# “IT JUST HAPPENED”: THE STUDENT WALKOUTS OF 2006*

Laura Barberena
Hortencia Jimenez
Michael P. Young

*University of Texas at Austin*

January 2008

* Direct correspondence to Laura Barberena (laurab7@laurab7.cnc.net) or Hortencia Jimenez (hjimenez@mail.la.utexas.edu)

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from our ongoing research on the pro-immigrant student walkouts in March of 2006. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with students, educators, and community activists involved in half a dozen walkouts across four Texas cities, we reconstruct students' actions and experiences just before, during, and after the walkouts. In our reconstruction of the events, we highlight four interrelated social and psychological processes that have a long, if checkered, history in the sociology of collective behavior and social movements: 1) the role of anxiety as a collective mood shaping protests; 2) the centrality of non-normative or rule-breaking collective action; 3) the spontaneous, undirected, and fluid nature of the protests; and 4) the symbolic and emotional significance of the walkouts to the students involved. These themes recall insights from the collective behavior tradition and support more recent calls by scholars to resist normalizing protest and to attend to the role of emotions and ambiguity in social protest.

# INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings from our ongoing research on the student walkouts in the spring of 2006. Over a seven-day period, tens of thousands of middle school and high school students walked off their campuses to protest legislation passed by the U.S. House of Representative that threatened to make undocumented immigrants and their supporters felons. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews of students, high school principals, and community activists closely associated with six different walkouts in Texas, we outline four themes highlighted by these massive protests: 1) the role of anxiety as a collective mood shaping protests; 2) the centrality of non-normative or rule-breaking collective action to the events; 3) the spontaneous, undirected, and fluid nature of the protests; and 4) the symbolic and emotional significance of the walkouts to the students involved.

These themes recall insights from the collective behavior tradition of the mid-twentieth century and support more recent calls by social movement scholars to resist normalizing protest and to attend to the role of emotions and ambiguity in social protest (Blumer 1939; Piven and Cloward 1992; Jasper 1998; Polletta 1998; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000). Many will resist our claim that collective behavior theory can help account for the 2006 student walkouts, but much of the scholarly animus against this tradition is unfair. We contend that key insights from the work of Herbert Blumer and Neil Smelser are indispensable in understanding the walkouts. Although largely unacknowledged, these same insights have become increasingly important in cultural and social-psychological theory building since the collapse of the political process paradigm. Structural and rational choice approaches to protest discarded these insights when they charged the entire tradition with defaming activists as irrational or psychologically

disturbed (Wilson and Orum 1976; McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 1988). In fact, Blumer and Smelser's work usefully highlights dimensions of a general kind of rapidly-coordinated and emotionally-charged collective action. The student walkouts in March of 2006 are particularly amenable to this type of analysis. Collective behaviorism still has a lot to offer to sociologists of protest and possibly even more so in an era when new social networking software provides an effective means of "short-circuiting" the personal and the far-flung (Smelser 1963; Young 2007).

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

The 2006 walkouts started on March 24 in California. On that Friday, hundreds of students walked out of at least six high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (Malloy 2006). Smaller walkouts were also reported in nearby Riverside and in Modesto in northern California (Eiselein 2006). The following week, after a massive and well-organized demonstration in Los Angeles, student walkouts exploded across the nation. Tens of thousands of students walked out of high schools and middle schools in U.S. cities in every region of the country. Los Angeles, Dallas, Denver, Chicago, New York, the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC and dozens of smaller cities in between reported walkouts during the week (Jablon 2006; Kleinbau 2006). All told, in a period of seven days, more than a hundred thousand students walked out of schools in communities across the United States.

Although the walkouts caught school administrators, police, politicians, and leading immigrant rights activists and organizations by surprise, there was an obvious if slow political fuse to this explosion of student protests: The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act or H.R. 4437. The bill, passed by the

House of Representatives in December 2005, would have made undocumented immigrants and those that might be construed as helping them stay in the United States felons. It would have also required state and local law-enforcement agents to turn over to federal authorities any undocumented immigrants they detained and made it harder for legal immigrants to become U.S. citizens (Hernandez 2005).

The House bill was immediately opposed by a variety of immigrant, social justice, humanitarian, religious, and Latino organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, Educational Fund, National Council of La Raza, (National Council of La Raza, 2005). As a result of the bill, a series of protests emerged in the winter and increased in rate and scale into the spring. One of the earliest mass protests occurred in Chicago on March 10, drawing at least as many as a hundred thousand participants. A rally in Los Angeles on March 25 was the largest in that city's history with at least a half a million marchers descending on the downtown area. The protests culminated on April 9 and 10 with protests 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 (Traux 2006).

The walkouts that started in earnest on March 24 in Calfornia and then exploded across the United States during the last week of the month---the 27th to the 31st---were only loosely connected to these organized mass rallies, and, in many cases, student protests preceded the well-orchestrated mass rallies. In Los Angeles, students started walking out before the mass rally on March 25. In Dallas and Austin, the student walkouts occurred well before the mass rallies 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 (Calderon 2006). On March 29, the walkouts spread to Austin with hundreds of students walking out of at least four high schools and two middle schools. The next day, just north of Austin, in the city of Round Rock students at one of the two high schools walked out. On Friday, two to three hundred students walked out of the second Round Rock high school. In these cities and many others like them, the organized rallies were, in part, reactions to the lead students had taken in the school walkouts. Although public authorities speculated that adults must have been behind the scenes spurring the walkouts, a more accurate claim is that the student walkouts spurred the mass rallies organized by adults.

According to newspaper accounts *and* the students we have interviewed, the Texas walkouts were triggered by news in the mainstream and Spanish-language media reporting on HR 4437 and on protests against the bill in Los Angeles, and by postings on MySpace.com calling for a nationwide student walkout. As one Dallas newspaper put it, "Email and text messaging then spread [the call for a walkout] like wildfire. And with the help of old-fashioned paper fliers, a mass student protest materialized in an instant" (Yan 2006). These journalistic and participant accounts of the power of Myspace.com and text messaging have the ring of mythical lore, but they appear widely accepted by most involved. It may well turn out, as in the case of the 1960 sit-ins, that historical research will uncover quite a bit more organizational work went into pulling off these protests and that social movement organizations and established activist networks played a more significant role in the walkouts then first thought by both participants and observers. Indeed, our research of the Texas walkouts uncovers some organizational preparation and

the activation of established activist networks, but the 30 interviews we conducted with students, community activists, and school principals support the popular opinion of the moment: These protests were triggered by alarming news of the threat of HR 4437, news largely mediated by social networking software. They emerged with breathtaking speed, were relatively unorganized, and spread to communities with little or no history of Latino or immigrant activism.

In Dallas, for example, overlapping social networks activated through MySpace.com spread the word on Sunday, March 26, that walkouts were being planned for the next morning. A time was set for the action at certain schools. Email and text messaging along with some flyers furthered the communication (Stengle 2006). Not one of the students we talked to had any idea how big the walkouts would be. Many did not decide to walkout until minutes or even seconds before actually doing so. Some only first heard of the walkouts in schools the day of the event. Within particular schools, students who decided to walkout were shocked to see how many other students poured out of the classrooms and into the halls. In many cases, it was not clear where the walkouts were headed. In Dallas, walkouts from different schools ended up at two different destinations. According to participants, they were improvising as events unfolded. For example, students walking out of Townview High headed first to two neighboring schools and then to Kriest Park. Students from other schools headed to City Hall. The students we talked to who gathered at Kriest Park said they could not believe it when hundreds of students from different schools started to pour into the park. On this first day, students from at least six different high schools in Dallas walked out. On the following day, the walkouts spread to Irving, TX and then down the I-35 corridor to places like Round Rock with no

history of organized immigrant or Latino activism.

## COLLECTIVE BEHAVIORISM REVISTED

As Francesca Polletta (2006) has recently observed, the 1960 sit-ins inspired "important theorizing about [protest] participation generally." We think the student walkouts of 2006 should have a similar effect. If they are to, however, some of the "received wisdom" drawn from the sit-ins and extended to a wide variety protests may have to be questioned. One of the enduring lessons from the research on the Civil Rights Movements by leading sociologists like Aldon Morris (1986) and Doug McAdam (1982), for example, is that there was considerable organizational support for protests that at first appeared spontaneous. A generation of social movement scholarship inspired by black activism in the 1950s and 1960s used these lessons to reject the assumptions of collective behaviorism and its psychological theories of crowd behavior (McPhail 1991).

We contend that the 2006 walkouts deserve attention as an "undirected phase" in Chicano/a and Immigrant Rights movements (Gusfield 1968). Making sense of the walkouts and gauging there affect on these movements will require explaining, not dismissing, the anxious energy, spontaneity, and thin organization of these protests. New communication technologies are an important part of this explanation. Social networking software, like that used on Myspace.com, enables rapid and widespread communication without the mediation of formal organizations or established institutions. It fuses two forms of communication that in the past followed different tracks. As Pam Oliver (1989, p.6) explains,

> Both mass communication and personal communication are important in all social movements. The mass media can provide communication bridges that jump geographic and social barriers and, with today's technology, can do it very quickly. But they are highly selective in what information they transmit.

> Conversely, personal communications can be about almost anything, but they must be made between people who are in immediate physical proximity to one another, or who have some preexisting social relationship. . . People discuss and evaluate the news they hear from the mass media, and they use the mass media to check the news they hear through personal sources.

Social networking software compress the two forms. As such rumors and news of events have at once the feel and the form of face-to-face communication and mass broadcasts. This new technology actually realizes something collective behaviorists began to theorize about in mid-twentieth century---the rapid anxious circular reaction to news of threat on a mass scale.

For the last two decades, social movement theorists have called for an end to bashing the social psychology of collective behavior theories (Cohen 1985; Gamson 1992), but certain aspects of this tradition's social psychology remain taboo. Micro-processes are now acknowledged as important and even some tepid claims about the role of personality types in protests are being recognized, but *anxiety*, the emotion so central to the work of Blumer, Smelser, and other social scientists working on protests before the 1960s, remains off the agenda (cf Flam 1996).

Anxiety is not like anger, grief, elation, or other more reactive affects (Jasper 1998). Anxiety is a vague, diffuse, and, at some level, permanent experience. For this reason, existential philosophers and psychologists have viewed it as an affect like no other affect, an ontological characteristic as much as an emotional experience (Kierkegaard 1980; Heidegger 1962; May 1996). As such, anxiety would seem a poor choice as a psychological factor in episodic events like protests. And indeed, although scholars of social movements have called for an end to the theory bashing of collective behaviorism, few, if any, have called for a reconsideration of anxiety as a master emotion

of social protest. We think this is unfortunate.

Anxiety ought to command attention precisely because of its pervasiveness and permanence as an emotional experience. Anxiety is at the root of our confrontation with uncertain and ambiguous situations, a precondition of action within these situations, and therefore obviously central to all protest. Although pervasive and permanent, the feel of anxiety varies greatly over time, across situations, and according to its "handling." Anxiety may not ever be conquered, but its effects vary, and these variations matter.

According to Blumer (1939), emotional reactions to social unrest were the motive forces behind all collective behavior. According to Blumer (1939), the frustration of desires leads to a state of unrest, and in this state people become excited and apprehensive. This emotional state spreads through relatively unmediated interaction or "milling." The emotions of social unrest are "the crucible" out of which all collective behavior emerges. Protests and movements give direction to frustrated desires "through ideas, suggestions, criticisms, and promises." In movements, mediating symbols interject a process of interpretation between collective emotional stimulus and collective action. Blumer viewed social protest as a creative and emotional source of new moral orders. Through symbolic mediation and coordination of action, the restless individual "has his sentiments focused on, and intertwined with, the objective of the movement." The experience of participating in a protest is purposeful and transforming. The feeling is one of personal *"expansion"* as frustrated desires *"surge forth"* in the direction of the articulated social cause of the movement and toward a *"new order of life."*

For Smelser (1962), as for Blumer, the formation of protests begins with experiences of insecurity. Protests express the experience of anxiety and strive to

restructure the ambiguity brought on by structural strain. Protests reconstitute an ambiguous situation by linking concrete experiences with higher levels of general significance. This can serve to resolve ambiguity and drive social action as it operates as an anxiolytic. In protests, participants envision and enact a regeneration of self *and* society.

In the 1970s, these collective behaviorist assumptions of structural strain and psychological insecurity came under sharp attack. All social movement researchers know the story of this paradigm shift. In the wake of the 1960s, sociologists increasingly emphasized organizational, material, and rational aspects of activism. Whereas collective behaviorists distinguished social movements from the normal workings of politics, this new organizational and materialist perspective viewed movements as engaged in the same political processes as other institutional actors, but at a serious structural disadvantage. Movements were an extension of normal political action, not an extension of anxious, spontaneous crowds.

We can all agree that the lives of American immigrants and their children are subject to constant structural strain, but in the winter of 2005-6 with passage of the H.R. 4437, this strain appeared increasingly as clear and present danger. For many immigrants, their circumstances in America seemed to have taken a perilous turn. This change led to what Blumer would describe as widespread social unrest disrupting the routine lives of many. This “restlessness” undermined trust in social experience. Disruption of routine life was *first felt* and only then did a grasp of the situation, of the problem, and of the way to proceed begin to emerge. In order for actors to reorient themselves in the unfamiliar setting, they must feel their way, and then act. It was the uneasiness of losing the familiar

and the excitement of new horizons opened up by this disruption that prompted creative, social protest. New communication technologies enabled rapid and mass communication of these raw sentiments and a quick collective reaction. In adjusting to the threatening circumstances, actors *projected* themselves into the change. They did so collectively and this collective projection constituted *social protest.*

For Blumer and Smelser, anxiety is the primary emotional reaction to these situations of disruption, frustration, and ambiguity. According to their social-psychological approach, the restlessness or strain that stems from rapid social change or mobility awakens a fear without a clear object. Social protests take form when this diffuse emotion is focused in a novel and creative way. These collective actions are not planned or organized. They are spontaneous, emergent, and undisciplined. They open new horizons and new paths that catch people by surprise and transform them. We think this theoretical framework provides the beginning of an important explanation for the 2006 student walkouts.

## DATA AND METHODS

We interviewed 25 students from four Texas cities: Dallas, Irving, Round Rock, and Austin. The students came from six different high schools: one each in Austin, Round Rock, and Irving; and three from Dallas. The students we talked with were involved in five discrete walkout events: two Dallas walkouts both occurring on Monday, March 27, with one ending up in Kriest Park and the other at City Hall; an Irving walkout that occurred on Tuesday, March 28, and ended up, after a train ride, at Dallas City Hall; one Austin walkout on Wednesday, March 29, and ended at the Capital; and one Round Rock walkout on Friday, March 31, that ended up at a park under the interstate. We used a

snowball sampling technique beginning with a few names that we got from newsreporters who had covered the protest events. We also spoke with three principals: two from Dallas high schools and one from an Austin school. We also interviewed two community activists who became involved in the protests. The format we used for the interviews was open-ended. In general, we simply tried to get students to talk about the what happened before, during, and just after the walkouts and their personal experiences. The 30 interviews averaged slightly under one hour in length. The shortest lasted 21 minutes and the longest 1 hour and 31 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

## RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE WALKOUTS

### The Role of Anxiety

Almost every student we interviewed reported experiencing some measure of anxiety before and during the walkouts. In general, our interviewees describe a process of change in their experiences of anxiety leading up to the walkouts. In the days, then hours, and then minutes before the moment of walking out, many described the experience of anxiety as mounting and telescoping. At the outset, anxious feelings had a slow rhythm and broad horizon. These feeling might be described as a rough focus on a general sentiment or affect structuring the Latino experience in the United States. The rough focus was brought about by news of HR 4437 and early demonstrations against the bill. This feeling then gave way to a quicker rhythm and finer focus, bordering on fear of a clear and present danger, as students readied themselves to act.

Mayra Lopez, born in Hidalgo and at the time a senior in a Dallas high school, remembered hearing about HR 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 mention something: 'Quieren sacarnos' 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 [pause] I was trying to get to school and trying to get paid.

Soon there after, however, a small rally at Dallas City Hall caught her attention. "That's when I realized the severity of the whole issue." News of HR 4437 and news of Latinos protesting the bill arrested her everyday life of school and work. What her mom said now suddenly seemed a real or at least possible threat: "Quieren sacarnos."

The principal of Skyline, one of the Dallas schools which witnessed a particularly large walkout, met with student leaders the morning of the walkout just before hundreds left campus. We asked him if he remembered what they said at the meeting. "They feared that their parents and guardians were going to be deported all of sudden. I understood and empathized. Their my children." When we asked students why they walked out, many said they did it for family or friends who they feared might be deported. Isabel Navarro, for example, was a freshman at the time in a Dallas magnate school, explained why she did it 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 a Round Rock high school, felt similarly. José said that chain emails calling for walkouts to protest HR 4437 got him thinking about doing something. Speaking a little over a year after the events, Jose 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.

> **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.
**HJ**: 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 a little. . . so hmmm…

Xiomara Bermudez, a junior at the same Round Rock high school, as she explained to us why she walked out expressed profoundly anxious feelings that were mixed with sadness and anger. News of the bill made her afraid that she and other Mexican Americans were actually hated in this county

**Xiamara:** I did it [walked out] because it was a good reason.
**HJ:** What reason was this?
**Xiomara:** It was to get our voice heard, you know, we disagreed with the law that they were trying to pass. You know, we have family in Mexico, we like them to come visit with us someday and we like to go over there and visit them. You know? Building a wall? Don't you think you are going overboard with that? And then, they said that it was to protect against illegal immigrants, illegal immigrants means you are not from the United States, what about the Asians, Canada, you know, why is it that it's just the Mexicans. . . And I asked people from Mexico, that lived there long, you know, 'do you, would you like for them to send you back?' You know? They were like 'no, this is such a great country' and for me to hear that, like, if they are sending you back then this isn't such a great country, they are like 'yeah but look at the opportunities here.' I'm like you know, you are right, that's so sad that they still want to stay here after they are trying to send them back, and hm. . . . I felt aggravated with that
**HJ:** With the bill?
**Xiomara:** Yeah
**HJ:** So you felt it really personal?
**Xiomara:** Yeah, I took it to the heart, and it's all based on color of skin, that's how I see it, and where you are from, I mean you cut a Mexican's hand, a Caucasian's hand, you are going to bleed the same color, turn off the light, we are the same people, we have the same heart beat, you know, and its just, I don't know, 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 Dallas, Fernanado Rodriguez, widely credited as a central leader of the day's event, "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 feeling between nervousness and excitement…and kind of wondering what was going to happen….. it was kind of a scary feeling too.

José felt very much the same way.

> **HJ:** When you woke up that morning what kind of feelings were you going through?
> **José:** I was anxious. I was pretty anxious. I'm going to do this. I'm going to go out there and say my . . . whatever I have to say. I was excited. I was pretty jumpy.

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." Just before walking out of her Dallas schhol, Pilar Montejano, born and raised in San Luis Potosi, was afraid for a clear and simple reason.

> HJ**:** Y porque te daba miedo?
> Pilar: Por ya tenia muchas faltas y ya no queria faltar a la escuela, y porque no sabia que nos iban hacer en la escuela, si nos iban a dar tickets, si nos iban a suspender, no sabia lo que iba a pasar, por eso sentia miedo.

Mayra 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 did not have faltas or absences, but the idea of skipping school just 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. [Pause] Am I doing the right thing? [Pause] I guess I just got the courage to walkout. I'm just one of those people who doesn't get in trouble.

Ramiro Hernandez, born and raised in Michoacan, widely recognized as one of the leaders of an Austin high school walkout and described by his principal as a "really good

kid," said of the students he was trying to get to join the protest: "Muchos tenian la dura." They wanted to know from him "¿Quantos hay?" "Ya hay mas de cien. . . Ya hay bastante. . . .Ya se iban."

The Centrality of Non-Normative or Rule-breaking Collective Action

Most of the students we talked to described fear and uncertainty giving way to exhilaration and pride as the walkouts started. The successful and collective breaking of rules, the defiant act accomplished in the face of the risk of reprisal, Mayra Lopez described the early moments of the walkout within her school:

> 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.

As Fernando described it, "We had the whole hallway filled up with people walking out with us, so you know, that got us that more excited."

Norma Perez, a senior at a Dallas high school, born in Michoacán but raised in the United States, described the electrifying experience of defying her Dallas high school principal. At her school, the walkout started at 10:30AM during "the passing period." Once school authorities understood what was happening, they tried to put the school in "lock down." Security guards and teachers tried to block the exist to the school, but, as Norma, described, it was to no avail. "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 exiting one of the school's many exits, she was confronted by the school's principal. He said, "You can't do this." Norma replied, "Oh, Yes I can. You can't stop me." In retelling the event, Norma's voice crackled with excitement and she offered us a quick but passionate

explanation for her defiance. “See it from my perspective. This is going to affect ***my*** family [pause], the people who ***I*** care for, that’s why I’m doing this. I’ll take the consequences.” As she walked out of her school, she looked back at the students streaming out the school, “I couldn’t see the end of the line.”

As the walkouts unfolded and students marched to other schools, parks, city centers, authorities pressed them to end the protest and return to school. In Round Rock the authorities were particularly aggressive in their tactics trying to break up the group of protestors and arresting students. More than an hour into their walkout, Xiamara Bermudez and her sister, Monica, were approached by a school security guard they knew.

> Officer Hayes, he drove up and he was like “Monica come on get on the bus, get on the car, it’s hot out here don’t be doing this” and my sister is like “can’t do it, can’t do it” and I was like “leave her alone.” So we walked up and hm, and they are still arresting people in the back and everybody just started running forward and I was like “ come on Monica, come on” and hm, we somehow got [away]. . .

José Rosa, also from Round Rock, described how students from his high school gathered outside of another school chanting for the students to join the walkout. That school went immediately into “lock down” making it difficult for the students to get out and join the protest. At the same time, police started to arrest students gathered outside.

> All of sudden people start getting arrested, people start freaking out, and start hoping fences and trying to run, and so we kind of get tired and start, we start realizing that Stonypoint ain’t gonna be able to get out and just about that time we see two people running out of Stonypoint 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 on the school and we all get excited, “yeah come on.”

Many of the students we interviewed remember moments of defiance like these as highlights of the walkouts. Mayra Lopez, senior from Dallas, born in Hidalgo, recalls 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. The police was there and they didn't look too amused.

In Round Rock, some students were arrested by police during the walkouts, and after the events, when the students returned to school they were all given citations from the police for violating daytime curfew. These citations were later challenged in court and thrown out. In Dallas and Austin, the walkouters did not get punished, but most of the students feared repercussions and expected them. For example, Norma Perez's principal directly told her "There's going to be severe punishment." At minimum, students feared the consequences about unexcused absences and missing exams. As Pilar Montejano explained, "Yo tiene muchas falta. No sabia si iban dar tickets or suspender." Some worried about missing scheduled exams and whether they would be able to make it up or not. Two of the principals we spoke with described the students involved as "good kids," kids that were conscientious about coming to school and working hard at their studies. These kids knew they were breaking rules and this rule breaking was thrilling.

The Spontaneous, Undirected, and Fluid Nature of the Walkouts

The anxiety leading up to the walkout and then the thrill of the defiant act itself, the emotions of protest, were heightened by the speed and uncertainty of it all. Fernando Rodriguez, one of the publicly recognized leaders of the Monday, March 27, Dallas walkout, started planning for the protest the day before. In our interview, he described how that Sunday morning he was watching "Meet the Press" or some other Sunday morning show and heard news about HR 4437 and proitests in Los Angeles. After going

to church, 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 talked to did not know whether or not they would walkout until the moment they did. Myra Lopez remembers being undecided right up to the point that the walkouts started. She new about the plans 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.. I don't know… 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….

Norma Perez 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 ohh. . .you know. It just happened. Everything just happened." Many students were caught unaware. They had not planned to walkout. Their bags were too heavy and their shoes were not suited for long walks. Leticia De La Garza joined the walkout spontaneously and she quickly realized she would not be able to keep up with all that she was carrying. "I had to stop because my backpack was too big. We dropped it off at a taqueria." Monica Valenzuela had no prior knowledge of the event. She didn't even know the reason for the walkout at first. "I thought okay, their just skipping class." "It wasn't planned at all" according to Monica. "It just happened."

Some schools had LULAC chapters on campus, but LULAC student leaders seemed as surprised as the rest of the students when the walkouts swept their campuses. According to Mayra Lopez, “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. Once underway, walkouters were confused about what to do next. Julia Contreras reported “a lot of confusion at the park. What we going to do know. How we gonna get back. When asked who organized the walkout she said “I have no idea who organized. You just got messages there were tons of messages, Text messages, Yahoo messenger messages, MYspace, It was just going around.” 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.

<u>The Dynamic Symbolic and Emotional Significance of the Walkouts</u>

As the protests wound down, students remember first thinking about 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 thinking when she arrived at the park:

> 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. I was proud. . . .Getting to the park was a great moment. Something I can tell my kids about. I tried to do something, I tried to make a difference. There were a lot of people. Like Togetherness comes really quick when like it comes down to like people getting kicked out. We’re not letting them to beat us down. This is great.

After the Dallas gathering in Kriest Park, students from some schools were bused back to their campuses. The ride back gave the students a buffered moment to think about 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.

Leticia De La Garza a senior born in Gautemala but raised in Dallas spoke for many of her fellow walkouters when she described how she felt about participating: "I felt like, I don't know, proud, you know, 'cause I was actually taking part of something big."

Fernando Rodriguez described the experience this way:

> When you're in the moment it's exciting but you kind of don't take it all in, because you can't because there are so many things going on. But I think when I got home and I seen the news and I seen the amount of students that had gone out and the helicopter views, I thinks that's where I felt the greatest, that's where I was able to just soak it in and see that we were able to pull it off and everything.

Mayra Lopez spoke almost mystically that "from everywhere there surges a leader…for some reason I got it." She summed-up her experience this way:

> I convinced myself to participate. Then after that I saw how everybody's reaction was, after seeing the news, and everybody saying that it was great leadership or something like that, then I got more hyped up about it and then I learned more about the law and I researched it and did whatever I needed to do.

Beatriz was transformed by the events:

> At first I thought I was going to be a biology major, doctor. But now I'm kind of hesitant, I want to go into the political sciences a little bit. And um…yeah, it's changed my life completely…but in a good way. I like it a lot. I'm more involved in the community with everything. It was good.

REFERENCES

Blumer, Herbert. 1939. "Collective Behavior." In R. E. Park (ed.), *An Outline of the Principles of Sociology*. New York: Barnes and Noble.

Calderón, R. (2006). "Immigration Reform & the 2006 Midterm Elections: Making History-Latino Democratic Majorities & the Republicans Failed Racial Policy." University of North Texas, Department of History.

Cohen. 1985

Eiselein, Melissa. (2006, March 25, 2006). “Students Stage Walkouts”. *The Press-Enterprise.*

Flam. 1996

Gamson. 1992

Goodwin, Jeff, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta. 2000. “The Return of the Repressed: The Fall and Rise of Emotions in Social Movement Theory.” *Mobilization* 5: 65-84

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*

Hernández, M. (2005, December 14, 2005). “Immigration Bill.” *Dallas Morning News*.

Jablon, Robert. (2006, March 27, 2006). “Despite Warnings, Thousands of Students Protest Immigration Bill.” The Associated Press Newswires.

Jasper, James M. 1998. “The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and Around Social Movements.” *Sociological Forum*, 13(3): 397-424.

Kierkegaard, Soren. 1980. *The Concept of Anxiety*

Kleinbau, Josh. (2006, March 28, 2006). 26,000 LAUSD Students Protest. *Los Angeles Daily News*.

Malloy, Tim. (2006, March 24, 2006). Immigration Rallies Draw Thousands Nationwide. The Associated Press Newswires.

May, Rollo. 1996 *The Meaning of Anxiety*

McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald. 1988. ASocial Movements.@ In Neil J. Smelser (ed.), *Handbook of Sociology*: 695-737. Newbury Park: Sage.

McPhail, Clark. 1991. *Myth of the Madding Crowd*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Morris, Aldon. 1986. *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*. Free Press: New York.

National Council of La Raza. (2005). National Latino organizations express extreme disappointment with the House support of Sensenbrenner legislation. Retrieved

December 7, 2006, from http://www.nclr.org/content/news/detail/35688

Oliver, Pamela E. 1989. "Bring the Crowd Back In: The Nonorganizational Elements of Social Movements." *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 11: 1-30. 1989.

Piven and Cloward. 1992

Polletta, Francesca. 1998. "It Was Like a Fever...Narrative and Identity in Social Protest." *Social Problems* 45:137-159.

Polletta, Francesca. 2006. *It was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smelser, Neil J. 1963. *A Theory of Collective Behavior*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Stengle, Jamie. (2006, March 28, 2006). Students Leave High Schools, March For Immigrant Rights." The Associated Press State and Local Wire.

Truax, E. (2006, May 1, 2006). "Hora cero para el 'gran boicot': Los inmigrantes se harán oir con paros y marchas en todo el país." *La Opinión*.

Wilson, Kenneth L., and Anthony M. Orum. 1976. AMobilizing People for Collective Political Action.@ *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 4:187-202.

Yan, Holly, Tanwell D. Hobbs and Paul Meyer. (2006, March 28, 2006). "Classrooms Clear Out for Immigration Protest." *Dallas Morning News*.