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## Critical Issues: Defining and Debunking Misconceptions in Health, Education, Criminal Justice, and Social Work/Social Services

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# Critical Issues: Defining and Debunking Misconceptions in Health, Education, Criminal Justice, and Social Work/Social Services

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As this is a unique issue, it became important for the University of Houston Downtown Committee for the *Journal of Family Strengths* and CHILDREN AT RISK to articulate how this issue came into being. What follows is a conversation among a representation of the editorial board from the University of Houston-Downtown, discussing first how the topic of “mythbusters” came into being, and secondly, how we as a group identified topics in our respective areas of expertise. When we started thinking about this issue for the *Journal of Family Strengths* within our own disciplines, we brainstormed about some things that seem to be common threads to all of us; things that seem to ignite the same kind of feeling amongst everyone in the group. The conversation started with a comment on the link between autism and vaccinations, and whether or not it qualifies as a myth because a large portion of people believe it despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary.

The conversation shifted to a commonly held belief that more guns makes the general public safer. There is considerable data that shows otherwise, yet to our surprise, the professor whom we asked to write a piece about this topic is an avid supporter of gun rights and does not view that belief as a myth, exemplifying the complexity of the issue. Another theme that surfaced was the topic of “Stranger Danger”, and, ultimately, it became a topic that was included in the final issue. As the conversation took shape, a list of topics organically grew. We identified what stood out for us based on where we have been going with the *Journal of Family Strengths* over the past few years, especially in terms of trying to stay at the leading edge ideas and topics that might appeal to the readership but still within the scope of the journal itself. All of these topics impact families in some way or another and ultimately strike at the heart of family strength. Once we really thought about the topics we wanted to cover, health, safety, policy, education, social determinants of health, and social and economic justice became the strongest themes for discussion. The following paragraphs represent the conversation held among the editors and associate editors of this special issue. Most of it has been paraphrased or edited for clarity, but the flow remains intact so that the organic development of thought and comments can be seen. Because these are politically charged and contentious issues, we opted not to provide an exact transcript or to quote names; this allowed participants to speak freely and openly with one another, and for honest discussion of scholarly opinions to be presented to readers.

## **Discussion**

It's always easier to “other” people. Social psychologists have been telling us this for ages; how our minds may not be even aware of it; “in” and “out” groups and how easy it is to ostracize, blame, and judge people who are outside of your immediate experiences. And fear is enormous, partly because it is so easy to exploit these social anxieties. For example, fear is extremely easy for the media to grasp onto, for the public to consume, and for politicians and policymakers to react to. It can be used to justify how different social groups and different social issues are treated. For instance, the myth of stranger danger and fear concerning sex crimes and violent crimes. We, as a society, have this notion that we have to literally teach our children to stay away from strangers; there are even worksheets and coloring books on this topic. However, this fear came from a few major national news headline stories that are not at all typical; as a matter of fact, an attack by a total stranger is very rare. But that is not what hits the news, and despite the rarity of this happening, these are emotionally charged stories that are heavily covered and can be easily exploited. There are marketing and branding benefits around stranger danger, because it is catchy. We buy into it; we pay for it. Look at all the signage that we as a University have to put up when you have a gun free zone versus not. People are profiting off of those fears.

We have seen bulletproof backpack companies take off in the wake of each of these school shootings, despite the fact that these are incredibly rare events. Your child's likelihood of being targeted in a school shooting is highly unlikely but our policy responses are so reactive and unfounded in the science. This is why we identified an issue dedicated to busting myths as incredibly vital and important. Let us bring these issues back to the science and data, looking at the realities of what we do know from high-quality research studies and reorient our reality toward what is documentable instead of what is irrational or fear-based.

However, this is not a zero-sum game. For example, let's discuss the topic of education and standardized testing. The accountability and decreasing achievement gap myth is a particularly pernicious fear in terms of impacting educators, especially if we think about how educators are having to spend their planning days or how their merit pay, salaries, or even how their jobs may depend on state testing scores. Thinking about what happens to bilingual children is particularly worrisome. The science tells us that if you are an English language learner and you are taking a test in English, you are translating. You are reading English, translating it into your first language and trying to comprehend it; then, you are trying to go back and translate what that means to an English language answer.

Things get lost in translation. You also have cultural differences. These tests are still predominantly made for white middle-upper-class test makers and they use concepts, idioms, and images that reflect this dominant culture.

Educational attainment and performance among white middle-upper-class students remains pretty stagnant. It seems to have plateaued and flat-lined; however, we still endorse policy, curricula, and resourcing that do not target the needs of minorities and low-income students; this lack of proper curriculum is more predominantly visible in schools for students with lower socioeconomic status. But we, Houston, as the fourth and soon to be the third largest city in America, are going to have a real problem. We are going to have students who cannot successfully complete or be placed on a track to college and pursue successful careers. As a result, their wages are going to be lower. In that effect, we are talking about a substantial part of our population in this area. It is important to notice that today's Houston, demographically, is the future United States in 20 or 30 years.

This is not only an important question for Houston, and an important issue for us, but it represents what is going to happen with the entire country in the next few years. If you look at the tax base and then look at where the resources are being pushed out to, they are going to the suburbs. Not only are they going to the suburbs, they are going to specific parts in the school system in the suburbs. One thing that we see is that a huge amount of resources spent on honors classes, sports, college preparation courses, and then the remaining budget goes to the regular classes, special education, ESL, Reading-180, which is the class for development of reading at the high school level. We are seeing huge discrimination when it comes to how we allocate the resources. You are not only looking at the effects that has on the curriculum, but we are also examining the effect it has in the school, on the staff, and the administration. Houston Independent School District is on the verge of having the entire district taken over by the Texas Education Administration and you have as many as 15 schools that can be closed. How is that possible? What is the logic in that?

This is something we should think about a little bit. The intersectionality of each of these themes. Who benefits from these and who is challenged or faces barriers? Returning to the autism and vaccine link, the only people who seemingly benefit from it are the extremely well off who do not vaccinate their children. Even if they cannot prevent potential illness from ultimately occurring, they have the resources to be able to remedy. Who benefits from all the craze about standardized testing

in public schools? When our former governor of Texas and 43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States sits on the board of one of the largest standardized testing companies in the country and earns \$2 million in bonuses, it will give you a clue of what has happened and who benefits with standardized testing.

In the case of the undocumented immigrants, we see all this false rhetoric being thrown out on a daily basis. Immigrants contribute \$30 billion to the economy every year. Historically, we have always had limits on visas that have been very pro-European and Scandinavian, which are very restrictive and limited for other non-Europeans. The history of US immigration policy has been one that has privileged certain groups and really exploited others. Migrant worker programs fill these immediate needs and vacancies that we have as a country for labor. However, we know that these programs are not fair. And in retrospect, we now know that they are extremely exploitative. It is a myth that immigrants are taking American jobs. We know very well that they are doing jobs that American workers will not do.

We have multibillion-dollar multinational US companies that advertise for workers in other countries to come into our country to work. Nevertheless, these are not jobs that are taken from American workers. These are subsets jobs that are specifically being tailored to a group of people for the purposes of providing lower wages, lack of worker protection, and no meaningful benefits. Within that subset is also the idea that immigrants are criminals. There is a significant amount of research that shows the opposite, showing how these immigrants are involved in the lowest levels of crime. Often, by the second or third generation, when they become Americanized, then they are at the same level of criminality that a native-born individual is. However, certain politicians and the media continue to promote the idea that immigrants have a high level of crime and that terrorism is tied to immigration, which is absolutely false.

There are so many different ways to come to the country with and without documentation, and the experiences that people have may be guided to some extent by the challenges or the privileges of those entry pathways. One of the biggest problems that we have is that many international students are not staying in this country. In the 1920s and 30s, as a direct result of policies and oppression within Austria and Germany, among other places, we had a big influx of scientists who, then, single-handedly headed all of our efforts related to our aeronautic advances and nuclear technology capabilities. These were immigrants who left their homeland and came over, bringing their knowledge and their skills, helping us move into this unheralded era of advances. And yet now, we

have got this situation where for the first time in our history, due to our own policies, we are now forcing those same people to leave and seek jobs elsewhere after they finish their graduate studies in American universities. People who would, otherwise, stay here and work in this country, are returning home or migrating to another industrialized country. Because of these policies, we are experiencing this brain drain that is now preventing scholars from working in some of our industries and, at the same time, we are suppressing the potential candidates who could be contributing to technology, or energy, and education in this country.

On another front, we have a history of oppression and suppression against women and minority groups in this country. We still have not learned that the people closest to us could be the greatest threat. And yet, we have developed an over-reliance on law enforcement to solve social problems, thus criminalizing social issues. The reality is that you are far more likely to be assaulted in any capacity by somebody you know rather than a stranger. An unfortunate and very timely example of this is the US Olympics gymnastics national team doctor who was accused of abusing upwards of 250 young women and men. He was not a stranger to any of these individuals; on the contrary, he was somebody who was trusted and enjoyed a position of authority among the athletes.

Unfortunately, in some of these recognized problems, rarely is anything done. Or, some of the proposed solutions do not actually change the problem. Returning to this myth that accountability is decreasing the achievement gap. The solutions that have been proposed, standardized testing, only result in greater disparities between different groups. So that the groups that end up being punished are those populations in lower performing schools, good teachers are going to be pushed out, or they are going to find incentive to go somewhere else. This ends up punishing the students in those schools.

All of these issues and the prevailing incorrect social beliefs about these issues function to maintain the status quo. That is another reason we need to call them out and bring attention back to the actual empirical evidence about these topics. This is in part because the facts and science might lead us to better responses that actually address the issues. Unfortunately, that we tend to look at only one tiny fraction of what the issue covers. For instance, human trafficking. Conversations tend to center around two things: the massage parlor or the hotel. We do not talk much about human trafficking in high schools or the maid who works in your house. There is a climate and a culture that grows up around these issues, and the associated social responses, such as the #MeToo movement. If you think about this issue in terms of environment and

culture-we realize that this is not just happening in the movie industry, it's occurring in many other industries. There often are these expectations that if women wanted certain things, they had to do certain things. They had to be passive. Because if they said no, then they would not get any further in their career. They would not progress. The expectation was to stay quiet. There is a glimmer of hope listening to all of the students after the Parkland, FL school shooting. Articulate, passionate students not willing to back down.

One of us briefly caught a news story about how males are taught and about what it means to be male in this society. We are no longer hunter/gatherers. This is the 21st-century, people. And we still have you know 12<sup>th</sup> century, 13<sup>th</sup> century ideas about relationships between men and women. When you think about intersectionality, we can find ways to harass each other- religion, spirituality, socioeconomic status, relationship status, body type, straight, gay, queer, we will find ways to pick each other apart. One of the arguments in relation to the #MeToo movement is about toxic masculinity and its impact. Women typically have outlets where they are being taught how to express emotions and how to cope with some of the things that happen, and, often, men do not have those same opportunities. So that leads to problem in workplaces and other environments because of individuals who never learned how to deal with or to recognize when behaviors are not appropriate, or how to express when they are in conflict, or feeling challenged.

One of the biggest issues in the structured academic environment is that it does not allow children to be authentic. The solution is to let Jane or Johnny be authentic and to be able to have that release valve or tailor something in a way that they could possibly learn. One of the most prevailing myths in the education field is that children do not learn through play; play is play. But, that is exactly how children learn. They experiment. They grab things, and they play with stuff to find out that this is squishy and that is not. They learn how to problem solve, socialize, and communicate. All of this by playing. And then we put them in a structured environment that does the opposite.

How do we deal with all these very important topics that have real serious social effects on us? How do we teach the way that we need to do things whether it is in regards to education or human trafficking or stranger danger? And that is what is so powerful about the Parkland, FL students and the gun violence movement: the amplification of people impacted. That may be the change that will be really powerful, which will not just have people talking about these issues but have the people who are affected and hurt talk about their experiences. The younger generations

do a better job amplifying each other, and they are much more inclusive in the way that they talk and think. Amplify them and we can emulate them in their inclusiveness. The way you address these social problems and misconceptions about social problems is by shining a light on the people who are actually impacted. So, bringing in and giving the spotlight to people who are affected by these things gives us the foundation from which to start to care. *The Buddha in me recognizes the Buddha in you and we are better together.*

There is much at stake with each of the myths and misconceptions addressed in this issue, the final to be edited by faculty in the University of Houston Downtown College of Public Service. The discussion presented here, and the articles and book reviews published on each topic, describe and debate some of the most important issues in criminal justice, social work, and education today. We hope this issue can inform, enlighten, and perhaps even be a catalyst for change.