

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MIGRANT “ILLEGALITY”: A GENERAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Critical migration studies emerged to trace how restrictive immigration contexts contribute to conditions of migrant “illegality” and deportability. More recently, researchers have turned to examine diversity in migrants’ experiences, revealing how migrant “illegality” and deportability can take varied forms based on different social factors, including migrants’ immigration status, developmental stage, ethnoracial background, gender, and nationality. Yet, despite increasingly nuanced and contextualized accounts of migrants’ lived experiences, the psychology of migrant “illegality” remains undertheorized, as we lack general concepts and frameworks to explain how deportability shapes, and is shaped by, migrants’ psychosocial lives. This paper introduces such a framework by drawing upon findings from two ethnographic studies with undocumented migrants in Canada and the United States. Observing common psychosocial patterns in both groups, I propose *cycles of deportability* as a framework to capture how migrant “illegality” develops at the psychosocial level through repeated occurrences of status-related stressors, which produce both acute and chronic fears that further require distinct agencies and coping strategies. Next, I examine differences in migrants’ cycles of deportability based on their national context and immigrant generation. I conclude by discussing how this framework can help consolidate previous research findings and guide future psychological and critical migration studies.