tracing is ideal for studies like ours that draw on in-depth and over-time archival data. The method emphasizes process-based observations, rich description, and event sequencing in order to make inferences about social and political phenomena (Bennett, 2010; Mahoney, 2015). Drawing on fine-tuned case knowledge, process tracing examines unfolding events and situations over time, using

those sequences to identify the social processes and weigh evidence to confirm or disconfirm findings (Collier, 2011).

We analyzed the full universe of El Pueblo's files for the campaign, including hard copies of the organization's records and the entirety of the files stored on organization's servers. We used process tracing as a tool of descriptive inference (King, Keohane, Verba; Mahoney 2015) and sequentially mapped the structural and narrative elements of the campaign over time, identifying moments of internal discordance, and then evaluating that historical sequence of events and narratives to theorize how each stage compounded to fuel immigrant racialization. As such, our argument is not a causal one, but rather a constitutive one (Pacewicz, 2020), which uses the temporal sequencing of events in the campaign to spell out the constitutive parts of organizational respectability politics.

The Respectability Politics Process: El Pueblo's Intervention

In the early 2000s in North Carolina, public outcry arose over a handful of high-profile drunk driving deaths caused by Latinx undocumented immigrants. News coverage highlighted the drivers' racialized legal status (Asad & Clair, 2018) and included emotional stories about native-born, White children and parents killed by Latinx drunk drivers (Soper, 2000; 2001a; 2001b). By 2005, this coverage reached a fevered pitch when an intoxicated Latinx worker, Ramiro Gallegos, crashed his car into a White family's station wagon. The father, a popular high school teacher, died in the crash, and the mother suffered permanent brain damage. The couple's two young children survived. Gallegos had never been deported despite multiple prior DWI convictions, a fact that prompted sustained public outcry (Morrill et al., 2005; Rickabaugh, 2005).² The crash was front page news in the state, prompting editorials from major newspapers, calls for increased immigration enforcement from elected officials at all levels of government, and even a documentary film.

When these accidents first received publicity, El Pueblo was already engaged in public safety work, coordinating campaigns to teach new Latinx arrivals about 911 emergency services, seatbelt use, and car seat laws. Rising public concern about Latinx DWIs prompted the organization to embrace drunk driving as a key element of its *Por Nuestra Seguridad* (PNS) program. Over the next few years, the NC Governor's Highway Safety Program solicited El Pueblo's help in developing new approaches to curbing Latinx DWIs (El Pueblo, 2005, p. 1). In 2004, the organization appointed Tony Asion, a Cuban-American and retired Delaware state trooper, to run PNS and address growing statewide concern about Latinx alcohol use.

In 2005, El Pueblo responded to a request from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to establish a cooperative agreement to fund an expanded PNS program. The organization received a first grant of \$80,000 to "demonstrate and evaluate effective strategies for reducing traffic fatalities and injuries caused by driving under the influence of alcohol among the Hispanic/Latino population" (El Pueblo, 2008, p. 2).³ El Pueblo's NHTSA-funded project aimed to decrease alcohol-related

fatalities and injuries among Latinxs in Wake and Durham counties by 10% by conducting a social marketing campaign targeting Latinxs and a high-visibility enforcement campaign to “determine the most effective methods of reducing alcohol-related crashes and fatalities in the Latino community” (El Pueblo, 2005, p. 3). Over the next 3 years, partnering with the UNC Highway Safety Research Center, and the NC State Highway Patrol, and NHTSA, El Pueblo brought in tens of thousands of dollars to support the program. The organization expanded PNS to all 100 North Carolina counties, working with 11 El Pueblo-appointed regional coordinators, making the campaign one of the largest for an immigrant-serving organization in North Carolina.

In their initial work, El Pueblo treated DWIs as a public health issue, including efforts to partner with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (El Pueblo, 2001). Aligned with typical public health approaches, these efforts involved public education and efforts to link local immigrants to health-related resources. Yet by 2005, El Pueblo’s interventions were squarely premised on respectability politics, eschewing public health education and service provision. Unlike anti-immigrant racialization, which attaches negative racial stereotypes and meanings to specific populations, respectability strategies attempt to achieve belonging through the adaptation of mainstream values. Respectability politics accepts the premise of essential difference among certain segments of a population (usually the working class or newcomers) and assumes mobility and inclusion require marginalized groups to adopt new habits and values.

In the sections that follow, we demonstrate that El Pueblo structured its campaign around respectability politics, assuming that Latinx immigrants required rehabilitation and that inclusion could be gained by signaling assimilability and embracing mainstream values. We illustrate three central maneuvers of respectability politics: buying the party line, shaming the targets, and embracing the system. Although PNS endeavored to champion immigrants and facilitate their incorporation, we show that this respectability politics process instead doubled down on the racial stereotypes and racialization processes the organization sought to challenge.

Buying the Party Line

El Pueblo ramped up its campaign in a political climate replete with claims about the growing problem of Latinx drunk driving. A highly publicized study from the UNC Highway Safety Research Center showed that in 2002 Latinxs involved in car crashes were 2.5 times more likely to be drunk than White drivers and three times more likely to be drunk than Black drivers (WRAL, 2007). Latinxs accounted for less than 7% of the state’s population but 18% of its drunk driving arrests. The study further found that drunk driving was the number one killer of young Latinx men in the state (El Pueblo, 2008, pp. 1–2). These figures splashed across newspapers, filled television news, and echoed in the halls of the state legislature. Policy and media elites used this data to characterize Latinx immigrants as immoral, reckless, and criminal outsiders, even arguing that Latinx immigrants were working together to scheme the U.S. legal system and evade DWI charges (Swift, 2003).

El Pueblo leadership recognized the racial stereotyping implicit in this discourse and feared it would prompt a statewide backlash against all Latinxs. Leaders hoped their campaign could extinguish these concerns and facilitate Latinx immigrant incorporation. Their first move, however, was not to challenge the UNC data or the racialized portrayal of Latinx undocumented immigrants. Their first move was to buy the party line. Left and right, El Pueblo's leaders accepted the UNC data as fact and accepted the dominant characterization of Latinx men as problematic drunk drivers. Responding to the data, Tony Asion said, "Obviously the numbers speak for themselves. We have overrepresentation in DWIs so I am not going to say it is not happening. The question is, what are we going to do about it?" (WRAL, 2007). Not only did Asion and other El Pueblo leaders go on record touting the existence of a Hispanic DWI problem, they used this data in their appeals to donors. For example, the organization's NHTSA proposal centered the UNC data, framing Latinx DWIs as a pressing problem for the state and its citizens and arguing that Latinxs were more prone to driving intoxicated than any other population.

In buying the party line, El Pueblo ignored multiple problems with the UNC data. For one, the data analyses did not control for age or gender. Given that the state's Latinx population was younger and more male than other groups, it was quite possible that controlling for age and gender would have revealed minimal racial disparities in DWI rates. Further, the high DWI death rate for Latinxs could have reflected the fact that Latinx individuals were younger and therefore not dying of maladies than serve as leading causes of death in other populations. The higher arrest rates could also have reflected institutional racism in policing. During this same time period, investigations into the State Highway Patrol found that troopers intentionally targeted Latinxs for drunken driving violations (Lee, 2002), a problem also present among local police and sheriff's departments (Moore, 2002). Personnel ordered troopers to concentrate checkpoints where Latinxs lived and socialized. State troopers also reported that they steered clear of bars frequented by White and Black people when looking to make DWI arrests (Associated Press, 2002). Despite ample reason to question the validity of the UNC findings, El Pueblo's leaders chose to buy the party line. They adopted the dominant framing from policy and media elites, stereotyping Latinxs as reckless drunks and eschewing counterarguments about institutional racism, data quality, and public health.

When the organization first applied for NHTSA funding, it doubled down on these racist stereotypes to explain the disproportionate rates of DWI-related arrests and deaths among Latinxs. In reinforcing these racialized stereotypes, El Pueblo centered two additional racialized characterizations about Latinxs. First, when the state highway patrol argued that Latinx immigrants were "just acting the way they have always acted because it was culturally acceptable," El Pueblo reaffirmed these claims of ignorance (WRAL, 2007). Organizational leadership described North Carolina Latinxs as having "very little knowledge" and being "uneducated" about laws (El Pueblo, 2008, p. 2; WRAL, 2007). These claims racialized Latinx residents not only as reckless criminals but as ignorant.

Second, El Pueblo coupled these claims of Latinx ignorance with references to a supposedly all-encompassing Latinx culture of machismo which, they argued, incentivized drunk driving. As Tony Asion explained both locally and in the national news, “The machismo thing is when you say if I do not drive, I am basically letting everybody know that I cannot handle my liquor, and if I cannot handle my liquor, I am not much of a man - and so I have to drink and drive” (NPR, 2006). According to Asion and his El Pueblo colleagues, Latinx men, who comprised the majority of new arrivals in North Carolina at the time, believed that “even if I am falling drunk I cannot admit that I am falling drunk because that would be kind of a losing face type deal” (WRAL, 2007). El Pueblo aimed to lower Latinx DWI rates as means of quelling anti-immigrant sentiment and racial stereotyping, but their strategy for doing so merely reinforced public stereotypes of new immigrant arrivals as ignorant, hypermasculine, criminals.

El Pueblo built its subsequent PNS campaign on this racialized ideological foundation. Aiming to reduce DWI rates by 20–30% over time and 10% over the next 2 years, El Pueblo’s NHTSA-sponsored initiative aimed to address these perceived cultural shortcomings of new Latinx arrivals. Assuming that offenders were ignorant, El Pueblo set out to inform Latinx immigrants by disseminating leaflets and flyers about penalties for DWIs. Assuming that machismo drove drinking behavior, the organization launched a media campaign, designed to shame Latinx men into curbing their drinking. Assuming that Latinx men were disproportionately engaging in illegal activity, the organization partnered with state and local law enforcement to conduct targeted DWI checkpoints in predominantly Latinx communities.

These various campaigns, which we elaborate on below, all stemmed from the organization’s first move toward respectability politics: buying the party line. In accepting dominant discourse about Latinx DWIs, El Pueblo eschewed other possible strategies, such as ones focused on institutional racism or public health. In choosing to buy the party line rather than challenge racist policing practices or the media’s ongoing portrayal of Latinx drivers as undocumented and criminal, El Pueblo affirmed the racist portrayals of Latinxs in dominant discourse and set the stage for its next race-making maneuver: shaming the targets.

Shaming the Targets

Respectability politics assumes that group-level inequalities will decline if marginalized individuals engage in socially acceptable behaviors. It also assumes that entire communities face stigmatization and criminalization based solely on the behavior of a few. A respectability politics approach thus prioritizes within-community policing. It assumes that individuals must accept the racialized frames and norms of the White majority and that co-ethnics must enforce these norms by identifying and shaming violators (P. J. Harris, 2003; Kerrison et al., 2018).

El Pueblo’s second maneuver was to shame the targets: Latinx men. The organization accepted the broader belief that Latinx men were predisposed to engage in risky behaviors and proclaimed that it was the responsibility of those men to improve the

reputation of the entire Latinx community. In assuming that anti-immigrant sentiment and racial animus could be solved by fixing the behavior of those targeted, El Pueblo's leadership claimed that the behavior of Latinx men was harming the community and needed to change. They also launched a campaign that publicly shamed Latinx immigrant men, ignored systemic racism, trafficked in stereotypes, and ultimately, engaged in the very racialization of Latinxs that they were trying to resolve.

These efforts permeated the campaign but are best illustrated through one central tactic. From 2006–2008, El Pueblo developed and ran a series of weekly ads in the Spanish language newspapers in both the state's Triad and Triangle areas (*Que Pasa* and *La Conexión*). The massive, full- and half-page ads contained the names of Latinx men who had been arrested on DWI charges that week, with new ads going to print in each weekly issue. The tagline "Manejar Borracho? No Seas Tonto, Muchacho" ("Driving Drunk? Do not be a Fool, Man")⁴ appeared in bold print atop every ad. Just below, in large, bold print, the ads stated, "Are You not Ashamed?" Most ads also included a header that stated: "Every 3 days a Latino dies or is seriously injured as a result of driving drunk on the roads of North Carolina." Then in smaller print, the ads read: "This week, the following Latinos were arrested for driving drunk" with an indicator of which counties were being highlighted that week. A list of dates, full names, and the county of arrest followed. At the bottom, they asked, "Will it be your turn today?" The ads also included a running tally of Latinx arrests compared to non-Latinx arrest and the No Seas Tonto tagline.

El Pueblo leadership left no doubt as to the goal of these ads: shaming the targets. The ads' content reflected the organization's claim that ignorance and machismo drove Latinx DWI arrests. Director Tony Asion outlined the goal of the ads repeatedly in local and national media. In a particularly harrowing documentary produced by a local television station, Asion explained: "[With this campaign] we are trying to educate the folks that... when you are drinking and driving it is not just you. You are hurting all Latinos... and we want people to see who is getting arrested because that public shame is bad for machismo, too." We are using that in our favor" (WRAL, 2007). The organization chased respectability by shaming Latinx men into better behavior.

El Pueblo also ran ads in local Spanish-language newspapers that contained strong messaging alongside a rotating set of images that connected DWI arrests to the tarnishing of the larger Latinx immigrant community. One ad literally pulled headlines from newspapers reporting on Latinx drunk drivers. Underneath, in smaller lettering, the ad read, "Every time a drunken Latino drives it affects us all." Then in all red states, it proclaimed: "If you drink, do not drive!" [Figure 1](#)

Another ad pictured the back of a man's head as he stared up three closed doors labeled left to right as "Housing," "DMV," and "Public Health Services." At the top in bold black font, the ad read, "For a Latino who drives drunk, the doors are closed to us all." In smaller lettering, it read, "Every time a drunken Latino drives it affects us all".

[Figure 2](#)



Figure 1. “Lo Que Hace Uno Afecta A Todos” Spanish-Language Press advertisement placed by El Pueblo for the Por Nuestra Seguridad Campaign.

These ads encouraged Latinx men to shape up and stop driving while intoxicated and implied that anti-Latinx sentiment originated in the community’s immoral behaviors.

El Pueblo coupled this print ad campaign with the dissemination of a bumper sticker featuring their No Seas Tonto tagline imposed on the campaign logo. Despite its condescending tone, El Pueblo touted the bumper sticker as one of its most effective campaign elements, noting in their final report to the NHTSA that, “The bumper sticker was one of the most successful ways to reach the community with our message,” because it was, apparently, so recognizable (El Pueblo, 2008, p. 9). Additionally, El Pueblo disseminated posters and fotonovelas which used the same themes and imagery, placing them in ABC stores and tiendas. These were coupled with spots on four local Spanish language radio stations and television advertisements on Univision. The campaign was designed to have these complementary elements across media in order to ensure awareness among Latinx immigrants in North Carolina of not only the dangers of drunk driving, but its negative impact on the broader Latinx community.



Figure 2. “Por Un Latino Que Maneja Borracho Se Nos Cierran Las Puertas a Todos” Spanish-Language Press advertisement placed by El Pueblo for the Por Nuestra Seguridad Campaign.

Embracing the System

As they chased respectability for NC Latinxs, El Pueblo leadership relied on a third respectability politics maneuver: embracing the system. Respectability politics assumes that racism is not structural but rather situated in individual behavior. It assumes that if problematic individuals shift their actions, power brokers will shift their perceptions and treatment of the targeted population. Just as this approach requires trusting the actions of institutional authorities, so too did El Pueblo assume that law enforcement authorities and the state political structure would work in favor of Latinx immigrants if Latinx DWI rates declined.

El Pueblo’s growing partnerships with local and state law enforcement authorities exemplifies this trust in and embrace of the system. When the organization first launched its NHTSA-funded endeavors, their plans included routine collaboration with law enforcement authorities. From the outset, the organization planned to pair its “social marketing [shaming] campaign with a high-visibility enforcement campaign to determine the most effective methods of reducing alcohol-related crashes and fatalities in the Latino community” (El Pueblo, 2005, pp. 2–3). El Pueblo assisted law enforcement agents in holding DWI presentations in Latinx churches, community centers,

and fairs. More importantly, the organization worked with law enforcement to stage DWI checkpoints. Across the initial 3-year project period, El Pueblo paid for and conducted 11 additional checkpoints, what the organization referred to as “high visibility enforcement,” on top of the standard checkpoints (El Pueblo, 2005, pp. 2–3). In addition to funding these checkpoints, El Pueblo worked with state troopers and with local police departments in Durham, Raleigh, Garner, and Cary to coordinate them (El Pueblo, 2008, p. 14). Worth noting, however, is that even though these checkpoints were intentionally staged in areas highly trafficked by Latinxs, at none of these checkpoints did Latinxs comprise a majority of those apprehended for DWIs (El Pueblo, 2008, p. 14). El Pueblo’s reports and internal files give no indication that these facts prompted any critical self-reflection within the organization.

To assess whether their interventions worked, El Pueblo introduced an experimental design. In one region (the Triad), El Pueblo orchestrated the media shaming campaign. In another (the Triangle), they launched the media campaign and increased checkpoints. Another region (the Southeast) served as a control.⁵ El Pueblo launched no initiatives there but tracked Latinx DWI rates over time to use for comparison. Thus, the organization not only contributed to racial profiling in the state, they experimentally manipulated the lives of state Latinx residents.

El Pueblo’s embrace of the system is evident through these collaborations but also through its work championing police intimidation as a strategy to reduce DWIs. Throughout its multi-year campaign, the organization administered surveys to hundreds of Latinxs, asking about their drinking behaviors. As part of the survey, interviewers asked respondents which, from a list of interventions, might “be helpful in decreasing the number of Latino men that drink and drive.” All but one of the possible answers to this closed-ended question involved law enforcement, from increasing fines to increasing time under arrest to suspending licenses to more police checkpoints (El Pueblo, 2005, pp. 4–5). Some versions even threatened deportation (El Pueblo, 2005, p. 52). The data suggest that the organization embraced the system so intently that leaders did not even consider non-policing alternatives as feasible or desirable.

This embrace permeated the project. However, this approach was dangerous for NC immigrants. At this moment, local law enforcement agencies were rapidly signing onto 287(g) agreements that deputized local agents as immigration enforcement officials. The peak of the 287(g) program in NC coincided with the prime years of PNS, with more NC jurisdictions signing agreements than in any other state in the country. Despite the danger of collaborating with local police at the time, only rarely did El Pueblo staff express any concerns about their cooperation with law enforcement. When they did express concerns, these apprehensions usually focused on the lack of Spanish-speaking police officers (El Pueblo, 2005). Aside from this small critique, the organization’s standard line was not to challenge the states’ growing commitment to racialized policing of immigrants but to refer to local law enforcement and the NC State Highway Patrol as “essential to the success” of PNS and to facilitating Latinx incorporation (El Pueblo, 2008, p. 3). This refrain clearly communicated that law enforcement was part of the answer, not part of the problem. Rounding out the respectability politics process,

these partnerships with law enforcement assumed that dominant institutions were responsive, unproblematic, and morally just. Through them, *El Pueblo* reiterated that Latinxs could easily assimilate into White power structures if they only acted appropriately. This approach, however, overlooked the fact that the state itself is inherently racial (Goldberg, 2002; Omi & Winant, 1994) and that cooperating with the racial state on its own terms only served to enhance its power and further Latinx racialization.

Discussion and Conclusion

Recent research highlights respectability politics as a strategy employed by individuals to achieve upward mobility or avoid racist interactions. Treating individuals as the unit of analysis and drawing on in-depth interviews, these studies are well-positioned to reveal why people embrace respectability politics and the discourses they use to explain it. Focusing on the organizational level and analyzing archival data over time, our study builds on prior work to demonstrate how respectability politics plays out and to reveal its racializing implications at the broader community and group levels. *El Pueblo's* campaign exemplifies how organizations may engage in respectability politics and with what consequences for racialization processes. Using PNS as a case study, we illustrate three central maneuvers of respectability politics -- buying the party line, shaming the target, and embracing the system. Although PNS endeavored to champion immigrants and facilitate their incorporation, this respectability campaign leveraged the power of the racial state and intra-group shaming to regulate group behavior.

Rather than create a bridge, *El Pueblo* affirmed perceived essentialized differences between Latinx newcomers and mainstream America. It also promoted this racialization within the Latinx community. *El Pueblo* did not construct new racialized meanings and practices, nor did they contest existing ones proffered by anti-immigrant forces. Instead, they promoted stereotypes of Latinx newcomers as reckless, ignorant, culturally backward, and criminal and did so to such an extent that they came to be regarded as meaningful and widely accepted. From *El Pueblo's* perspective, this campaign was successful. As they reported to funders:

... we received valuable and very positive feedback from the community. There seems to be an overwhelming support for [our project] and many Latinos fear that their names will show up in newspaper if they were arrested and as a result they were not drinking and driving." (*El Pueblo*, 2008, p. 7).

While it is difficult to assess cause and effect from an ad campaign, *El Pueblo* points to the fear their campaign created by public shaming, describing it as an effective method of reducing alcohol-related crashes and fatalities in the Latinx community. They even argued that while heightened law enforcement activities complemented their social marketing campaign, inward-facing shaming campaigns had better success in

changing behavior than law enforcement. The messaging seemed to be, ‘no need for police to shame and punish, we got this ourselves.’

El Pueblo made strong claims about their project’s success and made numerous proposals to expand the reach of their campaign within North Carolina and nationwide. Yet their own data do not support these claims. While DWIs declined in counties targeted by the campaign, DWIs declined in the control counties, too. It is not clear, moreover, whether these patterns can be attributed to changes in police enforcement or social desirability bias on the part of respondents. Most concerning, their own data show that the odds of drinking and driving were *higher* among respondents who reported having seen or heard an anti-DWI slogan, suggesting that their campaign has had the opposite effect on drunk driving behavior (El Pueblo, 2008, p. 28) and that public shaming campaigns may in fact do real damage to targeted communities. Nevertheless, El Pueblo insisted that its shaming campaign was the secret to reducing drunk driving behaviors among Latinx immigrants and that such strategies should continue.

Sociologically-speaking, it is unsurprising that respectability politics fails to achieve its end goals. Evidence suggests that shaming rarely motivates collective action (Klandermans, 2002). Rather than stimulate the pride required for collective action, shaming often results in alienation, hopelessness, and feelings of inadequacy (Battle, 2019; Scheff, 2000). Rather than erase boundaries, shaming and stigmatization do the opposite, reinforcing boundaries between groups construed as deserving and undeserving (Battle, 2019) and dominant power structures (Schwalbe et al., 2000). As a result, respectability politics fails to achieve its end goals of inclusion, instead reaffirming the racialized social order.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is clear that El Pueblo’s strategies, intended to curb problematic behavior and usher the Latinx community into the mainstream, at best, did not work. At worst, they cemented problematic racialized tropes and intensifying state-wide perceptions of Latinx immigrants as dangerous criminals unable to adapt to mainstream values and practices. In the years following this campaign, North Carolina became a leader in interior deportations, prompted most frequently by traffic stops, such as those used by El Pueblo (Jones, 2019). El Pueblo also may have pioneered the use of public shaming techniques that have now been adopted by anti-immigrant forces. Aiming to stoke fear and anti-immigrant resentment, the Trump administration directed the Department of Homeland Security to use billboards of undocumented immigrants’ faces in sanctuary cities during the 2020 election season (Montoya-Galvez, 2020; Santana & Alvarez, 2020). Only recently have we seen resistance to these racialized views – not from the White majority who still harbor anti-Latinx racism, but from coalitions of Black and Latinx activists who have pushed back on both racialized tropes and El Pueblo-style strategies of shaming and enforcement (Brown et al., 2016).

El Pueblo is only one organization, but its ability to build a long-standing, well-funded partnership with law enforcement and to maintain prominent standing within the immigrant-serving community suggests that its respectability politics strategy

played a key role in shaping immigrant incorporation and advocacy in the state. Scholars would be well-served by paying more attention to the race-work that happens within organizations, not only because of their role in reproducing and challenging racialization processes, but also because of their ability to shape resource access, racialized discourses, and policy at the state and local level.

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Notes

1. We define organizations as groups that unite to accomplish extra-individual goals (Aldrich, 1999)
2. At the time, DWI was not a deportable offense.
3. The other entity to receive this federal grant was the Arizona Governor's Office of Highway Safety. (Box 17 Project Summary and Police Collaboration 2006–2008 p. 100). El Pueblo renewed the grant for nearly a decade.
4. The mainstream press also translated the campaign's name as "Don't be Foolish" and "Don't be Stupid, Man."
5. Originally, the organization planned to use Mecklenburg County as the control but replaced it with a Southeastern target area after the Mecklenburg County Sheriff independently increased immigration and DWI enforcement efforts.

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