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Dear members of the CUNY Politics and Protest workshop:

This paper has a pretty long history. We submitted it to *AJS* two years ago and after a long wait got three good and helpful reviews and a rejection from the editor. After making significant revisions we sent it to *ASR* and got three positive but challenging reviews and an offer to revise and resubmit from the editors. The draft you are reading is our revision to resubmit to *ASR*. We have also presented versions of it to different audiences at academic meetings: in particular Chicano studies and sociology audiences.

In this process, a rather simple idea that the 2006 walkouts were spontaneous and any explanation of them has to take seriously the anxiety of immigrants as they face existential threats has evolved, for better or worse, into a point and counterpoint dialogue with a score of critics. As a result, we fear the paper has lost its shape and edge.

What we would like to hear from you is does the paper still hang together? Is the overall argument clear? Is it compelling? Is it convincing? If not, where does it lose its way? Have we taken on tangential arguments that distract or are uninteresting or just wrong? We'd also like to hear anything else good or bad that you have to say about the paper.

Thank you for this opportunity to present the paper. And sorry for how long it is.

“It Just Happened”: Anxiety, Defiance and Emergent  
Collective Action in the Student Walkouts of 2006 \*

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ABSTRACT

More than a hundred thousand students across America walked out of school during two weeks in the spring of 2006. Drawing on 50 in-depth interviews with students, educators, and community activists involved in eleven walkouts across five Texas metropolitan areas, we reconstruct the lived experience of these social protests. Our pragmatist approach to the 2006 walkouts identifies three tightly interrelated social and psychological processes: the dynamic role of anxiety as a collective mood; the centrality of rule-breaking and its mood-switching effect; and the emergent nature of the walkouts. Insights from the collective behavior tradition and newer pragmatist approaches to social movements illuminate these processes. The paper addresses calls by scholars to attend to the role of emotions and emergence in social movements, to resist normalizing social protest, and to explore the relationship between political threats and protests. It helps explain the 2006 walkouts and draws general lessons for understanding undirected protests in the age of social networking websites and mobile phone saturation.

“IT JUST HAPPENED”: ANXIETY, DEFIANCE, AND EMERGENT COLLECTIVE  
ACTION IN THE STUDENT WALKOUTS OF 2006

In a few weeks in the spring of 2006, more than a hundred thousand secondary school students across the United States walked off their campuses to defend immigrants against political threats. Drawing on 50 in-depth interviews of students, high school principals and community activists involved in eleven different walkouts across five Texas metropolitan areas, we provide an explanation of the 2006 walkouts grounded in the significance of collective moods and the mood-switching power of mass defiance.

We outline three tightly linked social and psychological processes that shaped the experiences of the students we interviewed: the dynamic role of anxiety as a collective mood prior to, at the point of, and after the protests; the centrality of collective rule-breaking, its exhilarating and anxiolytic effect; and the emergent nature of these rule-breaking protests. The centrality of these processes to the walkouts recalls insights from the Chicago approach to collective behavior and supports more recent calls by social movement scholars to attend to the role of emotions in movements, to resist normalizing protest, and to appreciate the emergent nature of activism (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000; Snow and Davis 1995; Piven and Cloward 1992; Blumer 1939). Understood within a broader pragmatist theoretical framework, these insights begin to make good on calls for an emotional sociology of social movements and an analysis of processes shaping protest in situations of political threat (Joas 1996; Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Flam 1990; Alexander 2006; Goldstone and Tilly 2001).

## THE STUDENT WALKOUTS OF MARCH 2006: NATIONALLY AND IN TEXAS

The 2006 walkouts started in California. On Friday, March 24, hundreds of students walked out of at least five high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (Malloy 2006; Keller and Gorman 2006). Smaller walkouts were also reported in nearby Moreno Valley and in Ceres in Northern California (Anderson 2006; Eiselein 2006). The following week, student walkouts exploded across the nation. Los Angeles, Seattle, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Chicago, Detroit, the suburbs of Washington, DC, and dozens of smaller cities reported walkouts during that week (Jablon 2006; Kleinbaum 2006). In one week, tens of thousands of students walked out of high schools and middle schools in communities across the country.<sup>1</sup> This unprecedented wave of mass defiance continued well into April spreading to every region of the United States (Eiselein 2006; Bulkeley 2006; Summers 2006; Bahrampour and Stockwell 2006; Obernauer 2006; Planas 2006; Riske 2006; Sena 2006; Fernandez 2006; Cole 2006; Thompson 2006; Bradley 2006; Chuang 2006; Krone and Lenore 2006).

Although the walkouts caught school administrators, police, politicians, and activists by surprise, there was a clear political fuse to this explosion of student protests: The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 or House Bill H.R. 4437 and impending action in the Senate on a similar bill to H.R. 4437 introduced by Majority Leader Sen. Bill Frist (S. 4545, Securing America's Borders Act) and an alternative immigration reform bill scheduled to come out of the Judiciary Committee on March 27. The House bill, introduced by James Sensenbrenner and passed by the House of Representatives in December of 2005, defined undocumented

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<sup>1</sup> In Texas and California, more than 60,000 students walked out in the first week alone according to newspaper accounts.

immigrants and those that aid them as felons. It required state and local law enforcement agents to turn over to federal authorities any undocumented immigrants they detained, and increased criminal penalties for document fraud (Siskind, Susser, and Bland 2005; Suro and Escoar 2006).

President Bush publically supported H.R. 4437 as he also continued to support calls for more comprehensive immigration reform. Immigrant, social justice, humanitarian, religious, and Latino organizations immediately opposed the Sensenbrenner bill (National Council of La Raza 2005). Community based organizations, churches, and the Spanish language media provided organizational support and education for anti-H.R. 4437 rallies. These rallies emerged in the winter and increased in rate and scale into the spring. One of the earliest mass rallies against H.R. 4437 occurred in Chicago on March 10 drawing at least a hundred thousand participants (Newbart et al. 2006). That same month, a rally in Los Angeles on March 25, the largest in that city's history with at least a half a million marchers descending on the downtown area, was planned to coincide with impending action in the Senate. The marches culminated on April 9 and 10 with rallies reported in well over a hundred cities across the country. Crowds in several cities were estimated to be between 100,000 to over 500,000 people (Truax 2006a, 2006b) .

The walkouts were only loosely connected to these well-orchestrated rallies. Almost everywhere, student protests preceded the rallies. In Los Angeles, the epicenter of events, students started walking out the Friday before the rally on March 25. In Texas, the student lead was even more pronounced. In the major cities of Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and El Paso, the walkouts occurred well before the mass rallies that took

place on April 9 and 10. On March 27 and 28, an estimated ten to fifteen thousand junior high and high school students walked out of Dallas area schools (Calderón 2006). On the same two days, hundreds walked out of schools in Houston. By the middle of the week, on Wednesday, March 29, the walkouts spread to El Paso with an estimated 700 hundred students walking out (Younge 2006). The next day over two thousand students walked out of schools in El Paso, hundreds of students walked out of at least four high schools and two middle schools in Austin, and just north of Austin, in the suburb of Round Rock, students at one of the two high schools walked out. On Friday, March 31, two to three hundred students walked out of the second Round Rock high school. Students in San Antonio walked out that same day and again at the beginning of the following week (Martinez and Ludwing 2006).

According to newspaper accounts and the students we interviewed, MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)) played a central role in inciting student walkouts. A viral spread of MySpace postings, furthered by emails and text messaging, jumped across relatively disconnected communities and triggered the early and massive wave of walkouts on March 27 and 28 (Shore 2006; Stengle 2006; Yan, Hobbs, and Meyer 2006; Martinez and Ludwing 2006; Younge 2006; Barreto et al. 2009). According to students we interviewed, the call to walkout “was just like crazy on MySpace”; it was “bulletin mania.”

Journalistic and participant accounts of the power of MySpace and mobile phone text messaging have the ring of urban legend, but are widely accepted by most involved. The 50 interviews we conducted with students, school principals, and community activists indicate that the walkouts unfolded with little planning, and were initially

coordinated through MySpace, instant messaging (IM), mobile phone text messaging, and word of mouth. Students alone executed this mass defiance of school rules and civil ordinances. The walkouts developed with breathtaking speed and spread to communities with little or no history of immigrant rights or Chicano/a activism.

In Dallas, a city historically known for its quiescence not its protests, the walkouts surprised everyone. As the walkouts spread across Texas, smaller communities with no experience with immigrant rights or Chicano/a activism received them with bewilderment. In Round Rock, a suburban city, officials appeared totally unprepared in their response, which included police chasing students through streets and arrests and citations that clumsily violated the constitutional rights of the students (Bowlin 2006). In other places with longer histories and more established networks of Chicano/a activism, like San Antonio, the walkouts were smaller in scale and came late in the week well after events in Dallas seized headlines. South of San Antonio, in border communities that were the cradle of the Chicano/a movement in the 1960s, walkouts did not materialize.<sup>2</sup>

The walkouts caught seasoned activists by surprise. The students were not following the organized plans to focus energy on mass rallies, and they were radicalizing the anti-H.R. 4437 protests with brash displays of Mexican nationalism. The day before the March 25 “*Megamarcha*” in Los Angeles, organizers meeting with reporters to publicize the demonstration were surprised to hear that students were walking out of schools across Los Angeles ahead of their event (Diaz 2007). National plans for marches

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<sup>2</sup> Students we interviewed from the Rio Grande Valley confirmed our newspaper analysis that the southeastern border region of Texas was largely untouched by walkouts. A student we interviewed from McAllen reported that in her high school students started to plan a walkout but a teacher convinced them to redirect their energies into a school project on immigrant rights.



on April 10, organized by moderate activists distancing themselves from the organizers of the March 25 rally in Los Angeles, were barely underway when the walkouts exploded across the country (Watanabe and Gorman 2006). The reception of the walkouts by leaders of immigrant rights social movement organizations varied from critical to ambivalent. In Dallas, Mexican-American civic leaders went public with their concerns that the walkouts were out of control and might do harm to the cause of immigrant rights. “We’re telling them to stay in school,” Jesse Diaz, president of Dallas LULAC Council 4496 told the *Dallas Morning News*. “[T]heir emotions are taking over. The kids are doing this on their own. There is no adult leadership” (Fischer, Ramshaw, and Unmuth 2006).

#### ANXIETY, THREAT SITUATIONS, AND THE PRAGMATICS OF DEFIANCE

Something significant happened at the moment students walked out of their schools—something that shaped this short but powerful burst of mass protest, will continue to mark the longer course of immigrant rights activism, and can illuminate the sociological analysis of “undirected” social protest in the face of political threats (Gusfield 1968). In order to understand this something, we look to the lived experience of the walkouts and to the situation-responsive collective action of the students (Katz 1988, 1999). Drawing on the vivid accounts of students, we reconstruct what the students felt before, during, and after they acted. We argue that making sense of the walkouts requires explaining—not dismissing—the emotional, rule-breaking, and emergent aspects of these protests.

Following an emerging literature on the relationship between social protests and political threats, we see the 2006 walkouts as a variety of “threat-induced contention”

(Almeida 2003, p. 345; Jenkins, Jacobs, and Agnone 2003; Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Goldstone and Tilly 2001). The walkouts, and the wider pro-immigrant demonstrations of the spring of 2006, present a clear example of a political threat “focusing resistance” (Goldstone and Tilly 2001, p. 180; Okamoto and Ebert 2010). Unlike most of the work in this literature, we do not fall back on rationalist assumptions defining threats and their motivating power in terms of costs or negative rewards. We concentrate instead on the collective-psychological process of protesters meeting a threat-situation with action.<sup>3</sup> We uncover a process that we believe can be found to operate in a wide range of cases of defiance in the face of political threat. To understand this collective process, we return to the pragmatist roots of collective behaviorism for insight on the role of anxiety in crisis situations.

The walkouts of 2006 conjure memories of the 1960 sit-ins: student-led, defiant, rapidly spreading, and apparently spontaneous (Polletta 1998). If we follow the analogy, social movement studies suggest that we should doubt the spontaneity of the walkouts. An enduring lesson from the Civil Rights Movement is that there was considerable planning, organizational support, and strategic execution behind protests that at first and misleadingly appeared spontaneous (Morris 1981, 1984). American sociologists used these lessons to reject key assumptions of the collective behavior tradition—assumptions that they believed relied on misguided psychological theories of spontaneous and emotionally overwrought crowds (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984; McPhail 1991). Five alternative approaches to explaining movement participation and mobilization took social

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<sup>3</sup> Goldstone and Tilly (2001, p. 183) in a key work sparking the renewed interest in political threats define threats as “the costs that social groups will incur from protest, or that it expects to suffer if it does not take action.”

movement theory in a different direction: a rational choice approach to micro-mobilization processes (Oberschall 1973); a meso-level approach to the role of rationalized organizations and social networks as mobilizing structures (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978; Snow, Zurcher, and Eckland-Olson 1980); a macro-level approach to structural opportunities created by political institutions (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982); and finally a cultural approach to the framing processes employed by activists to draw participants (Snow et al. 1986). All five of these approaches, which for a brief period in the late-1990s were synthesized together in the contentious politics paradigm, took shape against the social psychology of collective behaviorism.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of recurrent calls from prominent social movement scholars to stop bashing the collective behavior tradition (Cohen 1985; Oliver 1989; Gamson 1992; Jasper 1998; Snow and Davis 1995), influential arguments that psychological micro-processes are essential to explain protest mobilization (Snow and Oliver 1995; Klandermans 1997), a renewed belief among social movement scholars that emotions matter (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000; Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Goodwin and Jasper 2006), and the collapse of the contentious politics paradigm, current sociological visions of movements remain strikingly at odds with the defining works of collective behaviorism and their central problematic of the relationship between anxiety and protest. The current trend in sociological studies of emotions and social movements is—as it has

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<sup>4</sup> The important exception is the work on frames by Snow and his collaborators. Although the seminal 1986 article on frame alignment processes contrasted this interpretive approach to the social psychology of breakdown theories, Snow's work on social movements shows the strong influence of the Chicago approach to collective behavior, in particular his work on the importance of "threats to the quotidian" and the "emergent" nature of movements (Snow et al. 1998; Snow and Davis 1995). For works signaling the coming together of all these approaches see McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (1996).

been for the last four decades—still largely *anxiety averse* (cf. Flam 1996; cf. Taylor 1996; cf. Gould 2009).

### ***Overcoming Social Movement Theory's Anxiety Aversion***

The devastating critiques of collective behaviorism penned in the 1970s and early 1980s explain much of this aversion. These critiques exposed real weaknesses in the tradition, but they also misled the sociology of social movements insofar as they broke it off from valuable pragmatist insights about why emotions, and anxiety in particular, are often axial to social protest. They argued that the works in this tradition converged on a similar causal logic. McAdam (1982, p. 7) argued that the many different works in the tradition “relied” on a common “causal sequence” captured in the figure: “Structural strain → Disruptive psychological state → Social movement.” Tilly (1978), in an earlier but similar critique, associated the collective behavior tradition with a Durkheimian line of reasoning or breakdown theories that link fast and extensive social change to “restorative” collective action. In these breakdown theories, attitudinal factors mediate between rapid change and social protest, making “individual dissatisfactions and anxieties” the best “predictors of collective contention”—a claim Tilly and many others found contradicted by evidence (Tilly 1978, p. 24; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975).

This line of criticism held collective behaviorism to a variable paradigm that pragmatists in the tradition, namely Chicago School sociologists, did not hold to (Abbott 1997). In the “common causal sequence,” emotions worked as a central link in a chain of variable causes and effects. The image given is of social strain or rapid change giving rise to anxiety that in turn prods individuals, from behind as it were, to protest. From a pragmatist view this is not how emotions work. Dewey eviscerated this kind of stimulus-

response theory at the individual level and sociologists influenced by Mead certainly rejected it at the interactional level (Dewey 1896; Joas 1996). When action is understood as a process, stimulus and response are integrated in a coordinated circuit and it is, in Dewey's words, "a psychological fallacy" to separate emotion out as condition for action. "[T]he so-called response is not merely to the stimulus; it is *into* it"—emotional "stimulus" and active "response" are mutually constituted (Dewey 1896, p. 359). A pragmatist understanding of the relationship between social protest and anxiety begins with an analysis of how action meets the situation of threat. In a threat situation, the quotidian of life is disrupted and activity threatens to miscarry. This makes the situation anxious. Actors who manage to reconstruct lines of action in these situations do not respond to anxiety so much as they act "*into* it" or through it by trying to change the situation. From this angle, anxiety, to use Dewey's words again, "is not a thing or existence by itself; it is that phase of a coordination requiring attention because, by reason of the conflict within the coordination, it is uncertain how to complete it (Dewey 1896, p. 368)." The Chicago approach to collective behavior is consistent with this process view of emotion and action and not the "common causal sequence" identified by McAdam and Tilly.

Quite opposite to Dewey's formulation, in these devastating critiques of collective behaviorism, emotions appear as things, mental existences in themselves, or, as Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005, p. 471) nicely put it, as "nouns." Building on this substantialist assumption, the critiques claim that the tradition left unexplained how these subjective states transform into collective acts. Collective behaviorists, according to this argument, lack the mediating mechanism between individual psychological disturbance

and collective protest. Without assuming collective mental states or minds, “[t]hey offer no explanation of how individual psychological discontent is transformed into organized collective action” (McAdam 1982, p. 15). As Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005) convincingly argue, this criticism does not hold if emotions are understood as aspects to interactional situations, and not properties of individual psyches. An anxious situation and the emotion of anxiety are, in Dewey’s (1895, p. 20) words, “two names for the same experience.” These kinds of situations are often shared by interacting people and are matched with shared feelings: an idea Blumer (1939) tried to capture in his now rejected account of emotional contagion through circular reaction.

Ultimately the most damaging charge made against the tradition is that it treated protests as the irrational responses of psychologically disturbed actors. According to the critics, collective behaviorism dichotomized the reason of institutional political action from the emotion of non-institutional protest (McAdam 1982). While true of many works in the tradition, we do not think this charge sticks to Blumer (1939) or Turner and Killian (1972), the lead theorists of two generations of the Chicago approach to collective behavior. Blumer (1939, 1978) is clear on this point: collective protests that shape social movements are not characteristically irrational. Nothing could be further from the truth. In situations where routine action is threatened and balks, collective protests can breakthrough the uncertainty and guide to new social orders. These lines of action are essentially non-institutional, guided by emotional adjustments to the disruption of routine practice, *and* can exemplify intelligent action in the face of real uncertainty. As we explain below, this view of collective behavior is essentially pragmatic. It does not treat protest as irrational. It meshes the emotional and the rational.

In clarifying how these critiques misfire if the target is understood as a pragmatist view of collective behaviorism, we do not aim to resurrect an old tradition. Much of the work that fell under the label collective behaviorism was guilty of these charges. Instead we aim to recover a buried insight about the relationship between anxiety and protest and build out from this pragmatist insight to help explain undirected protest in situations of political threat. Nor do we advocate a return to anxiety as a master emotion for collective behavior analysis. The work of Jasper (1998) shows the advantages of appreciating the “irreducible plurality of emotions” in social movements (Joas 2000, p. 94).<sup>5</sup> We seek instead to identify general links between specific emotional experiences and collective action that can advance social movement theory, and on this count a rich sociological approach to the dynamics of anxiety and protest deserves attention not aversion. This approach goes a long way in explaining how threat situations become an occasion for resistance. Instead of relying on rational actor model assumptions that do not fit the lived experience of the walkouts, we begin with a pragmatist view of how the situation students faced in the spring of 2006 was actually experienced and acted on.

***Affective and Reactive Anxiety: A Situational and Interactional Analysis***

If we accept that undirected and “spontaneous” protests do happen, collective-psychological processes deserve renewed attention. In pressing situations, actors, including collective actors, must feel their way in order to orient themselves and think about who or what confronts them and how or whether to act. When there is no time out we commonly feel situations as we act (Katz 1999). According to Ricoeur (1981, p. 56),

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<sup>5</sup> The best recent work on emotions in a social movement, Gould’s (2009) study of Act-Up, concentrates on the dynamics of anger, and while anger and anxiety mix in this brilliant account of activism, she makes clear that nothing would be gained from reducing one to the other.

“[w]e must first *find ourselves* (for better or worse), find ourselves *there* and *feel* ourselves (in a certain manner) even before we orient ourselves.” In this embodied finding of ourselves in situations, Ricoeur argues that “feelings like fear and anguish. . . disclose, by means of revelatory experiences, a link to a reality more fundamental than the subject-object relation” (p. 56). This is not just the conclusion of phenomenological ethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology. Political scientists reviewing recent work in neuroscience agree that cognitive appraisals are always already emotionally oriented: “emotional appraisals are completed before awareness occurs” (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000, p. 44). Most social scientists now acknowledge that emotions are indispensable and decisive in grasping situations that are too complex or unfold too quickly “to be handled” by a detached and deliberate “analysis of options and their consequences” (Elster 2000, p. 159; Damasio 1994).

These revelatory feelings are not primarily private states but also shared dispositions attached as much to interactional situations as to individual actors. Emotional contagion is not a myth of the madding crowd, but a “socio-psychological fact” of interaction in shared situations (Collins 2004, p. 78). We do not misspeak when we refer to the mood of a party, a crowd, or a room. A shared mood is not an aggregate of the subjective feelings of individuals, but a social fact emerging from interaction. Moods often *occur* as public “affective attunement” or “rhythmic emotional entrainment” in shared situations (Dreyfus 1991; Collins 2004). “Basically unbidden” is how Elster (2000, pp. 149-150) would describe them: “involuntarily undergone rather than chosen, events rather than actions.” Moods, understood as collective events in shared situations, deserve special attention from students of social movements because they help explain



protest in these situations—not as stimuli to action but as the embodied aspects of interactional situations that orient action.

The point we want to highlight is not the primacy of emotion over cognition but the rejection of their separation. The rationalist paradigm in social movement theory reinforced this separation. Most revisions to the rationalist paradigm over the past quarter century have been cognitive in their theoretical approach. Cultural critiques to the paradigm privileged strategic uses of cognitive frames by leading activists. Even social-psychological critiques attuned to feelings privileged the cognitive and volitional management of emotions.<sup>6</sup> These challenges fail to consider how unbidden emotions like anxiety disclose reality and shape collective action. We argue that in situations of political threat anxiety is a widely shared and often overpowering mood that discloses the crisis-situation. This was true for the students we talked to who walked out of school in the spring of 2006.

A phenomenology of anxiety reveals it to be both “affect” and “reactive emotion” (Jasper 1998). Unlike anger, grief, elation, or other more typically reactive emotions, anxiety can be vague and diffuse, and, at some level, a permanent experience. As an affect, it is an almost atmospheric mood, more “scalar” than “vectorial” (Geertz 1973, p. 97). In this affective form, anxiety would seem a poor choice as a psychological factor to help explain episodic and intentional events like protests. As resource mobilization theorists argued against collective behaviorism, an attitudinal factor of “ubiquity and

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<sup>6</sup> McAdam, McCarthy and Zald’s (1996) edited volume, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, with its use of framing processes is an influential example of this kind of handling of the cultural turn within social movement theory. Reger’s (2004) work on consciousness raising with its use of Hochschild’s (1983) “emotion work” is a good example of this kind of handling of emotions within social movement theory. There are many more—e.g., see the 2002 special edition of *Mobilization*.

constancy” cannot be made to explain occasional social phenomena (Snow et al 1986, p.465). As a widely shared and basic mood, however, anxiety can shift as action and orientation toward a situation changes. It can shift to something more reactive like the fear of something immediate and concrete (Smelser 1963). For the study of undirected social protest, these occasional and dramatic shifts from affect to reactive emotion deserve special attention.

If emotions typically come with “action tendencies”, anxiety is attended by split tendencies: not just flight versus fight, but freezing or avoidance (non-action) versus attacking or confrontation (action) (Elster 2000, pp. 38-40). From a pragmatist perspective, anxiety first and foremost discloses a problem at hand, a crisis-situation. Dewey describes emotions in a “broad sense” as “idiopathic” (Dewey 1894, p. 561). They are unbidden, appearing spontaneously or immediately as habitual action or everyday experience catches, as it “meets with resistance from the world and rebounds on us” (Joas 1996, p. 128). The only way out of this uncertainty, this action-crisis, is to reconstruct the situation that balks action. “This reconstruction is a creative achievement on the part of the actor” bringing something “new” into the “world” (Joas 1996, p128-9).” If the problem or threat disrupting action is “too remote or uncertain” the feeling may be idiopathic in a more “narrow sense”: its source may be unclear and it may not be possible to do anything about it (Dewey 1894, p. 566). These situations feel paralyzing. To the extent that a situation provides “limits or definiteness” to the problem and the feeling, it may help guide action out of the crisis (Dewey 1894, p. 566).

Not so long ago, sociologists of protest scarcely questioned the centrality of anxiety to collective behavior in threatening situations. Blumer (1939) argued that people

become apprehensive in these situations. This feeling can spread through (circular) interaction leading to what he termed “social unrest.” For Blumer (1978, p. 3), “people in a state of social unrest are confronted with situations of uncertain and shifting character in which they have to develop their perspectives and to forge their lines of action.” The lines of action people forge are “products of meeting situations instead of being an [emotional] expression of the alleged causes of their unrest.” This collective meeting of uncertain situations with action takes the form of a distinctive process, at once emotional and emergent, that must be understood in terms of the temporal and spatial contexts of the situation.

Symbolic, organizational, and political processes shape the situation and the occasion for protest, but their “force” comes from the feelings that orient action in these situations (Gould 2009, p. 18). Through these cultural and material processes a vague and remote emotional experience can emerge as clear and close. In the spring of 2006, the Sensenbrenner bill (H.R. 4437) and impending action in the Senate focused the anxious situation of immigrants. Social movement organizations through education campaigns and rallies worked to call attention to the gathering threat. A scalar mood started to shape into something more like a vectorial motive (Geertz 1973). An affective emotion became reactive (Jasper 1998). The feeling for the situation was, in a word, framed (Goffman 1974; Benford and Snow 2000). The experience was of *movement* from the opposite ends of anxiety’s action tendencies: from paralysis to action. We describe this emotional process as telescoping.

From a pragmatist perspective, the “trick” is to “recognize that the situation is not constitutive of action (Whitford 2002, p. 355).” It does not “trigger” action but it is also

not just “the terrain” for acting on intentions (Joas 1996, p. 161). The situation and the telescoping feeling for the situation do not determine action. At the same time, however, feeling orients action in these situations. The situation is the “occasion for the formation of an end-in-view” that can be acted on to move through the problem (Whitford 2002, p. 355). We argue that the school situation provided students a definiteness and limit to their feel for the threat and thereby a way out, or in Dewey’s term, an “end-in-view” to guide a line of action against the threat. A similar end-in-view was not as readily apparent to many other immigrants whose resistance to the threat came after the lead of students in the 2006 wave of protests, if it came at all. For those outside of public schools, the problem situation remained remote and uncertain for longer.

In Goffman’s (1974) language of frames, the school context enabled a keying process that guided action. What we see happening from the students accounts is a transposing of reality at one level or social register to another: from the national level and its bewildering law-making processes and remote political authorities, to the school context and its rules and administrators. The more immediate and concrete level of the school provided a feel for the politically threatening situation and an occasion where a disposition to act could be realized.

The school context helped students overcome a common disjuncture that can be between the abstract, national threat of a changing immigration policy and the immediate feelings of anxiety. This disjuncture can paralyze. The anxiety felt is not just unbidden but idiopathic in Dewey’s narrow sense—its source too remote or unclear to guide practical action. The transposition of frameworks, school and national politics, was part of the occasion for student action. It provided an end-in-view for projecting action

through the threatening situation. This kind of keying or translation between situation-specific and situation-transcending projects appears in the telescoping emotions of the students both before and after the acts of defiance.<sup>7</sup> If we pay attention to the psychological process that attended to the walkouts, we can trace the students' feelings as they telescoped in, sliding from the broader and transcendent significance of the political threat to the more concrete and immediate occasion for action, and then after the walkout as they telescoped back out as they sensually reflected on the broader significance of what they had just done. In a fashion similar to the situated conduct Katz analyzes in his ethnographic work on everyday life, "instead of thinking about transcendent significance, the person registers the implications of the action in progress in a sensual appreciation (Katz 1999, p. 332)."

***The Anxiolytic Power of Emergent Defiance in Situations of Threat***

At the center of this process of telescoping in and out, in between the shifting emotions of before and afterward is the defiant moment. In anxious moments and situations, cognitive-behavioral therapists recommend simplifying and making concrete your fears. And then, surprise yourself, do the opposite of what you are inclined toward, break the pattern, disrupt the norm (Beck, Emery, and Greenberg 2005). We see parallels at the collective level. During the 2006 walkouts, defiant students did just this. We are not suggesting that anxiety prodded action. Quite the opposite, we see protest as a creative line of action used by some to move through, and against the shared anxiety—to attack the anxious situation.

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<sup>7</sup> This emotional process is similar to what Smelser (1963) referred to as shortcircuiting—a term that was unfortunately taken by many to refer to an irrational response.

How action meets a situation can change the prevailing emotion or mood (Shibutani 1966). Collective rule-breaking can have an anxiolytic effect. By making a situation in which a counter-posing emotion is produced, actors can attack the unbidden anxiety (Elster 2000). As it makes direction and purpose out of anxiety, as it moves through and ahead of it, defiance thrills and electrifies actors. Moves to defy a threatening authority electrify as they release actors, if only momentarily, from the constraint of anxiety (Scott 1990). Collective protests—understood as defiant and rule-breaking collective action—give direction to feelings of apprehension (Piven and Cloward 1992). These acts of defiance can project people through and (sometimes) out of the anxiety of a crisis situation.<sup>8</sup>

These defiant collective acts are emergent, empowering and often surprising (Fantasia 1988; Hirsch 1990). They project actors into unforeseen possibilities. They open new horizons and new paths that catch people by surprise and transform them and their situations. They are not directed or organized in the sense that they do not follow a preconceived plan, but they are practical. In an important sense, they would not work the same way emotionally if they were planned deliberately because they must surprise. Unlike the meaning of spontaneity for the students of the 1960's sit-ins in Polletta's (2006) brilliant revision, when the students we interviewed say "it just happened" they mean they surprised themselves with acts that were not planned. In much the same way as Katz (1999, p. 316-7) describes the situational conduct of everyday life, "because there is no time out from expressive being, perception and response are naturally intertwined."

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<sup>8</sup> May (1996, p. 376), drawing from clinical case studies, contrasts destructive methods of dealing with anxiety—passivity and avoidance—with constructive methods that confront and move "through" and "ahead" of anxiety-creating experiences.

This happens very quickly, instantaneously. Although the students we spoke with were unclear about the exact political process working through the House and Senate that threatened to change national immigration policy, they understood that the threat was real and closing in fast. Calls to walkout posted on MySpace and spread further by text messages reached students only hours before the decisive moment to act. Under the pressures of a rapidly evolving political threat, the lightening fast coordination of plans to walkout through the internet and text messaging, and the collective context of the school, there was little time to weigh the costs that would occur from protest or from inaction. In this situation, perception and response became an emotional piece. Katz's brilliant retelling of William James' example of someone fleeing a bear captures why.

[O]ne doesn't first see the animal and then decide it would be best to run away; one sees the bear with flying feet. One is always going through the woods in one state of anticipation or another, and the perception of a menacing bear is constructed by the gingerly manner in which one is already walking (316).

In this manner of speaking, we think the immigrant students who walked out saw the political threat of H.R. 4437 with a defiant walk. It was a revealing and practical take.

#### METHODS AND DATA

This research is based on 50 in-depth interviews with students, principals, and community activists with direct knowledge of the 2006 student walkouts in Texas. We interviewed 42 students from five metropolitan areas and two smaller cities in the Rio Grande Valley. The students we interviewed gave accounts of eleven discrete walkout events. Interviews were conducted from January 2007 through January 2009. We started with interviewing students referred to us by a reporter who covered the walkouts for the *Dallas Morning News*. She provided us ten names of students each from different high schools in the Dallas–Fort Worth Metroplex. We managed to make contact with five of

these students. To find students outside of the Dallas–Fort Worth area, we started with a sample of undergraduate students from two courses offered by the Center for Mexican and American Studies and a civics fair at the University of Texas at Austin. From these eight different points of initial contact or seeds, we used a snowball sampling technique in which each respondent was asked to recommend another person who had participated in the student walkouts. The resulting sample includes one fairly large cluster of students from the Dallas walkout that ended up in Kriest Park and another smaller but still significant cluster from the Austin walkout. We also have multiple accounts from walkouts in Round Rock and San Antonio and particular accounts of eight different walkouts from places as far apart as Houston and El Paso. We also spoke with five high school principals: two from Dallas, two from San Antonio, and one from Austin. We also interviewed three community activists who became involved in the protests and related events thereafter. In short, our data provides particular accounts of multiple cases of walkouts and multiple accounts of particular cases of walkouts.

Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone: 42 in person and eight over the phone. All of the students allowed the interviews to be recorded. The names used in this text are pseudonyms. All of the student participants we interviewed were of Latino heritage, and all but one of Mexican ancestry. Fifteen were born outside of the United States. We did not ask them about their immigration status. The question format we used for the interviews was semi-structured and open-ended allowing participants the freedom to speak. In general, we simply tried to get students to talk about what happened before, during, and just after the walkouts, with an emphasis on their own experiences. The interviews lasted an average of one hour and were conducted in Spanish and English,



in accordance with the preference of the respondents. In the collection of the data and coding we followed the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

We took pains to gather accounts of multiple walkouts across different social contexts and multiple accounts of specific events, but we must be cautious about generalizing from this data. Ideally our data would not just be randomized but—given our particular concern with shared emotions in interactive situations—ethnographic. But catching spontaneous and rare events like the 2006 walkouts for ethnographic study is obviously difficult. On Thursday March 30, 2006, one of the authors encountered a group of roughly 30 students who had just walked out of an Austin middle school. They were six blocks from their campus and headed to the Capital. He followed them to the Capital where possibly a hundred students were already congregated and observed for three hours as more students arrived from other schools. Ours is not, however, an ethnographic study.

We depend on the retrospective account of witnesses and participants. This data on individual-level psychological dynamics nonetheless contributes to our understanding of the collective-psychological experience of emergent social protest, “one theoretical level ‘down,’ so to speak” (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005, p. 490). This study is retrospective and it asks adolescents and young adults to report on memories of events. These memories are not copies of the experiences recalled but reconstructions and are subject to recall bias (Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz 1996). The students we interviewed provided depersonalized memories of particular images of scenes, events, and actions as well as personal memories of what they thought and how they felt at a given time and place. For example many described without personal reference crowded hallways as students spilled out of classes, the behavior of students as they exited

buildings, police chases, and the clothing students wore. They also provided reconstructions of emotional experiences like the anxiety they felt as the hour of walking out approached and their excitement as they bolted from class. Depersonalized memories pose the least problems in terms of recall bias because they are easier to corroborate, they can be compared with other accounts of the same events. Personal memories of how one felt are essentially private and cannot be verified by third parties, but they can be compared to the behavior described in depersonalized memories or by third party accounts to look for correspondence: Did students act as if they felt the way they say they felt? We make these kinds of cross checks when we can.

In general, studies of autobiographical memory identify the following characteristics of events that lead to well-recalled memories: uniqueness, consequentiality, unexpectedness, and emotion-provoking (Brewer 1986; see also Opp, Voss, and Gern 1995 on this point). These are all defining characteristics of the events the students in the study are asked to recall. There remains the difficult issue of whether recalling emotions is more problematic than recalling actions or even thoughts. As far as we know, political scientists working on theories of affective intelligence and the influence of emotions on voting are the only social scientists who have tested this issue. Civettini and Redlawsk (2005) in an experiment designed to see if respondents could accurately recall their emotional responses to candidates conclude, “that post-hoc measures of affective reactions are good, but not perfect, approximations of affect as it would be reported if measured immediately.” In short, there are good reasons to treat this phenomenological data as reliable.

#### RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE WALKOUTS

Most of the students we interviewed reported experiencing significant anxiety that they and loved ones as immigrants or Latinos were under attack in America. They described an anxious process that evolved leading up to the moment of walkouts and then changed dramatically with the protest. To understand this process a little context is helpful. Almost every one of our interviewees was either an immigrant or child of immigrants. Immigration involves separation from family and the confrontation of a hostile or at best ambivalent social and political environment of reception. For many immigrants, the separation from family supports, the loss of familiar and predictable settings, and the disillusionment of high expectations for a new life lead to generalized feelings of anxiety. A recent study of over four hundred immigrant children found that only one in five came to the United States with their family in tact. For the rest, immigration meant separation from one or both parents (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). For undocumented immigrants, immigrants with undocumented family members, and the native-born children of immigrants the threat of separation does not go away with resettlement. Hunted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) this fear can become relentless for many immigrants (Padilla et al. 1988). Studies suggest that this anxiety deeply marks the lives of many Latino children and adolescents in the United States (Varela and Hensley-Maloney 2009; Glover et al. 1999). For many of the students we talked to, the news of H.R. 4437 and how it might change immigration enforcement disrupted their lives. The serious threats of deportation, imprisonment, or loss of loved ones focused pervasive feelings of insecurity around a concrete and approaching danger. Students described experiences of anxiety as telescoping into fear, sliding from an affective to reactive emotion, and then giving way to excitement as they walked out.

### *Telescoping Anxiety*

At the outset, anxious feelings had a slower rhythm but a profound horizon, a totalizing reach over meaningful experiences and attachments. As the moment of walking out neared, students reported a quicker rhythm and finer focus to this anxiety, a feeling of fear of a clear and present danger. The course of their anxiety traveled from an emotional place where anxiety was held off or avoided through activity, to an unwanted confrontation with the profound but still somewhat abstract anxiety that their world could collapse under H.R. 4437, to proximate fears of reprisals for breaking school rules and defying local authorities. In this telescoping of emotion, students reported salient links between their anxiety over H.R. 4437 and the risk of walking out. In the act of walking out, the situation-specific fear of breaking school rules and the threat of H.R. 4437 to their lives, family, and friends came together. Parallels between the levels of threat facilitated the transposition. In the schools we studied, the control and screening of students by authorities had a similar feel to the work of the Border Patrol and ICE. The risks of walking off campus and the risks of being “bordered” had a similar feel (Browne 2005). Schools provided a situation where students felt and found a way to attack a confusing political threat that was coming from afar but seemed to be closing in.

Mayra Lopez, born in Hidalgo, Mexico and at the time a senior in a Dallas high school, remembered hearing about H.R. 4437 from her mom, but she did not at first register the significance of the bill.

I was busy with scholarships and stuff. I wasn't really concentrating on the news and stuff. My mom had mentioned something: '*Quieren sacarnos*' [they want to kick us out] and blah-blah-blah. I didn't really pay [attention]. I was really [pause], the moment we were living, the moment in my life, I wasn't really concerned with that. I was trying to get to school and trying to get paid.

Throwing herself into work and school, Mayra evaded some of the anxious uncertainty felt by her mom. This came to an end when a small anti-H.R.4437 rally at Dallas City Hall caught her attention. “That’s when I realized the severity of the whole issue.” News of H.R. 4437 and witnessing Latinos protest the bill arrested her everyday life of school and work. What her mom had said now suddenly seemed real: *Quieren sacarnos!*

As news of the potential impact of H.R. 4437 reached students, it disrupted the very foundation of their lives: their security in family and friends. Julieta Ramirez, a freshman at LASA high school in Austin, felt directly affected by H.R. 4437.

It was going to affect my family because my brother didn’t have his papers at that time, I didn’t have my papers at that time you know, cousins, and aunts and uncles, friends, and their family, you know? I was just, see, basically the majority of our friends, with the exception of maybe 3 or 4, it all be gone, you know.

For Julieta the anxiety was totalizing: “because we have our family, our friends, all around our community and just here all over the U.S., it would have affected everybody.”

The principal of a Dallas high school who met with student leaders just before hundreds walked off his campus explained that his students “feared that their parents and guardians were going to be deported all of a sudden.” Isabel Navarro, for example, a ninth grader in a Dallas magnate school at the time, explained why she walked out this way: “Well my parents came as quote-unquote wetbacks. So did my grandparents. I wanted to stand up for my parents and grandparents.” José Rosa, born in Odessa and a junior at the time at Round Rock High School, said that chain emails calling for walkouts to protest H.R. 4437 got him thinking about doing something. Speaking a little over a year after the events, José could not remember many of the details of the bill, but he remembered its intent to treat immigrants and those that helped them as felons. He remembers feeling bewildered and unsettled by the news of the bill.

**José:** I was just like in disbelief. It was kind of weird. It was like why you going to do that? You might as well put everyone in prison. Everyone is an immigrant some kind of way.

**Interviewer:** Did you make a connection to your family? Did you think anyone close by was going to be affected by the bill?

**José:** Yeah! My grandpa, my grandma even, even my cousins, my aunt, they helped people who came in. And some of our family actually had bad papers. And so, I was kind of worried, I was kind of worried about that. Like, well, we helped them out.

This anxiety mixed with a strong sense of injustice in many students' accounts. Xiomara Bermudez, a junior at the same Round Rock school, expressed profound anxiety that mixed with sadness and anger as she described how news of the bill made her feel.

"Yeah, I took it to the heart. . . . I actually felt hated at that point."

As the time grew close to actually walking out, students described mounting tension and excitement. On the morning of the first walkout in Duncanville, a southern suburb of Dallas, Fernando Rodríguez, widely credited as a central leader of the Dallas walkouts for the work he did the day before on MySpace, "felt kind of nervous and kind of excited."

[Y]ou know, well . . . 'cause there's always that thing where you're just looking at the clock the whole time and you're just ready to go . . . or you just don't know what to expect and stuff, and . . . it was kind of a mix[ed] feeling between nervousness and excitement . . . and kind of wondering what was going to happen. . . it was kind of a scary feeling too.

José Rosa felt very much the same way the morning of the Round Rock walkout. "I was anxious. I was pretty anxious. . . . I was excited. I was pretty jumpy." Julieta Ramirez, described the time just before the walkout as really exciting:

You know, I had trouble [sleeping], I think I might've spent 3 or 4 hours [sleeping]. I was really excited about it, you know going through with it. . . . It was just a lot of excitement, and I was just like oh my God it's almost time, it's almost time. I was counting down to 9 a.m., like, we are all counting down waiting for 9 to arrive.

Before the walkout started in Mayra Lopez's school, she described the collective mood this way: "It was uncertainty on everybody. It was tension on everybody 'cause they didn't know what to do, what was going to happen...if they were going to get in trouble." Nydia Velazquez described the way she felt just before walking out as the "most crazy feeling ever, like, there was like this vive that you can feel in the back of your neck, it was brewing, it was, it was indescribable."

Pilar Montejano, born and raised in San Luis Potosi, Mexico was afraid of walking out for a simple and concrete reason.

**Interviewer:** ¿Y porque te daba miedo? (*And why were you scared?*)

**Pilar:** Porque ya tenía muchas faltas y ya no quería faltar a la escuela, y porque no sabía que nos iban a hacer en la escuela, si nos iban a dar tickets, si nos iban a suspender. No sabía lo que iba pasar, por eso sentía miedo. (*Because I had a lot of absences and I didn't want to miss school, and because I didn't know what the school would do to us, if they were going to give us tickets, if they were going to suspend us. I didn't know what was going to happen. That's why I was scared.*)

Mayra Lopez was nervous for the same reason as Pilar. "In the morning, I didn't want to go. I had my two absences already." Beatriz Sanchez of Nimitz High School in Irving did not have many absences, but the idea of skipping school made her feel uneasy.

I was actually scared. I'm just one of those people that goes to school every day. I don't skip school. Am I doing the right thing? I guess I just got the courage to walkout. I'm just one of those people who doesn't get in trouble.

Similarly, Teresa Uribe, born and raised in Tamaulipas, Mexico was scared of getting in trouble. She asked Ramiro Hernandez, a central leader in the Lanier High School walkout in Austin "¿Si no iba a haber problemas con la policía y todo eso?" (*Would there be problems with the police and all that?*) The morning of the Austin walkout, Ramiro, born and raised in Michoacán and described by his principal as a "really good kid," was trying to get students at Lanier to join the protest: "Muchos tenían

la duda.” (*A lot of them had doubts.*) Fearful they wanted to know from him “¿Cómo cuántos hay?” (*About how many are there?*) He would respond, “Ya hay más de cien . . . vámonos, ya hay bastantes.” (*Now there are more than one hundred . . . let’s go, now there are a lot.*) And then the students said: “Pues vamos, vamos.” (*Well, let’s go, let’s go.*)

At the moment of action, the emotions of students like Pilar, Myra, Teresa and the students Ramiro encouraged to walkout were telescoping. As Maya Medrano, a sophomore from Fox Tech High School in San Antonio, described the moment of defiance, the fears of reprisals for walking out and anxiety over how HR 4437 could change everything became transposed, and they were about to be overthrown by a bold act:

I told my teacher, Sir, I’m going to walk out. This is going to happen. I had talked to some of the kids there and everybody knows I don’t have my papers. Everybody knows how hard this is hitting my home. ‘Cause it isn’t just me, but my mom, and my brothers. . . if we were deported my two younger sisters that are born from here, they would stay here cause there’s no chance that my mom wanted them to go back to Mexico with us. So that would separate our family that we worked so hard to keep it here and to work where we are at the moment. So I said, OK, I’m going to walk out. At 9 o’clock, I just kept staring at the clock. I just kept thinking, oh no, . . . I was just getting ready. . . OK, I’ve got to do this.

Maya was not alone in this in-the-moment fusing of the threat of changing immigration policy and the confrontation with school authority. It was a shared experience. Norma Perez, a senior at Skyline High School in Dallas, born in Michoacán but raised in the United States, described a similar transposition of frameworks in the electrifying experience of defying her high school principal. At her school, the walkout occurred at 10:30 a.m. during “the passing period.” School authorities responded by putting the school in lockdown. “They tried to lock us in, but the school has seven buildings so it’s



almost impossible for them to stop us.” As Norma was leaving one of the school’s buildings, she was confronted by her principal who declared, “You can’t do this!” Norma replied, “Oh, yes I can. You can’t stop me.” In describing the event, Norma’s voice crackled with excitement as she retold why she could: “See it from my perspective. This is going to affect *my* family, the people who *I* care for, that’s why I’m doing this. I’ll take the consequences.” At the moment of walking out, Norma felt she could or must defy his authority and “take the consequences” as the situation threatened to rip apart her family. An emotional transposition of school and national politics was guiding action. As she brushed by him, she looked back at the students streaming out, “I couldn’t see the end of the line!”

### ***Defiance and Thrill***

Many of the students we talked to described anxious anticipation giving way to the kind of exhilaration Norma experienced as the walkouts started. The act of defiance worked as a mood switch. Early in the morning of the walkout at LASA High school in Austin, Julieta Ramirez met with a group of students in her math teacher’s classroom.

We were in his classroom making posters, and making phone calls, there were about 20 of us. And, from there we were just, we kept running to the window to see if there was anybody out there yet and it was close to 9 a.m. I looked out the window and there was like people kind a peeking through, everybody was watching to see who was going to be the first people to walk through, to walkout, and so, I was like you know let’s just go. So we grabbed all our posters, everything we have and let’s just go.

As they made their move, Julieta described the mood this way: “We were just all kinda standing tall, you know, just walking out the building feeling proud for what we were doing.” Mayra Lopez described the early moments of the walkout at Townview in Dallas this way:

Everybody was coming out of the classes and you got more pumped up once you saw all the people coming out. . . It was exhilarating to get out of class without permission. . . It was a lot of noise, a lot of people, a lot of chanting.

Authorities at Nydia Velazquez's school tried to stop the walkout.

Once the principals and assistant principals figured out what was happening . . . they were like "Everybody go to home room!" And they were like yelling at everybody and nobody would move and so nobody wanted to get in trouble, but I guess we were strong in numbers, you know, and then, so then we just stayed there. There was 100 or more of us. And then, I don't know who this guy was, I don't even remember him, he stood up and he's like "no, we got to do this right, we got to do this right, nobody walkout!" And then, I was like look at all these people here, you know, and then so finally this [other] guy said "e-v-e-r-y-b-o-d-y LET'S GO! [laughs] So then we were like OKAY! And we just charged through the back doors and there was this old lady that I remember that nobody liked her, she was like, she was the secretary, she was like "NO, STOP, STOP, NO." She tried to grab people and people were like pulling off from her and we just walked right past her.

Defiance of school authority and rebellion against school rules fueled the thrill. "It wasn't just protesting you know, it was breaking the school rules, especially for me. I've never gotten in trouble," said Nydia.

Maya Medrano, described her feelings at the moment of walking out of her San Antonio high school this way:

I was mad, nervous, anxious, more anxious than anything else. I wanted to see how many people would do it. At first I was like what if I'm the only person that does it and if I get expelled, I can't get expelled. At that point, when it was actually happening like all that kind of went away. And I was like, you know what if I get expelled . . . I got to accept something good. My mom would be proud of me . . . It's like my whole Mexican pride came and uplift me.

Maya's description captures the powerful anxiolytic effect of rule-breaking collective action: "when it was actually happening like all that" mad, nervous, anxious feeling "went away." The collective anxious mood switched abruptly with the act of defiance.

Once out of the schools, the students' actions were fluid as the defiance continued to unfold. Local law enforcement in Round Rock tried to detain and arrest students once they were off campus. Xiomara Bermudez described how the police chased students through suburban streets. José Rosa described how these students eventually gathered outside of Stony Point, the only other high school in the city, chanting for the students to join the walkout. That school went immediately into lockdown making it difficult for the Stony Point students to join the protest. What happened then, as José described it, sounded more like a scene from the militarized border with Mexico than from the streets of suburbia.

All of sudden people start getting arrested, people start freaking out, and start hopping fences and trying to run . . . [W]e start realizing that Stony Point ain't gonna be able to get out and just about that time we see two people running out of Stony Point with a poster and green shirts and everything [laughs] and all of a sudden like about four, five cops just swarm on them and just put them back in the school and we all get excited, "yeah, come on."

Many of the students we interviewed remember moments of defiance as highlights of the walkouts. Mayra Lopez, senior from Dallas, recalled the feeling as the walkout emptied into Kriest Park.

It was awesome. We were just standing their in the middle of the park and we just saw massive number of kids coming in cars and trucks and walking and chanting and . . . I get goose bumps just thinking about [it]. The police was there and they didn't look too amused.

In the city of Round Rock, when the students returned to school they were all given citations for violating daytime curfew. These citations were later challenged in court and thrown out. In Dallas and Austin, the walkout participants did not get punished, but most feared and expected repercussions. For example, Norma Perez's principal made an announcement informing everybody in the school "you guys don't have permission

and you guys are going to be punished.” At minimum, students who walked out feared consequences for unexcused absences. Some worried about missing and not being able to make up a scheduled exam. As Beatriz Sanchez explained, “some of us were scared that oh they are probably going to suspend us.” Some students in San Antonio thought ICE was ready to “raid” the students who dared walkout.

In letters to newspaper editors, a commonly voiced criticism of the students was that they were just kids taking advantage of an opportunity to skip school. The kids did not understand nor really care about the political problem at hand. They were truants not political activists and they should be treated as such. One of the principals we interviewed said as much and the local authorities in Round Rock punished the students as such. The other school principals we spoke with described the students involved as generally “good kids”—kids that were conscientious about coming to school and working hard at their studies. Students we interviewed described walking out as rebellious even dangerous behavior that they did not easily entertain. These kids feared and expected repercussions, they knew they were breaking rules, and this defiance for a higher purpose was thrilling.

### ***The Emergent Nature of the Walkouts***

The speed and uncertainty of the walkouts punctuated the emotions of the protests, the anxiety leading up to the events and then also the thrill of the defiance. Students repeatedly described their acts of defiance with the temporal qualifier “just”—flagging the spontaneity or instantaneous character of what they felt and did. The student interviews reveal a common sequence of experience. Collective moments of apprehensive waiting—watching the clock, halted in the halls in front of authorities in

indecision, caught in “*la duda*”—are suddenly broken through with acts that “just happen”: “I just got the courage to walkout”; “And we just walked”; “I was like you know let’s just go.”

There was of course planning and coordination. Fernando Rodríguez, one of the publicly recognized leaders of the Monday, March 27, Dallas walkout, started planning less than 24 hours before. In our interview, he described how that Sunday morning he was watching “Meet the Press” or “some other” news show and heard about H.R. 4437 and protests in Los Angeles. After going to church with his family, he decided to try to mobilize some friends.

I called them on the phone and I was like hey you know I’m thinking of doing a walkout you know tomorrow. And they are like ‘for real?’ And I kind of got ‘em into everything that was going on . . . and they were like ‘alright whatever, that’s cool, we’ll do it, we’ll do it.’ So I told them to call more people and when I got back to the house, as soon as I got there, I got on MySpace.

According to Fernando, the plans were pretty sketchy and he had no idea what to expect. “With so little time that we had to plan we couldn’t cover every detail about what we were going to do.”

Some of the students we interviewed remained undecided about walking out right up until the moment they did. Mayra Lopez was one of them. She knew about the plans to walkout because of MySpace:

It all started with MySpace. I saw a bulletin through one of my friends and it said ‘yea let’s walkout for’ . . . I don’t remember what it said . . . At first I didn’t agree with it. I was like if we are [to] fight for people to have the right to an education . . . it just doesn’t seem right if you walkout of education. That was my first thought but then, um . . . as I thought more about it, and my friends kept calling me, . . . they said ‘yea let’s do it.’

Alexandra Fernández, a junior at Townview, born in San Luis Potosí, Mexico heard about the Monday Dallas walkout through instant messenger. As she recalls:

I didn't have MySpace at that time, so I'd gotten a note that Sunday on messenger that said there's this new law that they are trying to pass and we want everybody to support us and on Monday we will be walking out of Townview.

Norma Perez's description of how the walkout in her school started made it sound mysterious, almost magical. "It was funny how it happened . . . It just happened. It was the whole moment. It wasn't really like oh . . . you know. It just happened. Everything just happened."

Many students were caught unaware of the plans to walkout. They were not prepared to walkout. Their bags were too heavy and their shoes were unsuited for long walks. Leticia De La Garza, a senior at Townview who thought the administration would stop the walkouts before they got underway, joined the protest spontaneously. She quickly realized she would not be able to keep up with the walkout with all that she was carrying. "I had to stop because my backpack was too big. We dropped it off at a *taquerilla*." "It wasn't planned at all" according to Sandra Bermudez of Round Rock. Choosing the same words as Norma Perez, Sandra said, "It just happened."

In the cases we researched, the planning of the walkouts took place over 24 to 48 hours at most. Word of the walkouts reached most students the day before or the morning of the protest. Students initiated these plans. They spread the news through informal networks of friends connected by a social networking website, text messaging, instant messaging (IM), and word of mouth. These plans developed with breathtaking speed, and as they were spread to hundreds and thousands of students, they seemed to many of the students on the receiving end to have been conjured almost out of thin air. When asked who organized the walkout, Julia Contreras, a junior at Townview, said, "I have no idea

who organized [it]. You just got messages. There were tons of messages, text messages, Yahoo messenger messages. It was just going around.”

This is not to suggest that established organizations in the schools did not play a role. Some schools had campus chapters of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), but, in general, LULAC leaders seemed as surprised as the rest of the students when the walkouts swept their campuses. Alejandra Torrez, a LULAC leader at Townview, had no idea students were going to walkout on Monday, March 27. She was not even on campus that morning and learned about the protest only after the fact when she returned to campus later that afternoon. According to Mayra Lopez also of Townview, “it wasn’t organized by LULAC in any way. They didn’t know that we were going to walkout. It was after the fact. Everything was spontaneous.”

Norma Perez, from Skyline High School, described the most organized walkout of the eleven different walkouts we researched. According to Norma, she and a few friends spent Saturday and Sunday planning for the walkout on March 27<sup>th</sup>.

A group of us decided to actually plan a walkout, so we began the planning, making posters, text-messaging, and MySpace and everything. Everybody new pretty much what was going on. I was the, [pause] one of the main organizers in Dallas and for the first day...so we made posters, we made phone calls, we made e-mails, we send MySpace, every kind of way you can think of text-messaging went crazy, it was like I would send one and I would get 7 back from different friends who were just passing the word.

The organizing strategy at Skyline, according to Norma, centered on contacting the school’s student body leaders, LULAC members, and “popular” students. Norma was a LULAC officer and got hold of membership lists.

We have rosters in LULAC, we got the list of the youth but they don’t know this, we got the list of the youth and we called the presidents, we are doing this, you guys can’t say this is LULAC, you have to say that this is not for LULAC, you have to say that this is by yourself but call everybody.

In the case of Skyline, as Norma described it, LULAC did not mobilize resources for the walkouts so much as students pilfered the organization's resources against its will. After the first walkouts on Monday, LULAC in the Dallas area claimed publicly that it had not been involved in organizing the students and called for an immediate end to the walkouts. The organization sought to redirect the students' passion toward the more structured goals of turning out for the demonstration on April 10 and voter registration.

There was variation in the degree of planning and organizing across the walkouts we researched. Some high school walkouts appear to have been spontaneous reactions to the news that other schools in the area were walking out. At Skyline and LASA, events appear to have been more directed, but even in these relatively well-organized walkouts student preparations started at most 48 hours in advance and they involved little to no support from established social movement organizations. Julieta Ramirez described how the planning for the walkout at LASA in Austin came about:

It was sparked up, we were just kinda talking about it, and I was like I thought we should do this, and they are like, hey I thought that too, so you know we started making plans. It was kinda sparked up, we were just kinda talking, ideas popping everywhere, we were like let's do this. So on Monday they had the idea, two days of planning and the third day is when we did [the walkout].

Ramiro Hernandez's narrative of events at Lanier in Austin resonates with Julieta's. Ramiro indicated that some minor planning was involved in his school's walkout. He found out about his school walkout through a friend who gave him a flyer with the date, time and location to gather once off campus before heading toward the Capital.

Entonces, así fue como empezó todo...nosotros empezamos cuando supimos de *que cuándo y cómo* nos íbamos a juntar, empezamos a mandar mensajes a otros estudiantes y esa fue prácticamente toda la organización que hubo. [*So, that's how*



*it all started...we started when we learned the when and how we were going to meet, we started to send messages to other students and that was basically all the organization there was.]*

Students who did not hear about the walkouts in advance still had a chance to join.

Ramiro decided to go to the school and recruit more students and take them in his car to

PetSmart, a block away from the school premises:

Entonces empezamos a ir a la escuela a traer chavos y más gente. Entonces empezamos a traer gente en nuestros carros... Yo me metí a la escuela, adentro de la escuela y yo les fui diciendo a los chavos, hey vamos a hacerlo, vámonos, vámonos y aquí están los carros afuera entonces yo mandé un carro con otro muchacho y ese empezó a llevar gente. *[So we started going to the school to bring kids and more people. Then we started to bring people in our cars...I went into the school, inside the school and I went along telling the kids, hey we are going to do it, let's go, let's go and our cars are here outside, so I sent a car with another guy and he started to take people.]*

In many of the walkouts, students were confused about what to do once they had bolted from campus. Norma Perez said that once the walkout started that the students at her school were just improvising. “We were just going to walk around the school, but so many came out, we thought let’s go to City Hall.” When the marches arrived at their (often improvised) destinations, students again did not know what to do next. Julia Contreras reported “a lot of confusion at [Kriest] park. ‘What we going to do now? How we gonna get back?’”

A most prominent and undirected aspect of the walkouts were the many displays of Mexican pride. Walkouters adorned themselves in Mexican flags, they covered their faces in red-white-and-green bandanas. They wore Mexican t-shirts, jerseys, and hats. They also painted “*Hecho en Mexico*” on their faces and arms. These spontaneous expressions of Mexican nationalism became a hot issue in the media. Editorial pages in papers across the country took offence to these brash displays of Mexican pride (Lopez

2006; McClung 2006; Hernandez 2006; Garcia 2006). Xiomara Bermudez from Round Rock recalls that students “were wearing red, green, and white, and a bunch of Mexican flags and then we got our face painted there.” In Austin, Ramiro Hernández worried about the high visibility of Mexican nationalism, but he could not stop students from taking Mexican flags.

Yo no quería que llevaran de ninguna bandera, si no iban a llevar americanas, que no llevaran de ninguna bandera, me entiendes. Porque yo entendía, yo entiendo que para muchos hasta puede ser como una amenaza el que tanta gente este saliendo a las calles y con banderas mexicanas y gritando “Viva México” y todo eso. [*I didn't want them to take any flag, if they weren't going to take American flags, then don't take any flag, you know what I mean. Because I understood, I understand that for many it can be threatening to have so many people coming out to the street and with Mexican flags and yelling “Long Live Mexico” and all that.*]

Nydia Velasquez from Pasadena acknowledged that they were criticized for the Mexican flags:

There was Mexican flags, a lot of Mexican flags, and there was a couple of American flags joined with the Mexican flag. I mean, we got criticized, so there was a bunch of flags and there was people with Mexican shirts on and things like that.

As immigrant rights activists prepared for the big marches on April 10, in most cities the planners made it clear that participants should bring American flags. These activists were clearly concerned with the criticism the students had received for flaunting Mexican pride.

As the protests came to an end, students started to reflect on the significance of what they had just done. Julia Contreras who walked out of her Dallas school and marched to Kriest Park recalled what she was feeling when she was at the park after a long march:

We were trying to make a difference. Trying to get them to listen to us. Hey we're here. Listen to us. They're not taking us serious. But maybe now? They're a lot of us here.

Students from some of the schools who ended up in Kriest Park were bused back to their campuses. The ride back gave them a buffered moment to reflect on what they had just done. Isabel Navarro, a freshman born in Dallas but self-described as Mexican, remembers it as the most emotional time of the whole day.

On the bus we were so happy. We were screaming. . . We were chanting, "yeah we did it," piled three to a seat, one lying on top of each other.

It was not, however, all elation for Isabel.

I was crying because I was remembering my grandpa and I was doing it for his honor. They were holding my arms. Some of my home-girls started crying too. It was a bitter-sweet day.

For a number of the students we interviewed, the long experience of walking out was marked at the end by these kinds of emotional pivots: from the elation and thrill of defiance to an ambivalent and scalar mood more somber and, once again, more anxious.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Immediately after the first walkouts, some established activists in the immigrant rights and Chicano/a movements responded as if they had taken to heart the collective behavior tradition's pejorative interpretations of protesters: The kids were out of control dangerously disconnected from the leaders of their communities and organized attempts to respond to the threats of anti-immigrant legislation (Fischer, Ramshaw, and Unmuth 2006). Shortly thereafter, still others moved to claim some responsibility for this impressive mobilization of student resistance and, more importantly, to discipline and direct it (Truax 2006b). In rejection and attempted cooptation, these activists unwittingly

grasped what really happened. The student walkouts were powerful and pragmatic because they were spontaneous and emotional.

In much the same way, sociologists cannot begin to explain the 2006 walkouts and similar undirected phases of protest without first appreciating their emotional and emergent nature. Something causally significant happened at the moment of the 2006 walkouts—something that propelled this short but massive wave of protests and left its mark on the longer course of the immigrant rights movements. We think our interviews of students involved in the walkouts catch this something. We interviewed students, educators and adult activists directly involved with the walkouts to try to reconstruct the lived experiences of the protests. Our interviews uncover the dynamic role of anxiety as a collective mood, the centrality of rule-breaking as a mood switch, and the emergent nature of these protests. These interrelated social and psychological processes deeply marked the protests and the students involved. Without attending to these processes, sociologists will never gauge how undirected phases of protest like the 2006 walkouts fit into the longer run of the social movements they implicate. Focusing on these interrelated psychological and social processes does not pathologize protesters. Quite the opposite, our phenomenology of anxiety reveals the pragmatics of emergent defiance.

Our study of the social-psychological processes of emergent protest builds on a long history in the sociology of social movements, but most contemporary scholars of social movements disregard this history. Today, anxiety is largely neglected as a psychological ground for collective confrontations of uncertain and threatening situations. Even with a resurgence of interest in emotions, anxiety appears relatively unimportant in contemporary social movement studies. This is a big oversight. As we

argue in this paper, immigrants share profound worries about deportation, separation from family, and unfamiliar and hostile social environments. The actions of students in the spring of 2006 must be understood within this collective-psychological situation of anxiety. Although their anxiety may be more profound and acute than many others in America, immigrants are not unique in their anxious confrontation of social reality. Once anxiety is given its place as the experiential ground to situations of uncertainty and threat, the emotional power of collective rule-breaking takes on new light. Rule breaking operates as a powerful anxiolytic as it creates direction and purpose out of anxious situations. The emotionally-charged direction of these defiant and rule-breaking collective acts is emergent and potentially transformative for both participants and the movements they implicate.

So what happened with the walkouts in the spring of 2006? Confronting widespread anxiety focused by H.R. 4437, Latina/o students situated in the context of public schools with their rules and authorities, independent of social movement organizations, with the coordination of a social networking website, text messaging and word-of-mouth, collectively attacked a national-level political threat. Breaking out of their schools and taking to the streets in places all across America, well beyond the traditional strongholds of past activism, these students spearheaded a massive wave of protest. In these acts of defiance, students projected themselves into the national political uncertainty, attacking fear and unleashing the thrill of newly found solidarity. The particular political threat the students reacted to, H.R. 4437, is now gone, but the broader political threat persists. This threat is being slowly intensified by the steady and significant increase of deportations under ICE's "Secure Communities" and 287(g)

programs. It is also repeatedly focused, if albeit on a more local level than the threat of H.R. 4437, by events like the passing of SB 1070 in Arizona and the proposed Arizona-like bills now appearing in scores of states. The widespread and shared anxiety remains and is mounting. The 2006 experience of collectively attacking it is now stored in the memories and dispositions of the tens of thousands of student walkouters, the hundreds of thousands of marchers, and the millions they influenced. In the long run of social movements, fluid and undirected moments alternate with the strategic actions of social movement organizations and established activist networks. A pressing question is how undirected and directed moments interact within this longer course and to what end. In spite of tremendous growth in the area of social movement research, we think this interaction remains poorly understood because undirected moments are not seen as such and their emotional and emergent character is underappreciated. A pragmatic return to old insights from the collective behavior tradition can change this. We think it can also help explain what happens next in the immigrant rights movement.

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