Title
Participating and Belonging without Papers: Theorizing the Tensions between Incorporation and Exclusion for Undocumented Immigrant Young Adults

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Publication Date
2014

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Participating and Belonging without Papers:
Theorizing the Tensions between Incorporation and Exclusion for
Undocumented Immigrant Young Adults

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

by

Laura Elise Enriquez

2014
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Participating and Belonging without Papers:
Theorizing the Tensions between Incorporation and Exclusion for
Undocumented Immigrant Young Adults

by

Laura Elise Enriquez

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor Vilma Ortiz, Chair

We know relatively little about how undocumented immigrant youth, who entered the U.S. as children, are being incorporated into U.S. society as young adults. To fill this gap, I draw on 123 in-depth interviews with 92 undocumented and 31 recently legalized Latino young adults, ages 20-35. Unlike existing scholarship, I examine the experiences of individuals from a range of education levels and address experiences outside of educational institutions (e.g. work, family formation). I find that undocumented young adults experience incomplete incorporation because structural barriers prevent them from fully participating in society in the ways that they desire and expect, giving rise to feelings of exclusion. Specifically, I explore how their undocumented status limits their participation and feelings of belonging in educational, economic, and social institutions. I also address how educational status and gender intersect with the limitations of
their undocumented status to differentiate their experiences. While assimilation theorists conceptualize immigrant incorporation as participation in various social institutions, I contend that we must also examine feelings of belonging as a distinct aspect of incorporation. Thus, I re-conceptualize immigrant incorporation as the process through which an immigrant becomes a full member of society, not only by participating in social institutions but also by asserting feelings of belonging. This highlights the understudied dimension of emotional exclusion, and demonstrates how it intersects with structural exclusion to limit incorporation.
The dissertation of Laura Elise Enriquez is approved.

Leisy J. Abrego
Abigail C. Saguy
Min Zhou
Vilma Ortiz, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the undocumented young adults who were willing to share their stories with me. Despite busy schedules and beliefs that they would have little to say, they welcomed me into their lives and referred me to their friends and family members. I am grateful that they trusted me with the intimate details of their lives and had faith that the questions I was asking were important. In many ways, a large part of this dissertation was inspired by the exclamations and sighs that my first question elicited and the tears and laughter that followed. While I relay their stories of struggle and exclusion in the following pages, I also hope that I have captured the agency, sense of humor, and critical eye that have helped them negotiate these limitations. It is by focusing on their strength and resilience that we will be able to see and challenge the injustice of the current U.S. immigration system.

This project was enabled by financial support at various stages. A pre-dissertation fellowship from the Social Science Research Council’s Dissertation Proposal Development Program provided me with funds to conduct a pilot study and the opportunity to learn from an interdisciplinary group of graduate students and senior scholars interested in Migration and Gender. This group provided me with the space to flesh out the scope of the project and center the role of gender in my questions. The data collection was generously funded by dissertation research grants from the National Science Foundation, the University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States (UC-MEXUS), and the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. I am also grateful to the Ford Foundation and UCLA which awarded me pre-dissertation and dissertation fellowships that allowed me to immerse myself in this project.

I am also fortunate to have been guided by a number of thoughtful and caring mentors. Vilma Ortiz has supported me since my first day of graduate school when I walked into her
office and told her I wanted to write a dissertation about the lives of undocumented young adults. Through thoughtful mentorship and critical questions, she has helped me flesh out my initial vision and given me the space to run with my ideas (and then helped wrangle them in). Her willingness to listen to ideas and read drafts has been invaluable. In addition, I am grateful for the enduring enthusiasm that Leisy Abrego, Katharine Donato, Gilda Ochoa, Abigail Saguy, and Min Zhou have shown for my work. They patiently listened to my ideas, read drafts, pointed me in new directions, and helped me refine and clarify my thinking. Further, I am forever grateful for Gilda Ochoa’s mentorship over the past ten years; she introduced me to the power of sociology, taught me the research skills that have enabled my work, and showed me what it means to critically engage research as a tool to positively impact communities.

I am also grateful to my many colleagues. First, I must recognize the never-ending support of Irene Vega who has been with me either in-person or virtually as I have written this dissertation. She provided emotional support throughout the project, helped me talk through my ideas, and has never held back when critiquing my work. The women of the Race and Immigration Research Group at UCLA – Karina Chavarria, Deisy Del Real, Rocio Garcia, Celia Lacayo, Miriam Martinez, Erica Morales, Laura Orrico, Casandra Salgado, Ariana Valle, Irene Vega, Sylvia Zamora – gave me invaluable feedback on various drafts of dissertation chapters and articles and listed to countless versions of my job talk. William Rosales, Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and I survived the initial years of graduate school together and I am grateful that we have continued to support each other by reading drafts of each other’s work and talking out ideas over lunches and happy hours. I am also thankful to Susila Gurusami, Claudia Lopez, Anthony Ocampo, Elena Shih, Phi Su, and Veronica Terriquez for their support and feedback.
I am forever thankful to my friends and family who have listened to me talk about my work and lovingly told me when to stop talking about it. My parents and brother have always supported me, cheering me on while reminding me to take time of. My mom sent me to my computer to write long enough to make sure my weekends were sufficiently productive and then promptly distract me for the rest of the day. I am also thankful to my grandparents, aunts, uncles, mother-in-law, sisters-in-law, and cousins who have always been excited to hear about what I’m writing at the time. Además, gracias a mi suegra por todo su apoyo buscando personas para entrevistar. Finally, my friends – Liz Ceja, Sandra Hamada, Erick Huerta, Iris Gardner, Jodie Pham, and Stephanie Roman – have kept me grounded in reality as I wrote this dissertation.

Lastly, I must recognize Miguel Carvente, without him this dissertation would have been the product of a much more painful process. Thank you for letting me talk through my ideas and repeating them back to me so I could hear how they fit together. You have kept me sane throughout this process – knowing exactly when to drag me away from my desk and when to send me back to work. You have always had faith that I could weave these stories together and do them justice, even when I had my doubts. This would not have been possible without you.
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“Because We Feel the Pressure and We Also Feel the Support: Undocumented Latina/o Students' Educational Success.” *Pacific Sociological Association Conference*. San Diego, CA. April 2009.

INTRODUCTION

You know the famous sign around San Diego—the mother and father and they’re pulling the little girl along. Nobody looks at that little girl and thinks, “What happens to her when she grows up?”

Stephanie, an undocumented young adult who came to the U.S. as a young child, poses this question in the documentary *Lost and Found* to highlight how undocumented immigration status comes to limit the opportunities of undocumented immigrant children as they enter young adulthood (Tran 2007). Of the estimated twelve million undocumented individuals in the United States, almost a fifth are 1.5 generation undocumented youth and young adults who entered the U.S. as children under the age of 16 and are currently under the age of 35 (Batalova and McHugh 2010; Passel et al. 2013). Given the young age of this population and their contested access to higher education institutions, most research has focused on their educational experiences, particularly access to and experiences in college (Abrego 2006, 2008; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Chavez et al. 2007; Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Enriquez 2011, 2014; Flores 2010; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Gonzales 2010; Greenman and Hall 2013; Huber and Malagon 2007; Perez 2012; Perez et al. 2009).¹ This research reveals that most undocumented youth realize the limitations associated with their undocumented status when they exit high school, attempt to access higher education, and begin to transition into adulthood where they learn they cannot obtain a driver’s license or legal employment (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2011). While this highlights the inequalities created by undocumented status in early young adulthood, we know relatively little about what happens to undocumented young adults as they leave school (whether it be high school or college), enter the workforce, and begin to form families.

¹ Other research on undocumented young adults focuses on their political participation (for examples see Enriquez 2014; Gonzales 2008; Nicholls 2013; Perez et al. 2010; Seif 2004, 2011; The S.I.N. Collective 2007)
This dissertation addresses how the structural limitations and uncertain futures associated with undocumented immigration status affect immigrant incorporation by examining the educational, economic, and social incorporation of undocumented young adults. In addition to filling a substantive gap, I use the case of undocumented young adults to unpack the immigrant incorporation process laid out by assimilation theory. Drawing on 123 in-depth interviews with 92 undocumented and 31 recently legalized Latina/o young adults ages 20-35, I examine how educational, economic, and social participation are connected to and informed by feelings of belonging and exclusion. I find that undocumented young adults experience incomplete incorporation because structural barriers prevent them from fully participating in society in the ways that they desire and expect, giving rise to feelings of exclusion. While assimilation theory traditionally conceptualizes immigrant incorporation as participation in various social institutions, I argue that we must also examine these feelings of belonging and exclusion as distinct aspects of incorporation. Thus, I re-conceptualize immigrant incorporation as the process through which an immigrant becomes a full member of society, not only by participating in social institutions but also by developing feelings of belonging. This highlights the understudied dimension of emotional exclusion, and demonstrates how it intersects with structural exclusion to limit incorporation.

“ILLEGALITY” AND THE STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION STATUS

“Illegality” is a state of legal non-existence in which an “individual can be physically present but legally absent” (Coutin 2007, 9). Various structural mechanisms produce and sustain this state of “illegality” – demand for cheap labor; immigration laws and border militarization; immigration enforcement policies and deportation threats; differential access to rights and social
services; public discourse and social attitudes (Chavez 2007; De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Menjívar 2006b; Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014; Ngai 2004; Willen 2007). Additionally, “illegality” has severe consequences for the daily lives of undocumented immigrants as they develop a fear of deportation which leaves them vulnerable to employer abuse (Chavez 1998; Nessel 2001), limits their physical mobility (Núñez and Heyman 2007), restricts their ability to provide opportunities for their children (Yoshikawa 2012), and curtails their social and political participation (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Enriquez 2014; Sigona 2012; Willen 2007). This concept allows us to center the legally-imposed, structural limitations associated with undocumented immigration status.

At its most basic level, “illegality” and undocumented immigration status mean that an individual does not have permission to be in the country and thus is subject to deportation. In the current U.S. context, the actual threat of deportation is rising with President Barack Obama on track to deport over two million individuals by 2014, more than all the deportations conducted before 1997 (Golash-Boza 2013). As a result, a quarter of Latinos reported that they knew someone who was detained by immigration officials or deported in the past year (Lopez et al. 2011). Although a significant number of individuals are deported, the threat of deportation, or their “deportability,” increases the marginalizing effects of deportation policies by promoting a constant state of hypervigilance and fear in everyday life (De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Attempting to minimize the risk of deportation, many undocumented immigrants limit their social participation (Menjívar 2011; Sigona 2012). Further, this fear of deportation extends to affect immigrant physical mobility when they are unable to obtain a driver’s license.²

² Most states, including California during the period when this research was conducted, deny undocumented immigrants access to a driver’s license (National Immigration Law Center 2013b).
These threats and fears can also extend to stress families and communities with undocumented members (Dreby 2012; Hagan et al. 2010; Menjívar and Abrego 2012).

Undocumented immigrants’ are also unable to legally access employment without a social security number. These legal limitations relegate undocumented immigrants to jobs where they work “under-the-table” and are underpaid, exploited and exposed to unsafe working conditions (Chavez 1998; Gleeson 2010; Nessel 2001). Further, they earn significantly less than their documented peers with a wage penalty of approximately 14-24% (Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002). These economic limitations can promote economic instability which also has consequences for their educational and social incorporation as individuals struggle to afford higher education, leisure activities, or provide for their children (Díaz-Strong et al. 2011; Yoshikawa 2012). These economic limitations then restrict their economic and residential mobility, keeping them in overcrowded, impoverished areas with limited resources (Chavez 1998).

While studies on “illegality” have mapped the basic structural limitations associated with undocumented immigration status, relatively few scholars have examined how the consequences of “illegality” are experienced differently from various social locations. Leisy Abrego (2011) demonstrates that there are generational differences as 1.5 generation immigrant young adults are distinct from first generation immigrant adults because they grow up in different social contexts and develop different legal consciousnesses. Further, we know that the racialization of undocumented migration as a Latina/o issue can mark Latinas/os as undocumented and differentiate their experiences from non-Latina/o undocumented immigrants (Bangalon et al. 2012; Chan 2010; Chavez 2008; Ngai 2004). However, it remains unclear how other social locations like educational status and gender differentiate the experiences of undocumented
Latina/o young adults. Given that the structural mechanisms that produce “illegality” (e.g. migration patterns and opportunities) are gendered (Donato 2010; Hagan 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994), this dissertation pays particular attention to gendered differences.

ASSIMILATION THEORY AND IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION: A THEORETICAL FOCUS ON PARTICIPATION AND STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

Immigrant incorporation has largely been examined through the lens of assimilation theory. Developed to explain the incorporation of European immigrants in the early 20th century, classical assimilation theories predict that racial/ethnic differences will diminish over time as each subsequent generation becomes increasingly structurally incorporated into the core group (Gordon 1964; Park 1950; Warner and Srole 1945). In response to the divergent experiences of post-1965, non-White immigrants, segmented assimilation theories consider racial/ethnic identities and communities as dimensions that affect incorporation in conjunction with structural factors. As a result, they predict three types of assimilation: an upward path into the White, middle-class mainstream, a downward path into the underclass, and an upward path into the middle-class enabled by the ethnic community (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). Most recently, neo-classical theorists like Alba and Nee (2003) sought to streamline these paths by redefining the mainstream as the White, middle-class individuals centered in classical theory but also the minority groups and low-income individuals discussed in segmented theory.

Though these three versions of assimilation theory predict different incorporation patterns for various racial/ethnic groups, they all focus on how participating in social institutions increases incorporation levels. In other words, structural limitations limit incorporation by preventing participation. For example, Gordon (1964) hypothesized that structural assimilation – or participation in mainstream institutions – was the key to eventual full incorporation. Similarly,
studies focus heavily on identifying structural factors, like governmental policies and co-ethnic community structures, that affect how various immigrant groups carve out a place to participate in society (Menjívar 2000; Portes and Shafer 2007; Zhou and Bankston III 1998; Zhou and Kim 2006). These structural understandings of incorporation lead scholars to focus on specific participatory outcomes to assess incorporation patterns in each type of social institution. For example, political incorporation is assessed through naturalization rates, voting patterns, community advocacy, and being elected to political office (Bloemraad 2006; Cho 1999; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Wong 2006); economic incorporation through employment status, number of hours worked per week, earnings, occupational status, homeownership, and wealth (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Telles and Ortiz 2008); and educational incorporation through GPAs, test scores, high school graduation rates, and degree attainment (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Studying each of these types of institutional-level incorporation on their own, as I do, allows us to understand the process that leads to each type of incorporation and contributes to larger incorporation patterns.

FEELINGS OF BELONGING AND EXCLUSION: THE EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

While assimilation theory accounts for the ways that structural limitations impact institutional participation and thus immigrant incorporation, my findings suggest that undocumented young adults are participating in U.S. society but are not completely incorporated because structural barriers prevent them from fully participating in society in the ways that they desire and expect, giving rise to feelings of exclusion. Thus, I argue that we must also examine feelings of belonging and exclusion to gain a fuller sense of immigrant incorporation processes.
Feelings of belonging tie an individual to a community through feelings of social and psychological membership where an emotional attachment makes individuals feel “at home” and “safe” (Bloemraad 2006; Flores and Benmayor 1997; Joppke 2010; Taylor 1992; Yuval-Davis 2006). Individuals seek to carve out their own spaces of belonging by forging friendships with similarly identified individuals; these can then be transformed into networks of individuals where informal spaces or permanent cultural institutions can be constructed to function as safe spaces (Caldwell et al. 2009; Flores and Benmayor 1997; Rosaldo 1994). Within the immigration literature, these feelings of belonging are generally studied in terms of national attachment, often measured through racial/ethnic identification. For example, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) use individual’s racial self-identification into national-origin, pan-ethnic, or hyphenated American categories to assess the “sites of belonging” of the children of immigrants. While assimilation scholars clearly acknowledge the significance of identification and belonging, focusing on a singular outcome variable misses the micro-processes that produce these identities and their associated feelings of belonging and/or exclusion. Examining the day-to-day micro-processes that lead to these feelings of belonging and identification can shed light on how these feelings are connected to larger patterns of participation and incorporation.

Undocumented youth spend their childhood believing that they are no different from their U.S. citizen peers because they are guaranteed the right to participate in K-12 educational institutions (Abrego 2006; Bosniak 2006; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Motomura 2010; Olivas 2005). This early and significant educational right essentially leads to their institutional and social incorporation into U.S. society and encourages them to develop a sense of symbolic membership that connects them to their host country (Abrego 2008; Perry 2006). In other words, the rights afforded to undocumented young adults and their early feelings of belonging set them
up to believe that they will be able to participate in U.S. society and remain incorporated.
However, the limitations created by their undocumented status prevents this as they enter young adulthood and realize the structural limitations that their immigration status poses to their educational, economic, political, and social participation (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2011; Sigona 2012). Yet, their prior incorporation serves as a means to claim that they belong. Specifically, they draw upon these past experiences where they were treated as full members to argue that they are substantive members of U.S. society because they are long-term residents, participate in community institutions like schools, pay taxes, claim a U.S. identity, demonstrate patriotism, plan a future in the U.S., obey laws, and participate in political and labor movements (Buff 2006; Flores 1997; Milkman 2000; Perry 2006; Rogers et al. 2008; Varsanyi 2006). Yet, having to assert that they belong highlights how they have been structurally excluded and do not fully belong. Essentially, they realize that they will not be able to participate in the ways they desire and expect, and develop feelings of exclusion rather than belonging.

While assimilation theory focuses on how participation levels are directly related to incorporation levels, I contend that we should include feelings of belonging as a distinct actor in this incorporation process because of its significant impact on individual’s day-to-day lives. I suggest that disentangling these two factors will allow us to clarify instances where exclusion is produced and understand how it limits incorporation. Current theories of incorporation would predict that many undocumented young adults would have high levels of incorporation because they have high levels of participation – attending school, holding jobs, participating in political advocacy, or hanging out with friends and building social networks. However, my research shows that, while undocumented young adults are doing these things, they have lower levels of incorporation than this model predicts. Thus, I re-conceptualize immigrant incorporation as the
process through which an immigrant becomes a full member of society, not only by participating in social institutions but also by developing feelings of belonging. Thus, as Figure 1 suggests, incorporation is the product of participation and feelings of belonging as these two aspects reciprocally affect one another and work together to determine an individual’s level of incorporation. This process is disrupted in the case of undocumented young adults because their structural limitations prevent full participation which leads them to develop feelings of exclusion, rather than feelings of belonging. This re-conceptualization allows us to highlight the understudied dimension of emotional exclusion, and demonstrate how it intersects with structural exclusion to limit incorporation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To address the substantive and theoretical gaps in the literature, this dissertation addresses the following research questions:

1. How does undocumented immigration status affect levels of participation and feelings of belonging in educational, economic, and familial institutions?
2. How do educational status and gender affect levels of participation and feelings of belonging in educational, economic, and familial institutions?
3. How do participation and feelings of belonging within these various institutional contexts come together to produce and shape the overall incorporation levels of undocumented young adults?

**METHODOLOGY**

Undocumented young adults occupy a unique social location as both social insiders and outsiders; this makes them a productive case for assessing the impact that feelings of belonging and exclusion have on incorporation (Bosniak 2006). As such, I draw on in-depth interviews with 92 undocumented young adults and 31 formerly undocumented young adults who legalized their immigration status in the past five years. All respondents are 1.5 generation young adults, having entered the United States before the age of 16 and currently being between 20 and 35. Most have spent the majority of their lives living in the U.S. and participating in U.S. institutions. Specifically, 40% arrived before the age of six and completed all of their schooling in the U.S., another 40% arrived between ages 6-10 to enter elementary school, and 20% arrived between ages 11-16 to start middle school or early high school in the U.S. I only interviewed Latinas/os since this group makes up 77% of the undocumented population. Given that the majority (59%) of the undocumented population is Mexican-origin, I primarily interviewed Mexican-origin individuals with three undocumented respondents from Guatemala, one legalized respondent from El Salvador and one legalized respondent from Peru.

My research questions, data collection, and data analysis were guided by two main points of comparison: *educational status* and *gender*. Educational status mediates the experiences of undocumented young adults because educational institutions are one of the main areas where they have explicit access to rights and are able to use education-based laws to assert a sense of legitimacy and belonging (Abrego 2008; Bosniak 2006; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Motomura
In addition, the literature on gendered inequality suggests that these young adults will have divergent experiences that vary within and among multiple institutional contexts because of gender roles, stereotypes, and expectations (Abrego 2009; Donato 2010; Hagan 1998; Hardy-Fanta 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Lopez 2003; Menjívar 1999; Ridgeway 2011).

In order to draw comparisons across gender and educational status, I purposively sampled respondents to include relatively equal numbers of men and women from six education levels: (1) did not complete high school, (2) completed high school, (3) attended a 2-year college but did not complete an associate’s degree, (4) currently attending a 2-year college, (5) currently attending a 4-year university, and (6) attended a 4-year university and completed a bachelor’s degree. The number of undocumented respondents in each category can be found in Table 1.

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The 31 formerly undocumented respondents were also stratified by gender – 14 men and 17 women. Given the limited size and accessibility of this population, I was unable to stratify these respondents by education level. The majority (19) had completed 4-year college; four were currently attending a 4-year university, four had attended a 2-year college but not completed a degree, two were high school graduates, and two did not complete high school.

Interviews were conducted between November 2011 and August 2012 in Southern California. All participants lived in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, or Orange County during the time of the interview and the vast majority had lived, gone to school, and worked in these counties since arriving in the U.S. All three counties are all in the top ten metropolitan areas with the largest undocumented populations (Fortuny et al. 2007). I initiated snowball sampling by
selecting twelve individuals with varying levels of education and separate social networks from the extensive networks I had built through four years of previous research with college and community-based undocumented youth organizations. To increase representativeness, I used a dual-incentive technique (see Heckathorn 1997) where participants received a $20 incentive for being interviewed and an additional $10 incentive for referring others, usually extended family members, neighbors, former classmates, coworkers, and friends. Participants chose the language of the interview; all but five elected to be interviewed in English. Spanish-language interview quotes were translated into English with the original quote provided in footnotes. Spanish terms used in English interviews were retained with translations provided in brackets.

Interviews lasted an average of two hours and were directed by a semi-structured interview guide that collected detailed histories of their immigration experience, their natal family, and their participation in school, work, dating, marriage, parenting, and political and community involvement. For each institutional context, I asked questions to understand how their experiences are affected by their immigration status and/or gender, if they feel like they belong, and how their experiences compare to other undocumented individuals as well as citizen friends and family members. I also asked detailed questions about their overall feelings of membership and belonging; questions addressed their future plans, the rights they think they have, their ways of defining and practicing citizenship, the importance of gaining legal status, and how they claim a right to legalization. Interviews with formerly undocumented young adults also included questions in each section concerning how adjusting their legal status changed or shifted their participation, feelings of belonging, and understandings of citizenship. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using open coding techniques in HyperResearch, a qualitative data management program.
CHAPTER OUTLINE

In the following five substantive chapters, I analyze participation, feelings of belonging, and incorporation within the areas of education, work, and family formation. Chapter 1 sets up my theoretical contribution by establishing the complexity and importance of feelings of belonging. I find that respondents maintain two definitions of belonging: 1) legal permission to live in the U.S. and 2) incorporation or “fitting in.” These definitions stem, respectively, from their simultaneous legal exclusion and inclusion. I demonstrate that these contradictions provide an opportunity for undocumented young adults to draw on the second definition, and the feelings of belonging it promotes, to challenge their exclusion and claim access to rights and legal status. Chapter 2 addresses educational incorporation and demonstrates that educational mobility (i.e. transferring out of ESL classes, going to college) promotes structural incorporation but exposes undocumented young adults to the limitations of their immigration status, giving rise to feelings of exclusion. This suggests that structural incorporation is not necessarily accompanied by social-emotional incorporation, which leads to the ambiguous incorporation patterns of this population. Chapter 3 explores their economic incorporation to show that, contrary to undocumented immigrants who migrate as adults, this group tends to hold relatively “better” jobs as office works or managers in service industries. Further, their socialization to U.S. norms and rights, English language ability, and early stage in the life course encourage them to speak out against labor violations and mistreatment. Despite their apparent economic incorporation, their undocumented status produces feelings of exclusion due to their relative immobility, both within and among jobs. The final two chapters assess social incorporation through the lens of family formation and confirm the feelings of exclusion that arise when undocumented status prevents them from participating in the ways they desire and expect. Chapter 4 examines dating
experiences to reveal that undocumented young adults must continually negotiate their immigration status as they confront cultural norms around dating, including gender schemas and expectations that they will marry a citizen to legalize their immigration status. These cultural norms restrict their ability to fully participate and feel comfortable in social situations, influencing the extent of their participation and affecting partner preferences. Chapter 5 focuses on parenting and demonstrates that undocumented status encourages individuals to delay or avoid having children. Those who are parents feel inadequate as their citizen children experience “intergenerational punishment” where their dependency on an undocumented parent makes them de facto targets of immigration enforcement and limits their opportunities for upward mobility.
CHAPTER 1

“I Fit In [But] I Don’t Know If I Belong”: Reconceptualizing Citizenship and Belonging in the U.S. through the Eyes of Undocumented Young Adults

I do feel like I belong here. And that’s a dilemma within [me] because I’m told otherwise. The lack of a social security number is constantly reminding me I don’t [belong]. But my culture, my friends, my community, my neighborhood, the [community] work that I do – everything else roots me here.

– Edith Sandoval

Given their lack of legal status and desire for formal citizenship, undocumented young adults navigate complex notions of citizenship and belonging on a daily basis. Edith characterizes this as a “dilemma” wherein she, and other undocumented young adults, negotiate two simultaneous definitions of belonging: (1) legal permission to live in the U.S. and (2) incorporation or fitting into U.S. society. These two definitions of belonging lead to opposing feelings. The first definition focuses on legal status and promotes feelings of exclusion because she does not have access to the formal documents that she needs to feel equal to other members of U.S. society. Alternatively, the second definition of belonging as incorporation draws on ideas of participation, acculturation, and emotion to facilitate her assertion that she feels like she belongs, despite this structural exclusion. The simultaneous deployment of these two definitions explains why undocumented young adults feel that they do but do not belong at the same time. Edith’s experiences also hint at a relationship between these two types of belonging – while the legal status definition of belonging has the power to make her feel excluded, the incorporation definition of belonging provides an opportunity to contest her structural exclusion and claim access to formal citizenship and rights. Investigating these tensions and multiple definitions of

3 All names and identifying information have been changed to protect confidentiality.
belonging sheds light on the relationship between various dimensions of citizenship and the work these theoretical concepts can perform in daily life.

In a review of contemporary citizenship literature, Irene Bloemraad Anna Korteweg and Gökçe Yurdakul (2008) identify four dimensions of contemporary citizenship: legal status, rights, (political) participation, and sense of belonging. Legal status designates formal state membership and can be described simply as passport-holding (Joppke 2010). This status, or lack of status, is then used to determine who is granted political, civil, and social rights (Brubaker 1989; Carrens 1987). By providing these rights, citizenship enables an individual to participate. Whereas this is often conceptualized as purely political participation, all activities can be understood as inherently political which suggests that rights also provide for civic, social, and economic participation (Marshall 1950; Walzer 1983; Yuval-Davis 1999). Given the status, rights, and participation it fosters, citizenship also generates a sense of belonging that ties an individual to a community through feelings of social and psychological membership (Bloemraad 2006; Joppke 2010; Taylor 1992). Although these four dimensions capture the range of citizenship definitions, this typology does not adequately specify the relationships among these dimensions nor how they are understood and deployed on the ground.

Theories of substantive and cultural citizenship shed some light on the connection between these four dimensions by looking at the ways in which marginalized groups claim rights based on political, social, and/or cultural participation. Substantive citizenship has been used to highlight the importance of civil, political, and social rights and demonstrate how political participation and civic engagement can be used to claim and establish membership (Bloemraad 2006; Marshall 1950; Perry 2006). Alternatively, cultural citizenship focuses on how cultural practices – tradition, language, artistic expression – contribute to political and social
consciousness and rights claiming (Flores 2003; Flores and Benmayor 1997). Undocumented immigrants have been found to practice both substantive and cultural citizenship despite their lack of legal status (Flores 1997; Perry 2006). Together, these theories demonstrate that there is a strong connection between the participation and rights dimensions of citizenship and suggest that these can be accessed regardless of the legal status dimension. However, these theories do not adequately address the role of the sense of belonging dimension nor do they account for the tensions my respondents experience.

This chapter addresses these two gaps in the citizenship literature to develop a better understanding of how belonging is experienced and related to other dimensions of citizenship. Since examining the experiences of those who lack one dimension of citizenship is a productive way of assessing other dimensions (Bosniak 2006), I categorize undocumented young adults’ definitions of citizenship and belonging and analyze the tensions that are revealed through their lived understandings of these concepts. In the first section I explore the legal permission definition of belonging advanced by my respondents and the feelings of exclusion that they experience. In the second, I address the incorporation definition, the feelings of belonging they have developed, and the ways that they assert their right to legalization.

Throughout this chapter I advance three main theoretical contributions which allow us to understand how undocumented young adults, and other marginalized populations, can profess simultaneous feelings of exclusion and belonging and how this affects their claims-making strategies. First, I contend that the four dimensions that Bloemraad and colleagues (2008) identify are, at least in the U.S. case, hierarchically related and can be organized into, what I term, primary and secondary sources of citizenship. Legal status and rights are primary sources of citizenship and are externally granted by the nation-state. Participation and sense of belonging
are secondary sources of citizenship and are individually determined through relational and self-reflective activities. This categorization helps account for the conflicting definitions of belonging that my respondents have developed. The legal permission definition of belonging can be credited to their inability to access primary sources of citizenship and the incorporation definition of belonging can be attributed to their attainment of secondary sources of citizenship. Secondly, I suggest that the *sense of belonging* dimension should be recategorized as an *identification* dimension, leaving *belonging* to be conceptualized, like citizenship, as a multi-dimensional concept. Not only does this reflect how individuals understand and define belonging, but *identification* better captures the emotional and cultural strategies that I find among undocumented young adults’ secondary sources of citizenship. Finally, I contend that these theoretical categorizations become relevant for understanding the lives of individuals because secondary sources of citizenship can be used to claim access to primary sources of citizenship. In this case, undocumented young adults draw on their participation, culture, and emotions to make context-specific claims that they should be granted access to rights and a pathway to legalization.

**FEELING EXCLUDED: LEGAL STATUS AND RIGHTS AS PRIMARY SOURCES OF CITIZENSHIP**

Undocumented young adults face significant barriers to their educational and occupational opportunities due to their immigration status (Abrego 2006; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2011). At some point during their interviews, all of my respondents speak of these barriers and the structural and interpersonal exclusion they produce. When discussing their feelings of belonging, they point to these exclusionary experiences as they struggle to say that they unequivocally belong in the U.S. These marginalizing experiences and persistent feelings of
exclusion encourage them to define citizenship in relation to legal status and rights dimensions of citizenship and to conceptualize belonging as legal permission to be present in the U.S. They suggest that rights and legal status are intertwined in their effects and in the fact that they are both externally granted by the government. These experiences indicate that the legal status and rights dimensions are primary sources of citizenship because they are central to one’s ability to equally navigate the U.S. social context and because this definition often trumps the second definition that focuses on fitting in. Exploring the feelings of exclusion that result from lacking these two dimensions suggests that belonging is more than simply one dimension of citizenship.

**Legal Status- and Rights- Based Definitions of Citizenship and Belonging**

Undocumented young adults primarily conceptualize citizenship as the product of the legal status and rights dimensions of citizenship that Bloemraad and colleagues identify. Almost every respondent refers to one or both of these aspects in response to questions about what citizenship means. About half of respondents define citizenship primarily as legal status, giving answers similar to Marissa Rivera’s – “It’s just somebody that has papers” – or Ignacio Nunez’ – “People that are born over here.” While most expand upon these answers and/or critique these realities, legal status is at the heart of their definition of citizenship. Alternatively, most of the remaining respondents define citizenship primarily as access to rights and privileges, giving answers similar to Alicia Medina’s – “That you have more rights here” – or Pablo Ortiz’ – “The privilege of really pursuing all the things that you have in this country.” Whether focusing on rights or legal status, almost every respondent suggests that these aspects make up the primary definition of citizenship because they are critical for providing equal opportunities to participate in U.S. society.
Respondents also reveal that these two definitions are intertwined because the nation-state determines access to both and they jointly affect how individuals are able to navigate day-to-day activities. Antonio Mendez explicitly makes this connection:

It’s like the government is telling a group of people that you’re undocumented and that because you’re undocumented you don’t have the same rights. I mean your rights will be violated and you will be treated differently – you won’t get [a] driver’s license, you won’t be able to take out medicine [Sudafed\textsuperscript{4}] from just local pharmacies unless you have a state issued ID, you won’t get a job legally.

Not only are legal status and rights inherently linked and determined by governmental laws and policies, but they are critical for structuring equal treatment and participation in U.S. society. Specifically, Antonio connects his feelings of exclusion to the fact that his legal status prevents him from accessing the same rights as citizens. These limited rights and blocked opportunities for equal participation reinforce the primary importance of, and link between, the legal status and rights aspects of citizenship.

The significance of these legal status and rights dimensions encourages undocumented young adults to prioritize a definition of belonging as legal permission to live in the U.S. Christina Guzman provides a clear example of this in her assertion that she does not feel like she belongs in the U.S.:

Who belongs here and who doesn’t is defined through someone’s citizenship. Someone says whether you’re allowed to be here or not. … I would like to be able to go somewhere and live somewhere just based on what I can contribute, based on what I know. … But that’s not our reality. … I feel the oppression. I’m made to feel that I don’t belong here. As much as I fight it, you can’t help but feel that way.

Despite acknowledging a desire to think about citizenship as participating or contributing, Christina’s exclusionary experiences have forced her to recognize the primacy of her legal status when defining citizenship and belonging. This suggests that exclusionary and marginalizing

\textsuperscript{4} A state issued ID is required to purchase Sudafed, an over-the-counter medication used to treat common cold symptoms, because it can be used to manufacture methamphetamines.
experiences play a central role in reinforcing the significance of institutionally-granted legal status and rights and determining the primacy of the legal permission definition of citizenship.

**On Not Belonging: Structural and Interpersonal Contexts of Exclusion**

Building on this definition of citizenship as legal permission to remain in the U.S., approximately two thirds of respondents explicitly say that they do not belong because of the structural and interpersonal exclusion they face. Yet, many assert that they feel like they should belong. For example, Zen Cruz draws a distinction between fitting in and belonging to negotiate this fine difference between feeling and asserting belonging:

I feel like I fit now. But belong? Not exactly. It’s a different type of [feeling]. I’ve picked up enough of the norms and I’ve been able to assimilate. But to say that I belong, meaning in a sense that I can have the same opportunities that other people have and that I can grow from here and expand from here, and take my own matters into my own hands, no. … I can’t get a job that really pays well. I can’t build a credit line … All that stuff that normal people have and a lot of ‘em have at the age of 18. I’m 26 now and that’s nowhere near where I am. So, no. I don’t feel like I belong yet. But it feels like I fit.

Although Zen makes a strong case for why he should belong, he explains that his legal status has raised barriers, preventing him from pursuing the same opportunities as citizens and confirming that he does not currently belong. Not only does this draw on a legal permission definition of citizenship, but it suggests that the rejection – or feelings of exclusion – raised by one’s undocumented status trumps the sense of belonging that may stem from this alternative definition of belonging. In other words, the exclusion undocumented young adults experience is more powerful than the belonging they assert. I find that these feelings of exclusion can result from both the legal and interpersonal rejection that results from their undocumented status. The predominance of these feelings of exclusion give additional weight to the legal status and rights dimensions of citizenship, further suggesting that these are primary sources of citizenship.
**Structural Exclusion**

Most respondents’ feelings of exclusion stem from structural and legal barriers that prevent their equal participation in U.S. society. Like Zen above, thirty-nine respondents explicitly note that they do not feel like they belong because they do not have access to certain opportunities or rights. In addition, at some point during his/her interview, every respondent discusses how he/she has been denied access to some resource or right. This structural exclusion prevents undocumented young adults from feeling like they belong and helps convince them that legal status and rights compose primary sources of citizenship that are essential for being treated as equal to legal citizens and permanent residents.

Feelings of exclusion tend to emanate from being legally denied access to the resources needed to participate in U.S. society. For example, Amanda Loera explains that she does not feel like she belongs because her undocumented status prevents her from accessing the documents she needs in order to participate in the way she desires, “I want to be here. [But] no [I don’t belong] because I can’t drive, I can’t go to school. … If I just had a green card [legal permanent residency], a social security, and a drivers license, it would be great.” Despite her desire to belong, her inability to participate like other members of U.S. society prevents her from feeling like she belongs. Pointing specifically to her longing for the documentation that accompanies legal residency, she demonstrates how belonging is inextricably tied to legal permission and rights. Expanding on the significance of the documentation and rights that come with legal status, Diego Ibanez and Abby Ortiz discuss how lacking a state-issued ID excludes them from social participation and makes them feel like they don’t belong.

*Diego:* It just goes back to the same thing – papers. It makes the whole difference. The fact that I can’t be working at school [because I don’t have a social security number], that's the sense of not belonging here. Or the right not to vote. It means
that you don’t belong here in this country. The fact that I can’t travel, or enjoy other things that Americans do. Apply into a credit card.

*Abby:* When we’re driving. … We can’t get a license … [but] we have insurance. We try to be as straight as we can with everything. And it’s like it’s never gonna be enough because [of] the lack of [a] social security [number], the lack of license, ID. I mean even to recycle … they ask you for California ID!

Both Diego and Abby discuss the importance of various forms of legal paperwork – driver’s licenses, state-issued IDs, social security numbers – and how it prevents them from being able to participate in the same way as their peers who are citizens and legal permanent residents. Diego notes that this blocks opportunities for educational, economic, and political participation and Abby asserts that a lack of legal paperwork affects her every move, even her attempts to recycle. These examples demonstrate that *legal status* and *rights* are primary sources of citizenship because not having them formally excludes undocumented young adults from equally participating in U.S. society.

Undocumented young adults also developed feelings of exclusion because of their tenuous future in the US. For example, Edgar Gonzalez explains that he does not belong because of his perilous future and limited right to remain in the U.S.:

I fit in. I don’t know if I belong here because the country hasn’t accepted me legally. So, to be honest, I don’t belong here since immigration [can] stop me at any point [and] I’m not here anymore. I’m never going to belong here until I get some type of papers or they get some reform done or something. But, I fit in with the people already, it’s been thirteen years, I got used to the system.

The threat of deportation, and limited rights to prevent it, pushes undocumented young adults to feel excluded. As a result, Edgar sees legalization as a way to gain access to rights, eliminate the threat of deportation, and remove feelings of exclusion so that “fitting in” can become “belonging.” This suggests that structural and legal exclusion from social participation and rights
encourages undocumented young adults to prioritize a conceptualization of citizenship and belonging along these lines and disrupts the development of full feelings of belonging.

**Interpersonal Exclusion**

Interpersonal exclusion stems from experiences with popular anti-immigrant sentiment and encourages undocumented young adults to believe that their undocumented legal status, not their race, class, or other social locations, is the source of their exclusion. Although structural exclusion tends to affect all undocumented young adults in similar ways, experiences of interpersonal exclusion is highly varied because it depends on contextual stereotypes of undocumented immigrants. As a result, experiences of interpersonal exclusion are common when an individual fits the stereotype of an undocumented immigrant or is forced to reveal his/her immigration status as a consequence of his/her structural exclusion. These interpersonal exclusionary experiences highlight how lacking legal permission to reside in the U.S. prevents undocumented young adults from being treated as full members of society. It further reinforces the idea that legal status and rights are primary sources of citizenship and without them they are targets for discrimination and exclusion.

Twenty-eight of the 92 respondents explicitly note that they do not feel like they belong because of the interpersonal exclusion that stems from popular anti-immigrant sentiment. For example, Martha Sandoval explains how she feels like she doesn’t belong in the U.S. due to anti-immigrant comments she receives from the customers she interacts with while working at McDonalds. “When they're upset or mad at you because you didn’t do something how they expected, they’ll be like, ‘You're all Mexican. Go back to your [country]!’ They don’t even know your status. They don’t even know what you're going through. … That’s when you feel like, ‘Why am I here?’” Of all respondents, fast food workers like Martha were most likely to be
the target of anti-immigrant comments due to stereotypes that Latinas/os and fast food employees are undocumented immigrants. Some respondents also report that witnessing these comments contributes to their feelings of exclusion. For example, Celia Alvarez explains that although she has not experienced anti-immigrant comments she has seen the first-generation members of her family be targeted:

One time I went to Best Buy and my aunt was asking a question to an employee there and she asked in Spanish and the guy was like, “Oh, I don’t speak Spanish.” And then there was an Oriental guy next to her and then he said something like, “Oh, fucking Mexicans.” … You can’t do anything. You can’t start arguing with him because they are gonna call the cops. … You kinda feel like you don’t belong and then you’re carrying around that secret all the time.

Even though she is not the target of these comments, they contribute to her feelings of exclusion because she shares the undocumented status of her aunt and she feels like she is powerless to stop these comments. This type of racist-nativist interpersonal exclusion tends to impact Latina/o undocumented immigrants because undocumented migration has been racialized as a Latina/o issue; non-Latina/o undocumented immigrants tend to be insulated from these types of racist-nativist comments (see Bangalon et al. 2012).

Although less than a third of respondents report being subjected to or witnessing anti-immigrant sentiment – likely due to a mismatch between undocumented immigrant stereotypes and respondents’ tendency towards a U.S.-born self-presentation – almost everyone receives these anti-immigrant messages through media coverage of immigration. Exemplifying most of these responses, Joaquin Salas says he does not feel like he belongs because of what he hears on TV: “I hear a lot of comments in the news. … Stuff like, ‘Illegals are not welcome here.’ … That we are criminals. All those things.” Even though these are not face-to-face attacks, most respondents internalize these comments, contributing to their feelings of interpersonal exclusion.
Experiences with and the internalization of popular anti-immigrant sentiment also produce feelings of interpersonal exclusion when undocumented young adults are forced to reveal their undocumented status due to their structural exclusion. Most respondents primarily experience this form of exclusion when asked to show identification. In most cases, they believe that their self-presentation – young age, American style of dress, English language ability – suggests to others that they are U.S. born until they are forced to use documents that mark them as foreign. Aida Mendoza demonstrates the connection between structural exclusion – being denied access to a state-issued ID – and how it leads to interpersonal discrimination and feelings of exclusion:

I couldn’t go into certain places cause I didn’t have an ID. … Certain places they won’t take your ID. … Like if you don’t have a California ID, your [Mexican] passport needs to have a visa. … It happened to me once … [at] a lounge. … I had to explain to him, [lying and say], “Look, I’m here on vacation.” He’s like, “Well, why do you talk very good English?” I’m like, “Because I’m back and forth.” He’s like, “Well, how come you don’t have a visa?” … And it was embarrassing … for me to have to explain and lie about all this stuff just so I can go into a lounge.

Being unable to obtain a valid California ID is a form of institutional exclusion and this leads to interpersonal exclusion as it prevents respondents from navigating social situations. In Aida’s case, lacking a state-issued ID led to feelings of embarrassment and discrimination and compounded her feelings of exclusion when similar instances occurred repeatedly. Almost every respondent reports similar experiences and feelings about being asked for ID at a club, bar, restaurant, or store. Relatedly, Diego Ibanez recalls similar feelings of exclusion when forced to reveal his immigration status at school: “They gave me a 000 [student ID] number, three digits, and I was embarrassed. Especially at [that community college], everyone can hear your conversation [when you talk to clerks]. And when they ask you, ‘Hey what's your social?’ Like 000-72-something, [you know it’s not real].” Similar to Aida, Diego reports feeling embarrassed
and excluded because he was forced to reveal his legal status and potentially subject himself to anti-immigrant comments. These experiences suggest that lacking primary sources of citizenship (e.g. legal status and rights) puts undocumented young adults at risk for interpersonal discrimination and feelings of exclusion when they are forced to reveal their legal status and become embarrassed and afraid that they will become targets of anti-immigrant comments.

Similarly, structural exclusion – lacking a social security number – contributes to interpersonal exclusion as it limits undocumented young adults’ institutional access and allows others to discriminate against them when they try to navigate work and educational contexts. Speaking about his work experiences, Pablo Ortiz explains how he feels “persecuted, … discriminated, hated, not wanted. Only wanted when it’s convenient for certain entities, groups, organizations. But when its time for us to really charge what we deserve [for working] and then that’s when we are pushed away.” Pablo notes that his feelings of exclusion come from not receiving the treatment he feels he deserves from both laws and people. Speaking specifically about discrimination at work, and later about experiencing wage theft when he worked as a day laborer, he links structural and interpersonal exclusion by suggesting that structural exclusion – limited access to worker’s rights – contributes to interpersonal discrimination – being discriminated against and abused by employers. Given that most respondents report less explicit discrimination, it is likely that Pablo’s extensive interpersonal exclusion is connected to the fact that he more closely reflects the stereotypes of undocumented immigrants – short, dark skinned, speaks with an accent, works as a day laborer. College student respondents report similar interpersonal exclusion when navigating college settings where students are generally expected to be citizens. For example, Leo Campos recalls that a community college clerk would not issue him a student ID without a social security number. He remembers her saying, “No, you have to
use it [your social security number]. I don’t want to waste time. … Come back when you have your social.” He explains, “I understand it was a long line, she was probably stressed out. After that, I was like, “Screw this. I’m not going to deal with this.” I came home, and I cried to my brother, because I really want[ed] to go to school.” Despite the fact that Leo’s brother eventually took him to a different college and fought to get him issued an ID without a social security number, Leo never felt he belonged on campus after that and eventually left college without obtaining a degree. In addition, the fact that Assembly Bill 540 had already passed, guaranteeing Leo access to in-state tuition rates and entry to higher education institutions reveals that his educational rights were being denied. In both Pablo and Leo’s cases, structural exclusion from obtaining a social security number prevents their access to employment and educational rights (i.e. preventing wage theft and accessing higher education) and contributes to their interpersonal discrimination in these contexts and overall feelings of exclusion.

The majority of respondents resist saying that they definitively belong in the U.S. because of the structural and interpersonal exclusion they have experienced as a result of their undocumented status. These experiences encourage them to define citizenship in relation to the legal status and rights dimensions of citizenship and to conceptualize belonging as legal permission to exist in the U.S. This shows the interconnected nature of these two dimensions of citizenship and their immense power as they are both externally granted by the nation-state. The dominant use of this legal permission definition of belonging, and the significant impact lacking legal status and rights has on individuals’ daily lives, supports the re-conceptualization of legal status and rights as primary sources of citizenship. Making this distinction allows us to acknowledge the hierarchical relationship between the dimensions of citizenship within individuals’ day-to-day experiences. Additionally, exploring these feelings of exclusion as the
counterpart to feelings of belonging helps demonstrate that belonging is a more complex concept that current theories suggest and needs to be more broadly conceptualized.

**PARTICIPATION AND IDENTIFICATION: SECONDARY SOURCES OF CITIZENSHIP AND STRATEGIES FOR ASSERTING BELONGING**

Undocumented young adults recognize that they do not officially belong in the U.S. because they do not have access to rights and legal status; however, they simultaneously assert that growing up and spending most of their lives in the U.S. makes them feel like they belong and should be able to access these primary sources of citizenship. In fact, all but two respondents assert a sense of belonging using an alternative definition that focuses on their incorporation or the “fitting in” that results from living in the U.S. for a significant period of time. To assert this type of belonging and make claims for a pathway to legalization, they draw on participation and, what I call, identification dimensions of citizenship, which together compose secondary dimensions of citizenship. Unlike the primary sources discussed above, these two dimensions are not externally granted protections nor are they part of the popular understanding of citizenship. However, the fact that they can be developed without formal permission and are within an individual’s control means that structurally and legally marginalized groups, like undocumented young adults, can draw upon them to make claims to primary sources of citizenship.

**Participation- and Identification-Based Definitions of Citizenship and Belonging**

The participation and identification dimensions of citizenship represent secondary sources of citizenship and are a product of three factors – participation, culture, and emotion. I refer to these factors as claims-making strategies (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) because they represent that ways in which secondary sources of citizenship are used to claim access to primary sources of citizenship (i.e. legal status, rights); I use this term because it allows us to conceptualize
asserting belonging as a political act that contests primary definitions of citizenship and demands social change. Undocumented young adults’ use of participation is in line with the broadly defined participation dimension that Bloemraad and colleagues (2008) discuss and includes educational, economic, political, civic, and familial participation. However, their use of cultural and emotional factors to assert belonging suggests that the sense of belonging dimension would be more accurately termed identification. By identification I mean factors that demonstrate one’s similarity to those with primary dimensions of citizenship (e.g. legal citizens and permanent residents). In this case, this dimension includes cultural factors – the cultural capital, usually language and institutional knowledge, developed while growing up in the U.S. – and emotional factors – emotional attachments or memories developed after spending a significant amount of time in the U.S. Not only is the reclassification more accurate but this then allows the flexibility to define the term belonging as both of its lived definitions so that it can be theorized as it is experienced – as the product of all four dimensions of citizenship.

Advancing our understanding of how these theoretical dimensions of citizenship are deployed in individual’s daily lives, I find that my respondents assert that they belong, and should be given the opportunity to legalize their status, by relying on their participation, culture, and/or emotions. Specifically, 59 out of 92 respondents use their participation in various social institutions to claim belonging while 62 draw on their cultural knowledge, and 59 draw on their emotional ties and connections to the U.S. Although these three claims-making strategies are equally likely to be deployed, Table 2 shows how most individuals draw on multiple claims to demonstrate their belonging. In fact, close to half of respondents, 36 out of 86 respondents or 44%, use all three types of claims in conjunction with one another to make multi-faceted assertions of belonging.
Although scholars including William Flores and Rina Benmayor (1997), David McMillian and David Chavis (1986), and Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) conceptualize belonging as feelings or emotions, I find that undocumented young adults are unlikely to solely rely on emotions to claim belonging. Rather, emotions appear to work as a complementary claim to participation or culture. This points to the significance, but not necessarily predominance, of emotions in asserting belonging and provide evidence of secondary sources of citizenship. In the following sections, I outline these three types of claims and show how they are connected and used by undocumented young adults to assert their belonging and claim the right to primary sources of citizenship.

**Participatory Claims to Belonging: Home is Where You Live Your Life**

While participatory aspects of citizenship tend to be studied in relation to political participation (Bauböck 2005), I find support for Marshall’s (1950) and Bloemraad and colleagues’ (2008) move towards expanding the definition of participation to all types of institutional participation. Building on Leisy Abrego’s (2008, 2011) findings that undocumented students draw on their right to access and participate in educational institutions to claim rights and assert belonging, I demonstrate that they also draw on participation in economic, civic, and familial institutions. Although I separate these claims by institutional type, most respondents draw on their participation in multiple social institutions to make a stronger case for their...

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<td>Participation and culture</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation and emotion</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture and emotion</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation, culture, and emotion</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>92</strong></td>
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Table 2: Type of Claim Made By Each Respondent to Assert Belonging
belonging. This participation provides undocumented young adults with tangible evidence (e.g. school transcripts, tax returns, certificates, family ties) that can be used to claim access to primary sources of citizenship, especially in institutional contexts, such as with immigration officials. In the following sub-sections I trace how participation in each type of social institution is used to assert belonging and provide evidence for claiming legal status.

**Educational Participation Claims**

Undocumented young adults have extensive rights and institutional access to one type of social institution – schools. Arriving in the U.S. as children, they have the right, and in fact are required, to attend K-12 education (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Olivas 2005). In California, they also have access to higher education through laws providing for in-state tuition rates and certain types of financial aid (Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Flores 2010). I find that many respondents rely on their educational participation to empower themselves to assert their belonging. For example, Omar Valenzuela, a 4-year university student, explains that he belongs in the U.S. because “I did 5th grade here, I did my middle school here. I did my high school here. I played sports when I was in high school. I went to community college here. I transferred to [a California State University]. I'm doing everything here. So I don’t know any other home.” Omar traces his years of educational participation to demonstrate that the U.S. is his home and that he belongs there, rather than in Mexico where he was born and holds his legal citizenship. Having had constant access to educational institutions, he is able to trace his years of participation in a respected institutional cornerstone of U.S. society. Building on Abrego’s (2008, 2011) focus on college students, I find that these claims are not only made by individuals in higher education but by all respondents, regardless of educational status. For example, Ivan Cardenas who did not complete high school says, “I went to school here since preschool.” In light of his lack of a high school
diploma, he opts to focus on the length of his participation. Other high school graduates emphasize their high school diplomas or GEDs and a few, like Carolina Sandoval, express a desire to return to school in order to be able to make stronger claims to belonging. This suggests that educational access, at any level, provides opportunities for asserting belonging.

In addition to citing their participation in educational institutions, some respondents point to the ways in which education opened up opportunities for social participation. The educational focus of the federal DREAM Act suggests to undocumented young adults that education is a socially acceptable means of asserting participation and belonging. Pablo Ortiz, a university graduate, expands on this idea: “I love my student identity … because it’s respected and it’s admired by other people. … My [university ID card] has helped me a lot through … my personal life. As far as if I get stopped by police … [or] need to show ID. That ID was always my ticket to enter.” In addition to affording him respect, Pablo finds that his student ID has allowed him to negotiate interactions with police and gain access to other social spaces. It is through these lived experiences, and likely through the media coverage of the DREAM Act, that undocumented young adults learn to stress their educational participation.

Respondents also suggest that their educational participation is a key means of making claims about their belonging and right to legalization. Most believe that educational transcripts, degrees, or awards will be key forms of proof that they could show immigration officials if they are able to access a pathway to legalization. Cameron Peña, a community college student, explains what he would put in his legalization packet for immigration officials to review:

I think I would put just everything that I’ve contributed to the community and to society as a whole. How hard I’ve worked, how hard I struggle to [reach] whatever goal I obtain. Just really elaborate that. So how would you prove those things? I think my formal education would be one form of proof.
While he cites multiple forms of participation, Cameron points specifically to his formal education and the main way of proving his participation and ability to overcome struggles. Many believe that these transcripts will have strong weight in proving their belonging because society appreciates educational pursuits and because schools issue formal documents, paperwork which can be submitted to immigration officials to prove long-term participation and belonging.

**Economic Participation Claims**

Many respondents also draw on their economic participation to assert their belonging. Almost every respondent is employed in some form and thus participating in U.S. economic institutions. Most reflect on their jobs to assert that they belong and are not “stealing jobs” or “draining the economy” as anti-immigrant sentiment suggests. For example, Josue Contreras speaks about being a manager at a department store: “What makes me feel like I belong here is my job and the work that I’ve done. The way that I’ve grown in every job. … I know I’m a good sales rep[resentative].” These economic participation claims are easier for those respondents who, like Josue, have pride in their work and feel that they are in jobs that allow for personal growth. This is also the case for a few respondents who, like Chuy Soto, started their own businesses and are entrepreneurs. In these cases, the business, and the personal satisfaction derived from it, is constructed as economic participation and contribution. Yet, most respondents find themselves in low-skill, service sector work where they are not necessarily proud of their jobs nor do they have room for personal growth; these respondents focus on the economic contributions they make, specifically the taxes they pay. Abel Leon explains, “I truly am part of the U.S. and I belong to the U.S. Many people complain about taxes. Like, ‘Oh, why do we have to pay taxes.’ For me, if they want to get half of my check for my taxes, I don’t mind to be honest. I’m serious. Cause that’s pretty much how we provide different services here it the
United States.” Most, like Abel, speak of the tax revenue they generate through their work; however, others discussed the money they spend in the U.S. which generates economic revenue for stores and the government through sales tax.

As with educational transcripts, many respondents believe that their tax returns and employment records will be key ways to demonstrate their participation and belonging in the U.S. in the event that they are able to apply to legalize their status. For example, Mercedes Valdez suggests that her taxes\(^5\) could be a way to demonstrate being “an independent and productive person regardless of my status.” Similarly, Irene Correas uses her economic participation as a specific means to make a claim for a pathway to legalization: “I contribute with my labor and my taxes and everything I do, and yet I’m not being repaid. They’re not giving me back what I deserve.” Irene sees her economic contributions as a key form of social participation and uses is as leverage for claiming what she “deserves” – recognition of her participation and access to rights and legal status in return.

**Political and Civic Participation Claims**

Despite not being able to engage in formal political participation (e.g. voting), most undocumented young adults engage in civic participation as well as other forms of political participation. This serves as another means of asserting belonging based on civic republicanism ideals. Respondents focus on their participation in their local communities and political engagement. Relying on his participation in church activities, Joseph Santana explains, “I think I'm involved in this community. I have helped. I've been helped. … So if you take away me from this community, you’ll be taking away a member of the community. So through time and life experience, I have earned it.” Justifying his claim that he should be allowed to remain in the U.S.

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\(^5\) Undocumented immigrants are able, and in fact required to, pay income taxes. While they do not have a social security number, they can obtain an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) for tax purposes.
and legalize his status, Joseph argues that his civic participation has made him a member of a community and removing him would damage the community that has been created. Similarly, Daniela Sanchez speaks about her political engagement with local, state, and national campaigns for the DREAM Act and other pro-immigrant policies, “I feel like this is my community this is my home. I’m part of it. I feel like I do what I can.” Like Joseph and Daniela, most respondents discuss their participation in traditional forms of political engagement – rallies, phone banking, precinct walking, lobbying local, state, and federal representatives and policy makers – as well as a variety of civic participation – volunteer work, helping neighbors, translating for people, picking up trash in the neighborhood, feeding homeless people, caring for stray animals. Pointing to these concrete examples is a key way of demonstrating strong political and civic participation.

Some respondents cite following the law as a sub-set of these civic participation claims saying that following the law is a way of being a good community member. For example, Marisol Salas asserts her belonging saying, “I don't think that I've ever committed any crime, things like that. I don't think I would ever break the law.” Twenty respondents make these law-abiding claims, but it is most common among individuals who did not participate in higher education. Crime and the rule of law is a common way of rationalizing the exclusion of undocumented immigrants and othering racial minorities (Chavez 2008) suggesting that respondents are reacting to this specific popular trope. Although it is unclear why those who did not attend college are more likely to assert political participation through a law-abiding claim, I suggest that this can be attributed to limited access to other claims-making strategies or the fact that their reference group consists of highly criminalized, second generation Latina/o peers.

Respondents believe that their civic and political participation can make an effective means of claiming belonging and a right to legalize their status. Although it seems hard to prove
these activities in official ways when compared with academic transcripts or tax returns, some believe that they will be able to demonstrate this participation to immigration officials. Edith Sandoval explains how she would demonstrate her deservingness for legalization: “Definitely all my schooling, my volunteering services. I think that’s really been part of my life, especially volunteering. I’ve always been pretty active. … [I’ll get] letters of recommendation from people that think that I’m awesome.” Like Edith who has been active in various community and university based organization, those that participate in more formal political and civic engagement believe that letters of recommendation or certificates of recognition would be a way of demonstrating their participation. Alternatively, respondents who focus on their law-abiding nature believe that they will be able to draw upon their clean criminal record to claim a right to legalization. In some cases, individuals with criminal records think that they might be able to successfully make bids to legalize their status by demonstrating that they had served their time and turned their life around. Ray Guzman, who had been imprisoned for stealing cars, explains,

I don’t know if it’s a good thing that I have a criminal record but I turned my whole life around. I have pay stubs, I got letters, I have receipts, I have been working, I paid my [time in] probation, I did community service, I did my classes, I never tested dirty, I established a job, I got my own place, … I have two kids, a car. From when I started messing up to now, I changed everything.

In this case, Ray imagines that his past criminal record and the paperwork that resulted from his release and probation will allow him to demonstrate his renewed civic engagement and law-abiding nature. This is likely impossible due to current legalization policies but Ray’s assertions demonstrate the ways in which undocumented young adults can draw upon various aspects of their lives to make creative claims about their belonging and right to legalization.
Finally, many respondents discuss their families and the way these relationships tie them to a life in the U.S. Families function as a key social institution, supporting individuals in a multitude of ways. When struggling with the idea of returning to their country of origin, many respondents focus on their families as a way of asserting belonging. Cruz Vargas provides a prime example: “All my family’s over here. All my family – my grandma and my grandpa, my uncles, my aunts. The only person that’s over there [in Mexico] is my real dad, but I haven’t talked to him. … Home is where your heart is and my family’s here. My whole heart is here.” Cruz draws upon the presence of his extended family in order to claim that the U.S. is his home and that he belongs here because of his ties to these individuals. Most respondents make similar declarations, citing the presence of their natal families and the limited number of family members in Mexico.

As undocumented young adults become parents they begin to cite their citizen children and the families they have formed in the U.S. as a means of demonstrating their social incorporation. Explaining how she belongs in the U.S., Estefania Gutierrez says, “I do feel like I belong here more than Mexico just because my son is here and he was born here. My husband he was born here too. … This is my life now. There’s no turning back. … Realistically speaking, I’m not gonna be able to live over there [in Mexico]. Now this is my home. I belong in that sense.” Similar to Cruz, Estefania relies on her newly formed family to assert a sense of belonging in the U.S. and claim that these relationships make this her home now. In both cases, family ties serve as a way to speak to the strength of social ties to a place. In addition, it speaks to a popular activist discourse that has focused on preventing the separation of families through deportation. Although mixed-status families have an easier time making this type of argument,
family-based claims are still made amongst undocumented family members. This suggests that these claims are not always about legalization opportunities (i.e. petitions through citizen children or family members) but also about how families are key units of social organization. Similar to the civic participation claims, familial claims suggest that disrupting or separating an individual from that unit presents problems, not only for the respondent, but also for other individuals in the family unit.

Family ties may seem to offer less tangible evidence than the paperwork provided by educational, economic, and civic claims; however, they are a means of mobilizing immigration laws, which focus on family reunification, and convincing immigration officials to approve a petition for legalization. Victoria Sandoval explains how her family presents an opportunity for petitioning for legal status:

> When my dad came here he had the opportunity [to legalize] because they were doing that [amnesty in 1986]. But I don’t know why he didn’t. And then my mom comes [two years] after … and [the] same thing; neither of them did anything about it. And then now, we have to wait. I’m waiting for my son to be at least 18 so that I can start the process and when he’s 21, I could actually have my papers.

Victoria discusses how her parents could have legalized her if they had applied for amnesty through IRCA. Having a teenage son, she has begun to consider petitioning for legal status through him. Similarly, other respondents discuss extended family members, usually aunts and uncles, who petitioned for them and their parents in the past but have yet to be approved. Many also discuss opportunities for legalization through a citizen spouse. In this way, respondents recognize that immigration laws and officials respect the significance of family ties as a means for petitioning for legalization. Extending this to a claims-making strategy, they draw on these family ties as a means to demonstrate their connection and commitment to remaining in the U.S.
Focusing on their participation in social institutions, many respondents draw on their secondary definition of belonging as incorporation to assert that they belong based on their participation in educational, economic, civic, and familial institutions. Interestingly, many respondents draw on the idea of “home,” asserting that they belong in the U.S. because they have lived their lives here and participated in these four social institutions. In addition, these assertions tend to be made in reference to popular discourse around “good” (e.g. educated/DREAM Act eligible youth, families) and “bad” (e.g. economic drains, criminals) immigrants; this demonstrates the power of these cultural tropes and their utility for developing and framing claims-making strategies. Additionally, participation provides tangible evidence – school transcripts, academic diplomas and awards, tax returns, job histories, letters of recommendation, volunteer work, and family ties – and thus the leverage they need to assert a sense of belonging, or a feeling that this is their home and that they have the right to remain. While this could be useful for asserting belonging in any situation, it is particularly useful in institutional contexts, especially with immigration officials, where tangible, institutionally certified evidence is indispensible for claiming and securing legal status. This helps clarify the relationship wherein the participation dimension of citizenship functions as a secondary source of citizenship that can be used to claim access to primary sources of citizenship.

**Cultural Claims to Belonging: Foreign Languages and Spaces**

Undocumented young adults draw on two main forms of cultural capital to assert belonging in the U.S. – language knowledge and institutional knowledge. They use this knowledge to make claims to primary sources of citizenship in two ways: 1) positively by asserting a shared culture with U.S. citizens and thus a right to become one, and 2) negatively by distancing themselves from Mexico and consequently negating the option of returning
voluntarily or through deportation. I find that the acquisition of this cultural knowledge, and thus the ability to make these types of claims, is facilitated by educational participation. This suggests that cultural and participatory claims reinforce one another (i.e. participation encourages cultural acquisition which reinforces future participation). Furthermore, unlike the participatory evidence used to make more formal claims to legal status and rights, cultural claims are most often used in interpersonal contexts where they can facilitate explicit connections between the respondent and the person who they are trying to convince that they belong in the U.S. In the following subsections I trace how cultural claims are used to assert belonging and provide evidence for claiming legal status in everyday interactions and purposeful conversations with anti-immigrant adherents and policy makers.

**Language Knowledge Claims: “I Couldn’t Roll My R’s for Like Ever”**

Approximately half of the respondents who make cultural claims (35 of 62) do so through language. Most of the time, these claims are made in a positive way with 27 respondents citing their English language proficiency. For example, Fabian Quesada explains that he belongs in the U.S. and feels American because, “[I] learned the language. [I] consider English my first language.” Despite first learning Spanish, Fabian, like many respondents, asserts that English is his dominant and preferred language by saying that he considers it his first and native language. In fact, growing up and participating in U.S. institutions leads most undocumented young adults to develop a proficiency in and often a preference for English. In fact almost all of my respondents chose to conduct the interview in English and spoke to others (e.g. family members, strangers) in English during the time we were together. This English language knowledge allows them to then assert a sense of belonging because they can blend in to U.S. society. Take the experiences of Daniela Sanchez and Carolina Sandoval:
Daniela: If you decide to read two books at the same time – you are reading one in English [and] one in Spanish – there’s going to come a point where you’re going to understand more from another. You’re going to just say, “I’ll rather read this [English] book. I understand it more.” So it’s simple I feel American.

Carolina: I try not to make myself seem too Mexican. How do you do that? I talk to most of the people in English, so that way they can know I know English. There’s a lot of people that look Mexican but they don’t know English so they start treating them differently. So every time I go somewhere, like in an office or anything, … I go and I talk in English.

Similar to Fabian, Daniela explains that over time she came to prefer English. She then uses this as evidence for how she is “American” and by extension deserves to have legal status because of this shared identity and cultural knowledge. Even though Carolina has a similar preference for English, she intentionally speaks English in institutional spaces to secure better service by hiding her undocumented legal status and performing as a U.S.-born citizen. As was the case with Fabian, Daniela, and Carolina, most of my respondents equated their language knowledge with American-ness or some other form of U.S.-based identity. This connection provides further incentive to reconceptualize the fourth theoretical dimension of citizenship as identification, rather than sense of belonging.

Language-claims can also be made through negative framing whereby they distance themselves from Mexico and Spanish language in order to assert belonging in and identification with the U.S. For example, Marcela Avila explains that she feels like she belongs in the U.S. because she no longer feels fluent in Spanish:

It’s so sad but I’m losing my Spanish. I talk to my parents more [in] English than Spanish. … They reply in Spanish but I don’t reply in Spanish. … I’m used to the customs here because … the people that work [with me, who] just came from Mexico like less than five years ago, they talk all slang and I don’t understand their little jokes.

Lili Moreno similarly laments her loss of “cultural ties and our language” explaining that she has had to re-learn Spanish for her current job as a community organizer for Spanish-speaking
parents. Despite these efforts she explains, “the level of Spanish I speak is different than someone who would consider themselves Mexican.” Marcela and Lili’s extended time living in the U.S. and participation in English-dominant U.S. institutions contribute to their acculturation and Spanish language loss. This reality allows them, and other undocumented young adults, to make a cultural claim of belonging and identification with the U.S. by saying that they are no longer “Mexican” because of their difficulty with the Spanish language.

While overall participation in U.S. institutions facilitates the acquisition of and preference for English, these language-based assertions of belonging are most common among individuals who pursued a higher education (i.e. are currently attending a community college or university or had graduated from a university). In fact, more than two thirds of the respondents (23 out of 35) who use language to demonstrate their belonging have participated in higher education. Furthermore, those who already hold a bachelor’s degree, 17% of the whole sample, represent 34% of respondents who make language-based claims; these college graduates were overrepresented among both English and Spanish-based language claims-makers. This suggests that those with higher levels of educational attainment have a greater capacity to make language-based claims because of the comfort they develop with English over the length of their formal academic training and the limited exposure to Spanish-dominate spaces that comes with their educational mobility.

Language is most often used to claim access to primary sources of citizenship in interpersonal contexts. English facility can be a way to demonstrate similarity to citizens by distancing oneself from stereotypes about immigrants not learning English. For example, Adan Olivera discusses a conversation with his boss: “My boss says about me, ‘You … learn[ed] things that your friends didn’t.’… Some of them [my friends] don’t speak English, some of them
it’s hard for them to express themselves. [My boss asked], ‘What makes you different?’” In Adan’s case, his boss praises him for his English language ability, which eventually secured him a job in the office, rather than loading trucks in the warehouse. Adan believes that this language-based cultural capital not only sets him apart from his immigrant peers but also draws connections between himself and his U.S.-born boss. Such experiences reinforce the significance of language ability, encouraging respondents to highlight the language they share with U.S. citizens in order to assert that they belong and claim that they should also have access to citizenship. Paco Barrera’s interview provides a prime example of how this type of internalized strategy is deployed on a daily basis. He starts off his interview saying his name in a way that stresses and lengthens the “rr” in his last name: “My name is [Paco Barrera]. I couldn’t roll my r’s for like ever!” Even though this may seem insignificant and was said laughingly, it epitomizes Paco’s constant attempts to demonstrate his belonging in the U.S. to others, including me. By stressing his lack of Spanish language facility, he transmits key information – I grew up in the U.S., I prefer English, I cannot go back to Mexico because my Spanish is not very strong – all points which he also stressed throughout his interview. In this way, language use and comfort can become a day-to-day means of asserting a U.S.-based persona and identity in order to claim access to rights and legal status.

**Institutional Knowledge Claims: “I Would Be a Foreigner in My So Called Home Country”**

Fifty of the sixty-two respondents who make cultural claims to legal status and rights do so based on their possession of institutional knowledge. Unlike the positive strategy of using English ability to assert belonging, institutional knowledge is more likely to be framed in a negative way. Specifically, 44 respondents used an exclusively negative frame by demonstrating a lack of institutional knowledge of Mexico while 17 made simultaneous positive and negative
assertions. This suggests that institutional knowledge is used to distance oneself from Mexico in order to rhetorically assert belonging in the U.S. Given the fact that their undocumented status dissuades them from leaving the U.S. and visiting Mexico, most respondents had not returned to Mexico since leaving as children; this young age of departure and lack of return contributes to their limited institutional knowledge of Mexico and facilitates these types of cultural claims for a right to remain in the U.S. and obtain legal status.

Desiring to assert belonging in the U.S. despite knowing that they are legally and formally excluded, undocumented young adults resort to a negative framing of their belonging. For example, when I ask if they feel like they belong in the U.S., many respondents give answers similar to Fabian Quesada: “Do I feel like I belong here? Well I don’t feel like I belong in Mexico.” This is a common example of a basic negative claims-making strategy where belonging in the U.S. is asserted by demonstrating that she/he does not identify with nor belong in Mexico and so, by default, belongs in the U.S. despite her/his lack of formal rights and legal status. Jorge Flores expands on a similar idea making a cultural claim by citing dis-belonging in Mexico:

I don’t know how that would work out [going back to Mexico] because I don’t know much about how people interact. Now it’s a strange place to me. Well, it was a strange place to begin with [because] … we didn’t really wander outside of our small town. Our experiences with the outside world were very limited. … I would be a tourist. … I would be a foreigner in my so-called home country.

Trying to explain why he belongs in the U.S., Jorge explains that he would be a foreigner in Mexico for two reasons: 1) he does not know the cultural mannerisms needed to fit in and interact, and 2) he does not know much about the country because he has been away for so long and did not leave his small town prior to migrating.
Expanding on the idea of cultural mannerisms, some respondents explain that they do not know anything about the Mexican lifestyle. For example, Ivan Cardenas explains, “I don’t know the customs. I know the culture based on what my family tells me, the traditions. But if I were to go over there and start living a life I wouldn’t be comfortable. I wouldn’t feel at home. I wouldn’t feel right. This is all I know; I feel comfortable here [in the U.S.].” Immigrating at a young age, Ivan, and others, were never fully exposed to cultural norms and lifestyles in Mexico. Despite being exposed to Mexican culture in the U.S. through their parents, they are clear to assert that it is different as traditions and lifestyles change with migration. Drawing on this lack of cultural knowledge, Ivan is able to distance himself from Mexico and attest to his need to obtain legal status in order to remain in the U.S.

Another strategy is to cite a lack of institutional knowledge or cultural capital that would prevent the negotiation of Mexican spaces and institutions in the event of their deportation. Janet Godinez explains the trouble she faces when she tells people she is from Mexico: “I don’t know if I should tell them [I’m] from Mexico or here [the U.S., when people ask]. Cause when I tell them, ‘Oh, I’m from Guadalajara,’ they ask me, ‘Where exactly from Guadalajara?’ I don’t even know! Guadalajara, [the name], that’s the only thing I know.” For most who entered at a very early age, they have few memories of the towns they are from and some even had little knowledge about the geography of Mexico in general. In fact, Mauricio Ortega, who I met during my fieldwork, was surprised to find out that his hometown was located outside of Mexico City and that this was in the center of the country, not the northern part as he had thought. Similarly, respondents explained that they do not know how things work in Mexico. Celia Alvarez explains, “I wouldn’t belong over there [in Mexico] either. … I’ve never been there pretty much. I don’t know how money works. … I don’t even know how money looks. They
showed me the dollar from over there but … I don’t know what’s what.” Further exemplifying her point, Celia unconsciously uses the word “dollar” to describe Mexican currency, rather than the Spanish word, pesos. Citing a lack of knowledge about money, or similar things such as laws, respondents asserted that they would be unable to navigate Mexico and the Mexican context due to a lack of institutional knowledge. The implicit claim being that they have the knowledge necessary for navigating the U.S. and thus should be able to stay.

These cultural claims can also be made from a positive point of view. For example, Diego Ibanez says that he belongs in the U.S. because, “I know LA pretty much like the palm of my hand. And people get surprised, ‘How come you know these places?’ Cause I've been here! … I know LA really well, even with streets and freeways.” Focusing on his presence in the U.S. and his knowledge of streets, freeways, and geography, Diego points directly to his U.S.-based institutional knowledge to assert his belonging to and identification with the U.S. Another way of making these assertions is through knowledge of U.S. history and laws. Leo Campos gives a strong example:

You're American [if] you can name the president, from the first president all the way to Obama. You can recite the constitution – “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal and bestowed upon their creators.” I know the constitution, I know my Bill of Rights, I know my Miranda rights. ... I know so much about American history. ... They put me in the Mexican history class and I knew nothing. I didn't know why Cinco de Mayo was celebrated. I didn't know what the grito was about. I didn't know half of these things. … I was like, “We fought the French?”

Referencing the knowledge he learned in school and through the History Channel, Leo declares an American identity by reciting a variety of laws and historical facts about the U.S. He further makes his point by demonstrating a lack of knowledge of Mexican history, specifically its colonial history under France.
As with language, institutional knowledge is used to claim belonging and primary sources of citizenship in interpersonal interactions. Cruz Vargas and Marcela Avila provide examples of how they assert their belonging in response to in-person and online anti-immigrant sentiment.

Cruz: I try to tell ‘em that I belong here. I’ll question them about their own damn history and they don’t know shit about their own history. … So how are you gonna tell me you belong here when you don’t know shit and I don’t belong here when I know more about it then you do? What kinds of [history]? Everything. Like the laws before the immigration issues … with the Irish and everything. … Beginning with the Native Americans and everything.

Marcela: I go online and I read the articles and then at the bottom you read the [anti-immigrant] comments. Sometimes they get me mad and I respond sometimes … Like this one lady she was like “Oh Jimmy Carter, he was the one who signed that law … the amnesty in the seventies.” And I was like “First of all, … it is not Carter.” I guess it’s easy to respond back when you know more about the U.S. history than someone who was born here. It’s like that makes me belong even more. I know this country so don’t tell me that I’m not from here. I may not be born here but I do belong.

Both Cruz and Marcela use their knowledge of U.S. history as a means to challenge anti-immigrant comments and assert that they belong in the U.S. even if they are not citizens. In addition, given that Cruz did not complete high school and Marcela is enrolled in a four-year university, I suggest that these claims-making strategies are available to all undocumented young adults because basic history lessons are given at all educational levels. There is also plenty of evidence that the immigrant youth movement is using these cultural assertions successfully to claim access to rights and legal status. For example, in March of 2013 Utah State Senator Stephen Sandstrom rescinded his support for a law he authored that allowed police to check the immigration status of anyone they stop. He explains that he changed his position based on a lobby visit from an undocumented student: “Nothing else I’d heard from anybody shook me to the core more than that statement. I thought this girl who put her hand over her heart and said the
Pledge of Allegiance was in every way an American.” (Shen 2013). Like many legislators across the country, Senator Sandstrom was swayed to support more pro-immigrant laws because of the “American-ness” of undocumented young adults and the acculturation and general institutional knowledge that comes with living and growing up in the U.S. This suggests that participating in U.S. institutions, especially educational ones, provides basic institutional knowledge that can be used to assert belonging on an interpersonal level and claim a right to remain in the U.S. and access primary sources of citizenship through legalization.

Language and institutional knowledge are cultural claims-making strategies that allow undocumented young adults to draw upon their time in and identification with the U.S. to assert that they are similar to U.S. citizens and thus should have the rights and legal status afforded to them. These cultural based claims lend support for recategorizing the sense of belonging dimension of citizenship as identification since these cultural assertions tend to center an American or U.S.-based identity. They also demonstrate how secondary sources of citizenship are developed outside of government-assigned legal categories, which allows structurally marginalized groups to claim full access to citizenship. In this way, undocumented young adults can draw upon the acculturation enabled by lengthy participation in U.S. institutions and the lack of Mexican-related cultural knowledge that results from having left Mexico at an early age in order to make claims about the right to remain in the U.S. and legalize their immigration status.

**Emotional Claims to Belonging: “In My Heart I Feel that I [Belong]”**

Emotional attachments and memories provide a third means of asserting a sense of belonging or incorporation in the U.S. For undocumented young adults, their young age of arrival means that they grow up in the U.S. – participating in various aspects of social life and forming strong memories and significant attachments that connect them emotionally to the U.S.
While many scholars focus on emotions as the primary means of asserting belonging (Flores and Benmayor 1997; McMillian and Chavis 1986; Yuval-Davis 2006), I find that most undocumented young adults use emotional claims to complement their participatory and cultural claims and round out the secondary sources of citizenship they can use to claim access to legal status and rights. These emotional ties promote identification with the U.S., strengthening my assertion to reconceptualize sense of belonging as an identification dimension of citizenship.

Citing their young age of immigration, most undocumented young adults draw clear distinctions between being born in Mexico and being raised in the U.S. For example, Sonia Herrera claims that she is American because, “I don’t have any connections and any memories of Mexico. … This is all I know.” Matt Vasquez expands on this:

I was basically born over there and raised here. I don’t remember anything from over there. I feel like I was born here but I’m not. What makes you feel like you were born here? The fact that I took my first steps here. I went to school here. The fact that I don’t remember anything from there. I have no memories of when I lived there. I was very small like two or three years old [when I came to the U.S.].

Matt points to specific memories and emotionally-laden life events to demonstrate how the mere act of growing up and living in the U.S. for a long period of time has generated a multitude of memories and thus emotional attachments. These lead him, and many of my respondents to strongly identify with the U.S.

Although a fairly equal number of respondents make emotional, cultural, and participatory claims, emotional claims are almost always made in conjunction with a cultural or participatory claim. For example, Jorge Flores demonstrates that he belongs in the U.S. by delving into how the U.S. made him into the person he is:

This is where I’m from. … These are the streets that look like shit but this is where I used to play soccer. These are the alleys with broken bottles where I used to play soccer with kids my age. To me what it means is to have a real deep sense of belonging in a spiritual sense of belonging … I don’t feel out of place. …
could go almost in any street, any park, and it will trigger a memory, a good or a bad memory. …My sense of being a person, this is where it began. … In a concrete sense, this is where I’m from. … If you ask me where I’m from I’ll say West Anaheim, [not Puebla, Mexico].

Jorge connects his sense of belonging to his memories of participating in U.S. society – playing soccer, making friends, hanging out in parks. Moving beyond the participatory claims that can be made with this evidence, he makes an emotional claim by explaining that he is the product of these places; he is from West Anaheim because that is where he became who he is. To make a stronger claim, he argues that memories and previous experiences are not only evidence of his participation but they also produce emotional attachments Similarly, Chuy Soto provides an example of how acculturation can give way to emotional connections as well as the cultural knowledge needed to pass as a citizen:

I wouldn’t like to go back to Mexico because what am I gonna go back to? I don't have anything over there. … That's not my life. That’s not me. I am this. I'm LA. [If] they kick me across the border, I’ll probably come [back] on a party night with all the party guys. [If Border Patrol asks,] “Where are you going?” [I’ll say.] “Oh LA.” With my LA [dodgers] hat, light skinned, speaks English – you might get across the border.

Similar to Jorge, Chuy’s initial point is that he is from Los Angeles, that growing up there made him who he is. He attempts to provide further evidence of this emotional connection saying that he would not remain in Mexico in the event of his deportation but would instead use his cultural knowledge of the U.S. – English language ability, knowledge of Los Angeles sports teams – to attempt to regain entry by posing as a U.S. citizen spending the weekend in Tijuana. In both Jorge and Chuy’s case, emotional evidence is used as a complementary claim to strengthen the participatory and/or cultural claims enabled by these secondary sources of citizenship.

I suggest that emotions are used as complementary claims because they do not afford concrete evidence for countering structural/institutional and interpersonal exclusion in the same
way as participation and culture. Most respondents use emotions to capture abstract feelings of being “from”, “identifying with”, or “having a love for” the U.S. For example, Lili Moreno explains:

I love this country. The same way [that] I have a very interesting relationship with my dad [who used to be abusive]. … I’m not okay with him being the way he is sometimes but, at the end of the day, I love him and he’s always gonna be my dad. So that’s how I look at this country. I’m not okay with they way the government or … their laws or the way they treat their people, but this my country. This is where I live, this is where I grew [up]. This is my home and I love this country.

Struggling to explain and capture the significance of love as a concrete and measurable emotion, Lili equates the U.S. to her father in hopes that the listener, me, will be able to understand the significance of this abstract concept. Drawing upon this emotion and her memories of growing up and living in the U.S., she is able to assert a sense of belonging, despite the marginalization that she feels from being structurally excluded because of her immigration status. The use of emotions to assert belonging suggests that it is a powerful source of secondary citizenship claims that can be developed despite one’s legal status or rights. Even though it may not provide direct evidence like the other two sources, emotions do complement other claims by situating them within emotional pleas that can tug on the heartstrings of those who are listening.

Building on a definition of belonging as incorporation, undocumented young adults seek to assert belonging through participation and identification (i.e. culture and emotion) in attempts to claim access to legal status and rights, or primary sources of citizenship. I categorize the participation and identification dimensions of citizenship as secondary sources of citizenship because they can be informally developed and used to claim access to more formal aspects of citizenship. Though scholars have focused on emotional claims (i.e. feelings of belonging) as a key strategy used by marginalized groups to claim access to rights (Flores and Benmayor 1997;
Yuval-Davis 2006), I find that emotions are not the only, nor are they the most used, means of asserting belonging. Rather, they serve as a complementary claims-making strategy because they do not generate measurable evidence similar to that provided through participatory or cultural claims (e.g. school transcripts, tax returns, cultural capital). I suggest that the simultaneous use of participatory and cultural claims is likely due to the fact that each is represents a more effective strategy within institutional and interpersonal contexts respectively; they are deployed together to counter the structural and interpersonal exclusion discussed in the first section. I suggest that most respondents draw on multiple secondary sources to develop stronger claims because these three claims complement one another and allow individual’s to assert belonging in different contexts. The similar use and interconnected nature of these three claims-making strategies supports their categorization as secondary sources of citizenship.

**CONCLUSION**

While citizenship and belonging are highly theorized concepts, few have examined how individuals define and experience these concepts on the ground. In this chapter, I have shown how undocumented young adults develop two coinciding definitions of belonging – legal permission to live in the U.S. and incorporation or “fitting in.” These definitions lead them to experience simultaneous feelings of exclusion and belonging. Specifically, the legal status definition of belonging promotes feelings of exclusion by highlighting the limitations created by their immigration status while the incorporation definition of belonging provides an opportunity to assert belonging by highlighting the many ways in which they are participating in and fit into U.S. society. While the substantive literature has noted these tensions between feelings of belonging and exclusion (Abrego 2008; Gonzales 2011), I demonstrate that these tensions are the product of simultaneous, rather than alternating, feelings that result from these multiple
definitions and broad understanding of belonging. I examine these conflicting feelings of belonging further in the following chapters and demonstrate their significance and impact on incorporation patterns.

Investigating undocumented young adults’ understandings of citizenship and belonging sheds light on the relationships among the theoretical dimensions of citizenship. First of all, respondents’ experiences suggest that the four theoretical dimensions of citizenship that Bloemraad and colleagues (2008) identify – legal status, rights, (political) participation, and belonging – do not carry equal weight. I find that the legal status and rights dimensions align with definitions of belonging as legal permission to live in the U.S. and the participation and belonging dimensions align with their definitions of belonging as incorporation. Given that undocumented young adults concede priority to the legal permission definition suggests that these dimensions are hierarchically related and that we can think of citizenship in primary and secondary terms. Primary sources of citizenship – legal status and rights – are externally granted and are more formally and commonly recognized as a way of defining who is a citizen. Secondary sources of citizenship – participation and belonging – are individually determined through relational and self-reflective activities. Secondly, categorizing secondary sources of citizenship suggests that the belonging dimension of citizenship is more accurately specified as an identification dimension because it better accounts for the U.S.-based cultural capital, memories, and identities that are evoked to assert the incorporation definition of belonging.

I suggest that primary sources of citizenship are at the top of the hierarchy and have to be claimed because they are externally granted. Individuals cannot simply grant themselves legal status or rights but rather must petition the government to grant them. This claiming process is facilitated through the use of secondary sources of citizenship, which are used to demonstrate
how one is similar to others who already have access to primary sources of citizenship (i.e. citizens). These secondary sources can be used to make these claims because individuals can develop them outside of formal legal channels. Recognizing the distinctions and relationships between primary and secondary sources of citizenship allows us to understand how undocumented young adults can profess simultaneous feelings of exclusion and belonging. In addition, it provides a theoretical map of the relationship between the various dimensions of citizenship and how marginalized populations can exploit the tensions between them to secure fuller social inclusion.

In this case, undocumented young adults are able to draw upon secondary sources of citizenship to make direct assertions about why they are like U.S. citizens and make claims about why they should be allowed to access legal status and rights through the creation of a pathway to legalization. I find that these secondary sources provide specific types of evidence – institutionally-issued paperwork documenting their participation, knowledge demonstrating their cultural similarity, and emotional appeals – that can be deployed in the appropriate structural and/or interpersonal context in order to make a case for their inclusion and to counter their feelings of exclusion.

Recognizing the distinctions and relationships between primary and secondary sources of citizenship allows us to understand how undocumented young adults, and other marginalized populations, can profess simultaneous feelings of exclusion and belonging and how this affects their claims-making strategies. I suggest that all marginalized groups, even those who have access to legal status, are able to draw on sources of secondary citizenship to demand fuller access to rights. While citizens have access to legal status, a primary source of citizenship, they may still be treated like second-class citizens and be structurally and interpersonally excluded.
and denied the ability to fully deploy their rights. For example, LGBTQ-identified citizens are denied the legal right to marriage and have used cultural and emotional claims to claim this right (Frankie 2006; Rauch 2004). Additionally, cultural and gendered citizenship scholars have shown that racial minorities and women have used similar strategies to claim access to rights and full legal recognition (Caldwell et al. 2009; Flores and Benmayor 1997). Recognizing the hierarchical arrangement of primary and secondary sources of citizenship allows us to see and assess how marginalized groups are excluded and how they can exploit tensions to make claims to primary sources of citizenship and secure fuller social inclusion.

Finally, these findings suggest the need for a broader conceptualization of belonging that reflects how it is used in everyday life. Scholars of traditional, substantive, and cultural citizenship have sought to define belonging as social and emotional connections to a place (Benhabib 2002; Bloemraad et al. 2008; Flores and Benmayor 1997; Perry 2006). However, I find that individuals on the ground engage multiple, contextual definitions and suggest that there is a distinct difference between asserting and feeling like you belong in a place. This, in addition to the participatory, cultural, and emotional claims I identified, suggests that a more accurate typology of citizenship dimensions would replace the term sense of belonging with the term identification. This shift in terms allows us to maintain the integrity of the current definition while capturing the identity-based arguments individuals use to assert belonging, and deemphasizing the role of emotions. Continuing to use the term sense of belonging to represent solely this fourth dimension of citizenship limits our thinking about how belonging can be claimed in non-emotional terms (i.e. through participation or culture) and produced through the other dimensions of citizenship. Further, this allows me to broadly reframe the term belonging in the way that it is lived – as the product of all four dimensions of citizenship. I have shown how
legal status, rights, participation, and identification dimensions of citizenship coalesce to influence undocumented young adults’ multiple definitions of belonging and simultaneous feelings of belonging and exclusion. In this case, broadly conceptualizing belonging as a multi-dimensional concept allows me to center belonging as a key factor influencing immigrant incorporation and specify its role in assimilation theory. I turn to this in the remaining dissertation chapters.
CHAPTER 2
Learning Liminality: The Structural and Social Consequences of Educational Incorporation and Exclusion for Undocumented Young Adults

I told my [high school] counselor and he told me, “Oh, so you’re undocumented?” The way he expressed it to me was something really bad. Like, “Oh my God, what am I?” ... Sorry to say you have good grades, you have the GPA, but there’s nothing for you because you’re undocumented and it makes you different. ... So I remember I didn’t want to go to my graduation anymore. I felt really sad and angry that ... all of a sudden I know that I’m different from my friends and I won’t be able to go to a college like I wanted to.

--Irene Correas

College bound for most of her K-12 education, Irene experienced educational incorporation until her senior year of high school. Graduating in 2001, prior to the implementation of in-state tuition for undocumented students, her immigration status presented a barrier to her college attendance. This educational exclusion immediately made her feel different than her peers. Even though she was eventually able to gather the resources she needed to attend college and graduate from a California State University (CSU), her educational experiences were shaped by her undocumented immigration status and the structural and social differences it generated. Irene’s experiences reveal that the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion experienced within educational contexts can teach undocumented youth and young adults about their marginal social position.

Undocumented 1.5 generation youth and young adults face contradictory educational laws and policies that promote their simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Plyler v. Doe to explicitly grant undocumented youth access to K-12 education institutions due to their young age of arrival (Olivas 2005). As a result, most undocumented youth experience educational inclusion for most of their early life and become socially incorporated as they develop English language facility, ascribe to U.S. cultural norms,
and participate in U.S. social institutions (Abrego 2006, 2008; Perry 2006). Despite this inclusionary decision, there were no federal provisions for those seeking higher education. In 2001, California was the second state to enact a law, Assembly Bill 540 (AB-540),\(^6\) to grant undocumented youth access to in-state tuition rates if they attend a California high school for at least three years, hold a high school diploma or equivalent, enroll at a state institution of higher education, and sign an affidavit stating that they will apply for legal residency if given the opportunity. This law effectively increases access to college education by making it more affordable than out-of-state tuition which is two and half to six times more expensive\(^7\) (Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Flores 2010). Further, it gives undocumented students a sense of legitimacy and fosters the development of an empowered identity that they can use to claim additional rights (Abrego 2008).

Despite these inclusive educational laws, undocumented youth and young adults simultaneously face exclusionary educational laws and policies. Although AB-540 makes college more affordable it does not eliminate financial barriers as undocumented students cannot access financial aid\(^8\) (Chavez et al. 2007; Huber and Malagon 2007). Further, inclusionary policies are often under attack by anti-immigrant groups and lawmakers. In 2010, a court case (Martinez v. UC Regents) threatened to repeal AB-540 and eliminate undocumented students’ access to in-state tuition rates (Terkel 2010). Moreover, many undocumented youth and young adults are aware of and emotionally affected by anti-immigrant laws in other states which seek to

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\(^6\) Similar policies exist in 18 states. The following state governments provide access to in-state tuition: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Washington. Two states, Rhode Island and Hawaii, have similar policies enacted on the university level. (National Immigration Law Center 2013).

\(^7\) Tuition rates for the 2013-2014 school year: California Community College – $864 twelve units (full time) at in-state tuition rates $5208 twelve units at out-of-state tuition rates; California State University – $6,335 in-state tuition and $15,263 out-of-state tuition; University of California – $12,692 in-state tuition and $35,570 out-of-state tuition.

\(^8\) Since this research was conducting, the California legislature passed Senate Bills 130 and 131 which grant undocumented students access to some forms of state-funded and private financial aid.
deny undocumented immigrants access to social services and limit undocumented students access to education. Additionally, many respondents were attending California schools in 1994 when Proposition 187 attempted to eliminate their access to public resources like K-12 education (Mailman 1995). Finally, their rights are less protected as they exit educational institutions and transition into adulthood where their ineligibility for legal employment limits their access to stable, well-paid job and their deportability places severe restrictions on their physical movement (De Genova 2002; Gonzales 2011; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Núñez and Heyman 2007).

Due to their young age, undocumented 1.5 generation youth and young adults tend to first encounter these complex and contradictory laws within educational institutions. Faced with the limitations created by their immigration status, many undocumented youth focus on exclusionary policies because most educational institutions are not structured to provide all students with access to information about inclusionary policies like AB-540 (Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2010). Thus, immigration status limits undocumented youths’ pursuit of educational opportunities, lowers their educational aspirations, and contributes to a sense of uncertainty about the future (Abrego 2006). This suggests that structural inclusion and exclusion within educational institutions has consequences for undocumented young adults’ feelings of belonging.

While many scholars examine the structural barriers undocumented students face, few deeply address how these affect their feelings of belonging and sense of social-emotional incorporation. In fact, most research on immigrant incorporation focuses on structural incorporation (i.e. GPAs, test scores, high school graduation rates, and degree attainment) (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008). However, research on Latinas/os in education shows that feelings of belonging shape these structural outcomes (Gándara and Contreras 2009). Focusing on the disconnect between Latina/o students’ and White
teachers’ definitions of “caring.” Angela Valenzuela (1999) demonstrates that student disengagement is in part due to a lack of authentic relationships that makes them feel like they do not belong. In fact, Latinas are one of the least likely groups to feel that they have a teacher who cares about them (Gándara et al. n.d.). In addition to feeling excluded due to a lack of relationships with educational gatekeepers, immigrant youth are often marginalized by their peers and made to feel different due to their home culture and language (Olsen 1997). On the other hand, extracurricular participation, which facilitates the building of peer relationships, can increase Latinas sense of belonging in school (Gándara et al. n.d.). Collectively, this suggests that social relations that bolster feelings of belonging are key to promoting Latina/o educational achievement. Overall, this suggests that we need to better account for the relationship between structural barriers and feelings of belonging within educational institutions in order to fully understand undocumented young adults’ educational experiences.

This chapter addresses how simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary educational experiences, both on the institutional and interpersonal levels, affect the educational incorporation of undocumented young adults. I answer three specific questions: 1) How do undocumented immigration status and other social locations affect undocumented young adults’ educational pathways? 2) What do their simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary educational experiences teach undocumented young adults about their social position? 3) How do these opposing forces of incorporation and exclusion affect their incorporation within the context of education?

I find that undocumented youth come to understand the limitations of their undocumented immigration status within educational institutions. Since most research focuses on the experiences of undocumented college students, I first map the breadth of undocumented young
adults’ educational pathways – from those who do not complete high school to those who graduate from college – focusing on how undocumented status intersects with other social locations, like race, class, and gender. I then explore how simultaneously experiencing educational inclusion and exclusion teaches undocumented youth about their marginal social position. Finally, I demonstrate how structural mobility (e.g. transitioning from English as a Second Language classes to “regular” classes or from high school to college) exposes undocumented youth to marginalizing institutional and interpersonal experiences and reinforces their liminally legal reality. I discuss how heightened structural incorporation (via educational transitions) can lead to lowered social-emotional incorporation as undocumented young adults develop a heightened awareness of the social differences created by their immigration status. As a result, I argue that incorporation is actually composed of two parts: 1) structural incorporation which accounts for the extent of an individuals participation in the institution, and 2) social-emotional incorporation which accounts for their feelings of belonging and the social acceptance the experience while they are participating. These two types of incorporation are reversely related so that undocumented youth struggle to experience both simultaneously and so are ambiguously incorporated. Overall, these findings suggest that contradictory education laws and policies have both structural and social consequences for the educational experiences of undocumented young adults.

**EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS**

Most research on the experiences of undocumented youth and young adults focuses on the educational experiences of undocumented students enrolled in four-year universities (Abrego 2008; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Chavez et al. 2007; Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Enriquez 2011; Flores 2010; Huber and Malagon 2007; Perez 2012; Perez et al. 2009). However, most
undocumented young adults are pushed or pulled out of school before pursuing higher education (Abrego 2006; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2010; Greenman and Hall 2013). In fact, 28% of undocumented young adults who migrated to the U.S. before the age of fourteen do not complete high school and another 28% do not attend college after graduating from high school (Passel and Cohn 2009). Further, of the 44% who attend college, more than half will likely not obtain a degree as 42% of all Latina/o college students leave college with no degree within six years and 17% are still working on their degree after six years (Radford et al. 2010). Despite the fact that approximately 75% of undocumented youth will not pursue higher education or will not complete their higher educational degree, relatively little research examines the reasons behind this. As a result, I spend more time analyzing the experiences of undocumented young adults who do not successfully pursue higher education.

I find that the early educational experiences of undocumented young adults resemble the experiences of their citizen and documented peers in many ways. They participate in the same raced, classed, and gendered classrooms that contribute to the educational underachievement of Latinas/os in general (Gándara and Contreras 2009; Lopez 2003; Ochoa 2013; Valenzuela 1999). Further, their advancement to college is primarily fueled by structural support provided by Honors programs and social networks that provide them access to institutional knowledge and emotional support (Conchas 2006; Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2010; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). Given these structural factors, undocumented young adults’ educational pathways are heavily affected by structural factors that limit the number of all first-generation, low-income, Latina/o students. Undocumented immigration status compounds these limitations so that few undocumented students attend college, and even fewer complete college. For those who manage to gather the resources they need to attend college, their educational pathways are
disrupted by their undocumented status which creates financial instability by limiting access to financial aid and stable, well-paid employment.

Pathways Out of School

Examining the experiences of the approximately three quarters of undocumented young adults who (a) did not complete high school, (b) graduated from high school but did not attend college, and (c) attended community college but did not complete a degree reveals that many of undocumented young adults’ pathways out of school are not due directly to their immigration status. Their educational experiences reveal four key factors in pushing or pulling them out of school: (1) disengaging classrooms that contribute to missing class credits and push out to continuation schools, (2) family formation, (3) financial concerns, and (4) information and feelings about college attendance and graduation. Many of these are common push and pull out factors for all low-income, Latina/o, first-generation students, not just those who are undocumented. Further, the first two factors – disengagement and family formation – are gendered in that undocumented young men are more susceptible to push out through disengagement and criminalization in continuation school while undocumented young women are pulled off their educational paths by pregnancy. I find that their resistance to these raced, classed, and gendered push and pull out factors is weakened due to the limitations associated with their undocumented status, especially in relation to financial concerns and information and feelings about college attendance. In other words, most undocumented young adults find that there is no point in resisting raced, classed, and gendered factors since their undocumented status is going to raise barriers to paying for and utilizing an educational degree.
Almost half (20/45) of the respondents who (a) did not complete high school, (b) graduated from high school but did not pursue higher education, or (c) did not complete community college cite disengagement as a key factor in disrupting their educational pathways. The majority of these individuals were enrolled in “regular” classes (i.e. non-Honors, non-ESL) at under-resourced, overcrowded, and majority-minority high schools. As a result, many remember being bored in class, unchallenged by teachers, and disengaged. Enrique Escobar, who attended but did not complete community college, explains,

I went to … one of the most known bad [high] schools. The first day that I started, there was a [student] walk-out [in protest] … I remember one [teacher] that … all he did was just take roll and then he’ll literally fall asleep in class. All everybody did was whatever they want to do, just chat around and draw. I remember there was actually kids doing drugs over there [in the classroom] at that time. … [Students] would actually leave the classroom nobody would even notice. Most of the classes were actually like that. They would take roll maybe put notes on the board and all you had to do was copy them and that was class. That’s how it went for my whole ninth [grade] year of high school.

Like Enrique, many respondents discuss various forms of disengagement – teachers who do not care about teaching, students who do not pay attention during class – and how this made it hard to learn anything and encouraged their own educational disengagement. In some cases, they name the structural factors – overcrowding, lack of resources, curriculum – that lead to this perpetual cycle of teacher and student disengagement. Cruz Vargas, who did not complete high school, explains his frustration with the curriculum and how it led him to disengage in the classroom:

When they would tell me about history, I’d be like, “Well, where are my people at?” … And they’d tell me, “Oh, Mr. Vargas, we’re not on that subject.” Well, are you saying we didn’t exist during that time period then or what? And they’d tell me, “Yeah, but you guys didn’t do anything relevant at that point.” I’m like, “How does a whole ethnicity not contribute to a certain time! I find that
impossible.” And then they’d just tell me, “You wanna take it up with the Assistant Principle or do you wanna go and think about it outside?”

In Cruz’ case, these pleas and debates about culturally relevant curriculum earned him a reputation as a troublemaker and eventually contributed to his being sent to a continuation school. Hesitant and underprepared to challenge the structural status quo on an individual level, many respondents settled for academic disengagement, either failing or barely passing their classes.

Of those who did not complete high school, most found themselves either missing credits at the end of their four years or were sent to a less-structured continuation school where they did not complete their credit recovery programs. Nine of the 15 respondents who did not complete high school and seven of the 16 who completed high school had attended a continuation school. However this was gendered as those who had attended a continuation school and successfully made up credits tended to be women and those who did not tended to be men. This is likely due to the criminalization of men of color within educational institutions (Lopez 2003). Take the experiences of Cruz Vargas, who did not complete continuation school nor receive a high school degree, and Sara Romero, who left continuation school and then returned a few months later and received her high school diploma:

*Cruz:* That wasn’t even school; honestly, it was like it was more like a little jail for kids. The cop was there all day. They cared more about what you were wearing than about what you were learning. Instead of like being like, “Oh, [do] you need help with something?” They would be like, “Where are you from? What gang are you from?” Instead of focusing on school they focused on the problem they think they had.

*Sara:* It was a type of thing where you had to go and you bought the book and you sit in a freaking desk and you do the chapter and then you take a test. And you do the next chapter and you take a test. … I get distracted with everything. … I just can’t be alone because I won’t do anything. So I just stopped going.
Both Cruz and Sara note that continuation schools are not conducive to successful credit recovery because it is primarily independent work with little instruction or aid from teachers. However, their experiences of this space differ as Sara simply found it disengaging and unhelpful while Cruz encountered a relatively hostile environment. This suggests that the intersection of Latino undocumented young men’s raced and gendered social positions contributed to their push out from both high school and continuation school without regard for their immigration status. Without a high school degree, these undocumented young adults are unable to pursue higher education.

**Pregnancy and Family Formation**

Family formation is a pull out factor for a third of this group of undocumented young adults as twelve women left school because of pregnancy or caring for young children and three individuals (one woman and two men) did not continue their education because they became partnered through cohabitation or marriage. Half of the women who did not complete high school (4/8) or community college (5/7) directly attribute this educational disruption to pregnancy and the demands of motherhood. Victoria Sandoval, who did not complete high school, recalls her struggle to pursue an education while pregnant and caring for her young son: “I got pregnant when I was 17. I had my kid at the age of 18. I dropped out of high school. So my son, he was like ten months and I decided to go back to my school. By this time I was already 19. … I actually went into the office and spoke to the deans … and he helped me [re-enroll] and he told me, for your son, [the high school] has a daycare infant center.” Even with the help of a supportive high school administration and the availability of free daycare, Victoria found it difficult to balance her education with caring for her young child and eventually stopped
attending. This was the case for many of these undocumented young women who were pulled off of their educational path.

In addition to encouraging individuals to leave school, having children prevents undocumented young adults, especially mothers, from returning to school because of the financial strain of finding affordable childcare. Flor Vega who left community college after completing a part-time cosmetology certificate explains: “I’m planning to go back to school. I just have a daughter. She’s three years old. But it’s kind of hard because if I go to school, I have to pay more for a babysitter … So I’m waiting for her to go to school and work my schedule around her and maybe [then] I’ll have a chance to go to school.” Unable to get a job using her cosmetology certificate, Flor longs to return to school but is unable to cover the cost of childcare. In instances where mothers are able to find childcare they struggle with gendered desires and expectations that they spend time with their children. Sylvia Cortez, a high school graduate, explains: “My mom still tells me, ‘Why don’t you go after work [and] get a short career or something. Go to an adult school over here. I’ll take care of the baby.’ I’ve been thinking about it, but I don’t know. It’s hard cause I hardly see my baby. During my work he’s with a babysitter. So then after work I won’t be able to see him cause I have to go study.” Even though Sylvia has the social support, financial resources, and desire to pursue her education through a short-track career certificate, gendered expectations dissuade her from making this commitment. Gilbert Morales, who dropped out of high school to support his live-in girlfriend and returned years later for his GED, provides further evidence of this gendered disruption pattern. When I ask if having children will affect his plans to attend the local community college, he says, “No, because the mom is gonna stay right there.” Amid these expectations that mothers will care for children,
undocumented women find that family formation plays a key role in pushing them out of school and preventing their return if they desire.

The willingness to continue to fight for one’s education despite these difficulties often wanes as the utility of an educational degree becomes unclear in light of one’s educational status. Norma Mercado, who did not complete community college, remembers her struggle to persist in community college despite getting married and having two children:

At nineteen years old I decided, retardedly, that I wanted to get married. I did continue going to school right after marriage but my marriage was too much because our culture is like you have to be the wife and take care of the family. I did continue but I got pregnant with my first [child and] I just stopped going. When he turned three I started going again and continued [and then in] my last semester … [I got pregnant] and I just didn’t want to keep going to school. I guess I was just more on the idea that — well what’s the point. I’m never going to get a job in what I want. So I just stopped.

Although she was able to hold on to her dream of pursuing a higher education despite the demands of being a wife and mother to her first child, these demands became too much after her second child. Questioning the ultimate utility of these sacrifices because her undocumented status would prevent her from using her degree to get a better job, Norma left college one semester short of transferring. Essentially, these undocumented mothers realize that this constant battle to pursue an education may not be worth it since their degree will have relatively little pay off aside from personal achievement and pride.

Financial Concerns

Financial concerns emerge as both a push out and pull out factor that contributes to not completing high school, deterring undocumented young adults from attending college, and not completing college. In fact, 33 out of 45 respondents mention financial concerns as a contributing factor to discontinuing their education. Further, this is a point at which undocumented immigration status directly impacts educational retention by limiting an
individual’s ability to obtain a stable, well-paid job and thus afford the cost of college attendance, even under the lower cost of in-state tuition rates.

Financial concerns, primarily the need or desire to work and earn money, become pull out factors during high school. For some, their family’s financial situations, in part created by their parent’s undocumented status, can necessitate their entrance into the workforce. Alicia Medina, who did not complete high school, explains, “At 16 I had to leave school to work, that was a difficult decision because I didn’t want to leave. I liked school but my older sister, when she married, she left with her husband. So I had to start helping my mom with the cost of the rent and bills.” While Alicia’s family’s financial situation directly pulled her out of school, others suggested that their low-income status indirectly contributed to their push out from school. Abby Ortiz explains why she began to ditch during high school: “Sometimes because I didn’t have shoes. … Cause like we used to get shoes only when the school would start. And I think I dressed … like for middle school we had uniforms, so it wasn’t that bad. But for high school it was like I don’t wanna wear the same thing.” Unable to afford new clothes, Abby was teased by her peers and so sought to avoid these embarrassing situations by ditching school and eventually dropping out.

Although family finances impact the decision to leave high school in pursuit of work, this decision can also be partially attributed to a belief that a high school or college degree will have little impact on employment opportunities. Ignacio Nunez explains that the desire to work, in addition to being pushed into continuation school, contributed to his not completing high school:

I was trying to make it [my credits] up in adult school, but I just went to adult school for like three months and that’s it. Why did you stop going? Cuz I wanted money, I wanted money and I started working.

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9 Translated from: “A los 16 me tuve que salir de la escuela a trabajar, que fue un proceso porque bien difícil porque yo no quería. Porque me gustaba la escuela, pero mi hermana la mayor, como se caso, se fue con su marido. Entonces yo la seguí de ayudar a mi mama con los gastos de la renta y biles.”
He explains later that he does not think that having a high school diploma would increase the amount of money he makes or affected his job opportunities, saying that “almost all my work, they don’t need that [diploma]. … They never asked us.” In this case, the limitations associated with undocumented status and pre-existing push out factors encourage Ignacio to focus on his financial situation and leave school to find a job.

Those undocumented young adults who completed high school suggest that the cost of college directly deterred them from pursuing a college degree at either a community college or university. Marissa Rivera explains that she made this decision early on as a result of her family’s financial situation and the limitations associated with her undocumented status:

When I was probably in middle school. Because by then I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to go to school. … I could continue going but I knew that it was going to be a struggle, a really really big struggle because my parents, they are not economically really good right now. … I would have to have a job as well. … I would be juggling work and school and it would be really bad. So since then I put it in my mind [that] I’m not going to school. I’m going to find a good job that will support me.

Although she is aware that she could attend college despite her undocumented status, Marissa chose to focus on working because she did not want to struggle with working and going to school at the same time. Additionally, many gave up on pursuing an education when they realized they would not be able to obtain financial aid like their citizen peers. Adan Olivera, a high school graduate, recalls, “When you are in twelfth grade they started [asking] where you’re going to go to college, where you’re going to study. It’s kind of, for me [I thought], “What am I going to do? No papers, no social. How can you apply for financial aid.” Realizing he would be unable to afford the college education he desired without financial aid, and under the strong suggestion of his parents, Adan chose instead to obtain a certificate in data entry at a nearby occupational center that his undocumented older sister was attending. Thus, financial situations,
coupled with the inability of undocumented students to obtain financial aid, discouraged many undocumented young adults from pursuing a higher education.

Those undocumented young adults who are willing to attempt to overcome the financial barriers to college attendance, often find that finances force them to leave college. Leo Sandoval explains his decision to leave a California State University (CSU) his first quarter after transferring from a community college:

Working at a job [at a fast food restaurant] I made $12k the whole year. $12k is the exact amount that I need for a year and a half at school [for tuition at a CSU]. … The tuition already went up. … I think it went all the way up to like $3,200 or $3,400 last I heard. And it’s going to continue to rise. So with an eight dollar an hour job, I won’t cut it. Even with two jobs like that I still wouldn’t get it.

Forced to work in jobs that are willing to hire undocumented workers or do not check for valid social security numbers, Leo and many undocumented college students find themselves in low-income jobs where they are unable to piece together the financial resources they need to cover their tuition and living expenses. Those who work multiple jobs, as Leo suggests, find that balancing these hours with academic work is difficult. Celia Alvarez remembers,

I was getting out at work at midnight. And I had to be at school by like seven-thirty in the morning. I was only sleeping four or five hours, and I had to squeeze time [in] for my homework and I … was training for a marathon. So then I started thinking, okay, I’m already twenty-four, it doesn’t look like anything’s gonna happen [to fix my immigration status] and what am I killing myself going to school for.

While Celia was able to complete two years at a community college through a full private scholarship she received for being on the college’s track team, she struggled to continue once her scholarship ended and she had to work three part-time jobs while enrolled in classes. Essentially her undocumented status prevented her from obtaining financial aid to replace her earlier scholarship, limited her ability to obtain a job where she could make enough to afford school,
and finally encouraged her to stop going to school because she did not see a way to use her degree in the future.

**Information and Feelings about College Attendance and Graduation**

Most undocumented young adults are the first in their families to graduate from high school, let alone attend college. In addition, they attend under-resourced schools with relatively little college-going culture. This makes it relatively hard to access information about college attendance in general and even more difficult to access information specific to undocumented students (Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2010). Further, their undocumented status disrupts their ability to imagine utilizing their degree effectively in the future and can prevent them from having the college experience that they desired. All together, 35 of the 45 respondents note that their path into higher education was disrupted by a lack of college information or support. For many, this was related to their undocumented status.

Most undocumented students struggle to piece together the information they need to go to college because they must obtain specific information about policies like AB-540 which grants them access to more affordable in-state tuition rates. Although most note that their schools made standard presentations about going to college, these often did not contain information specific to undocumented students. Ivan Cardenas, a high school graduate, remembers how this presentation had a lot of information about the financial aid available to citizen and documented students:

“The whole FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] program and they started asking for a social and I didn’t have one. … So I just didn’t care about school no more.” While school could simultaneously provide info about undocumented students’ college opportunities during these types of presentations, they tend to focus on the resources available to citizens and end up

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10 This is especially critical now that undocumented students in California have access to some forms of private and state-funded financial aid through Senate Bills 130 and 131 (i.e. the California Dream Act).
alienating undocumented youth like Ivan by teaching them about the significant barriers their undocumented status poses to pursuing a higher education. Many undocumented students who attempt to obtain information from school officials outside of these presentations often encounter individuals who do not have sufficient information. Joanna Salas remembers, “I had one teacher actually try to help me with this situation about me not being able to go to school and he told me to speak to CHIRLA\textsuperscript{11} about it. But they never end up picking up.” While Joanna was able to find an emotionally supportive teacher who directed her to a potential resource, she was never able to obtain the information she needed to attend college. Most high school teachers and counselors do not have information about the resources available to undocumented students; rather, most undocumented college students obtain this information through social networks with other undocumented individuals (Enriquez 2011).

Further compounding this lack of undocumented student-specific information, almost a third of these respondents struggled to obtain general information about college attendance and enrollment. For example, Carolina Sandoval, a high school graduate, explains her attempts to enroll in two local for-profit cosmetology schools:

> I wanted to go [to one school]... [but] you actually need to get a, the government gives you a loan. So in order for the government to give you a loan you need to have a social [security number] or else you can’t. ... I used to always think, “Oh, when I grow up I’ma have my salon. ... So it kind of made me feel bad because I couldn’t. ... [My friend and I] had gone together to ask for information [at another school] ... [and the receptionist] was like asking us all these questions and she’s like, “Oh, do you guys have a social?” And we’re like no, and then she’s like, “Oh, well, then you guys just read the information that’s on the board.” ... She just walked away.

Although Carolina repeatedly tried to get information about cosmetology school, she never found out that she could take cosmetology classes at a local community college where she would

\textsuperscript{11} The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) is a well-known local non-profit organization that is featured regularly in news stories about immigration reform and undocumented students.
have paid relatively minimal fees compared to these for-profit cosmetology schools. Similarly, some of the other high school graduate respondents were unaware of the types of classes available at local community colleges or the enrollment process. For those who did manage to obtain the information necessary to matriculate to a community college, they did not always have the information they needed to quickly and successfully complete their requirements. Chuy Soto remembers taking the wrong math placement test upon entering community college. As a result, he started at the beginning of the college’s math sequence even though he had passed calculus in high school. Despite his frustration at having to take four math classes until he could take the statistics class he needed for his business major, he never went to take a new placement test because, “there was nobody to push me, go take another test, or a counselor that said, go take another test. Nobody really got to hear my side, ‘Oh I took calculus, how come I'm doing this?’ So I just kind of went along with what they gave me.” Unaware of how the college enrollment system works, many of the undocumented students who started community college got left behind and found themselves taking classes they did not need or missing ones that they did. This lengthened their stay at the community college and often contributed to their eventual decision to leave college.

Further, the experiences of a few students currently enrolled in community college reveal that academic under-preparedness contributes to the decision to discontinue one’s college education. Paco Barrera, a community college student for over six years, explains that he never felt bound for a university because he was underprepared in high school:

I feel like I'm not smart enough. I feel like I don’t have a base of what I need to survive in an institution. I feel like I can’t write well. I can’t speak well. I can’t read very well. I can’t research well. I feel like I'm not, like I'm just not. I just want to stop and I'm wasting my fucking time. Then again, what do I do if I drop out? … I don’t envision myself transferring. I don’t see it happening. … I think I'm just not cut out [for that] kind of thing.
In “regular” classes with average grades at an under-resourced and under-performing high school, Paco feels academically unprepared for college. As a result, he struggles to stay enrolled, pass his classes, and cannot imagine transferring to a university. Similarly, his older brother, Noel Barrera was enrolled in community college for six years until he was able to transfer to a University of California institution. Despite his eventual success, he struggled to persist in community college because of his academic unpreparedness:

I've had trouble in math and English. Right now [what] I'm waiting for is the winter intersession to start. I’m gonna take math, which is the one before the college level. And then in the spring I plan to take statistics and then I'm done. And then because I'm trying to get academic grades reviewed at [my previous community college], I have to wait for this semester. Cuz in the spring I failed my math class … so I retook it again this [fall] semester and I need to do academic renewal. But because I failed it in spring … I need a 2.5 to do renewal. And they're like no. So I have to wait for this to clear up

In part he contributes this to academic unpreparedness but in part also to a lack of motivation when he feels like he is wasting his life in college. While fighting these academic and emotional battles, Noel also has to navigate the institutional structure’s rules about making up failed classes; a difficult task even when it is facilitated by his close relationships with multiple student affairs officers on campus. For many undocumented community college students, this combination of limited academic skills, institutional knowledge, and motivation contributes to discontinuing their college career.

The decision to stop one’s educational pursuits due to failing classes and a lack of institutional knowledge is often exacerbated by the recognition that they will not be able to use their degree. Ray Guzman left high school in his senior year because he was short credits and did not want to go to continuation school. When I ask him about returning for a GED he remarks, “The way I see it is for what though? I’m still not gonna be able to get a job with a GED [unless]
I could get documents and forge it.” Joaquin Salas confirms Ray’s suspicion that a GED would not necessarily lead to a better job as he does not believe that his GED has affected his employment prospects “because most of the jobs that I had, well you don’t really need a high school diploma. It’s mostly physical work.” Sylvia Cortez expresses a similar sentiment around attending a community college for the purpose of a vocational certificate: “Sometimes when I want to get a career [certificate], I’m like – Where? Why? I’m not gonna be able to get a job because I don’t have documents.” This is not always entirely true as some respondents with vocational certificates believe that they have been able to use their skills to work “on the side” but not to be officially hired in their career area. Flor Vega explains that taking the classes for a cosmetology certificate at a local community college, “wasn’t a waste of time because I learned something.” While she was unable to receive her license without a social security number, she “does hair on the side” and “didn’t lose anything … [because] I can go back to school and my hours are not lost. … [If] I have my work permit, maybe I’ll take one class to refresh everything I know and I’ll be able to take my test.” In Flor’s case, she decided to continue with her cosmetology training because the teacher told her in the beginning of the program how she could manage the limitations of her undocumented status. In many other cases, undocumented students did not have this information upfront and began to believe that the cost of pursuing a degree far outweighed the potential benefits since they believed their degree would be relatively useless for obtaining a job.

Those who believed that their degree would be useful and acquired the institutional knowledge necessary to go to college often were college bound for most of their high school career. For these select few, their decision to discontinue their college careers was often
attributed to how their undocumented status prevented them from pursuing the college career they had aspired to and that their peers were pursuing. Aida Mendoza remembers,

I was in all these programs, and I was really trying to go to college. … Then they had trips to Yale and all these places, and I wouldn’t be able to travel. I qualified for everything; I just was never able to take the opportunity. So that’s when I started feeling like [it was] a waste of time. Honestly, it was like, fuck, twelve years burning my eyelashes, no sleep, no nothing, and trying very hard to be a straight A student for what? I mean, it has no pay off.

Senior year in high school Aida became disillusioned when her undocumented status prevented her from taking advantage of the educational opportunities she had been working towards. Instead of going to a top college she felt destined for, she attended one quarter at a local California State University and then had to move to a community college because she could not afford tuition. Adrian Garcia had a similar experience of moving to a community college after he was put on academic probation at a California State University when his grades dropped because he was unable to balance working two jobs with the demands of his school work. He remembers,

I didn’t really care much for [the community college] because I felt like it was a step back. The classes seemed like they were full of immature kids, just getting out of high school. I didn’t like it. I didn’t care too much for it. … I had already experienced what it was like to be at a higher-level university. Then having to downgrade it kind of took my inspiration away.

Pushed out of his dream university, Adrian eventually became disillusioned with college and left to focus on his job; he has not returned and does not anticipate returning in the future. In cases like these, the employment and financial limitations created by undocumented status can disrupt educational pursuits because the paths are not what the individual desired. Despite being able to overcome many of the structural limitations to college matriculation, these emotional barriers can push undocumented students out of school.

Examining the experiences of the approximately 75% of undocumented young adults who did not complete high school, graduated from high school but did not attend college, and
attended community college but did not complete a degree reveals four key factors that push or pull them out of school: (1) disengaging classrooms that contribute to missing credits and push out to continuation schools, (2) family formation, (3) financial concerns, and (4) information and feelings about college attendance and graduation. While undocumented status disrupts these pathways by creating financial instability and limiting their opportunities and feelings about attending and persisting in college, many of these factors are the product of their raced, classed, and gendered social locations. In most cases, the intersection of these social locations leads one’s undocumented status to weaken their commitment to resisting common push out and pull out factors.

**Pathways Through College**

Similar to how structural factors unrelated to undocumented immigration status push and pull undocumented young adults out of school, those who are currently attending or graduated from college have had their paths to college facilitated by various forms of structural support unrelated to their immigration status. This select group of undocumented young adults avoided the push out and pull out factors discussed above and also securing access to specific information about accessing higher education, including information about AB-540 (Abrego 2006; Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2010). Armed with positive educational experiences and information about resources for undocumented students, they maintain hope that they will be able to overcome the limitations their undocumented status poses to paying for their education and utilizing their degrees. Despite this, their undocumented status plays a large role in their pathway through college as it prevents access to financial aid and limits employment opportunities. Although previous research focuses on undocumented four-year college students’ ability to pay for their education and the need for providing access to financial aid (Chavez et al. 2007; Diaz-Strong et
al. 2011; Huber and Malagon 2007), I demonstrate that these financial limitations have two specific consequences for undocumented young adults’ educational pathways through college: limiting the schools they choose to attend and lengthening their time to degree. In fact, most pursue community college first in order to manage financial costs which often lengthens their college career. These disruptions lead them to develop negative feelings of frustration and exclusion about their educational pathways.

Most respondents who are currently attending college or had graduated from a four-year university were already college bound during high school and had access to structural support that allowed them to avoid commonplace push out and pull out factors. In fact, the vast majority of respondents in or who had graduated from a four-year university had participated in Honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and/or AVID classes in high school. As a result, they were surrounded by peers who were college bound and had access to information about the college application process. Sonia Herrera remembers how her college preparation program helped pave the way for her to successfully enroll in a California State University:

That program was a great help because they knew the classes that we needed to take and they gave it to us. If anything was wrong, we could always go to them and they would take care of it. So it was like a parent [providing guidance]. … Senior year I got into this other program … and they helped me with the whole process of filling out the application forms, the whole personal statement, the resume, the letters.

These programs ensured that students obtained all of their required classes, continued to imagine themselves attending college, and had access to information about the college application process. Further, by virtue of being an Honors student with high grades, these respondents were often selected by counselors to attend university’s recruitment presentations and college

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12 AVID (Advanced Via Individual Determination) is a wide-spread high school program designed to create a college-going atmosphere for first-generation, low-income, minority students and provide them with information about attending college.
workshops. Sol Montes, a student at a four-year university, remembers, “I was an expert in FAFSA because they always sent me even if I didn’t wanna go. Like my counselors literally dragged me to go to those stupid workshops, the FAFSA, the Cal Grants and the Pell Grants. All that crap. And that’s like a slap on my face.” Having one of the highest GPAs in her school, Sol’s counselors encouraged her to pursue higher education by sending her to financial aid workshops, unaware that she was undocumented and unable to utilize any of these resources. Further, teachers became invested in their top students and became committed to helping them attend college. Abel Leon, a university graduate, remembers how his teacher encouraged him to attend a California State University (CSU):

I went to [a CSU] because [of] my teacher. One day we were having a conversation about college, and she asked me the question, “What college are you gonna go [to]?” I said, “I’m going to [community college].” And she said, “Why [community college]. How about [a CSU]? How about other universities? What is your GPA?” And she saw my grades. Like, “No, you have to go to a four-year university.” It was already May … she took me to [a CSU] and she helped me to apply.

In addition to encouraging him to attend a four-year university, rather than taking a longer route through community college, Abel’s teacher put him in contact with student affairs officers at the CSU so that he was able to gain admission long after the application deadline. In many cases, Honors programs structurally integrated students like Sol and Abel so that they were able to build strong relationships with counselors and teachers. This facilitated their access to information about college and school officials who were able to help them navigate and overcome structural barriers to higher education. This structural support tends to continue into their college experiences as they access honors programs and college bridge programs that facilitate their entrance into and transfer out of community college.
Despite having the institutional knowledge and social support needed to successfully apply to and enroll in college, undocumented young adults are forced to take educational pathways that they define as less prestigious because financial concerns dictate the college they attend. Nearly two thirds of respondents who currently attend or graduated from college note that affordability dictated the college that they attended. First of all, financial concerns encouraged many to use community college as an affordable pathway into higher education. Typical of many respondents, Rafael Montelongo explains, “I applied for [a CSU] and I wanted to go there for engineering but I didn’t have money so I didn’t go. I just started going to community college.” Like Rafael, most respondents discuss this decision as a matter of fact. Community college offers financial affordability as respondents quote each unit costing $14 to $46 a unit, depending on when they were enrolled. Further, individuals who went straight to a four-year university, or were choosing whether to transfer to a CSU or UC institution, often elected for a CSU over a UC because of affordability. Gabi Santos, a CSU graduate, explains,

I applied to Cal State San Bernardino, UC Riverside, Cal State Fullerton, and Cal State Long Beach. There are some schools that I wanted to apply [to] but I really wanted to go there so I just didn't try cuz I didn't want to get in and then have that in my head that I couldn't go. I wanted to go to UC Santa Barbara so I didn't apply there. And UC San Diego too, I didn't apply there either. And I got into UC Riverside, and that was my first choice, but the whole money thing. ... I remember [a CSU] per semester was like $3,000 and UC Riverside was about $9,000.

Unable to afford attending a UC, Gabi avoided applying to her “dream schools” and chose to attend a local CSU which she could more easily commute too in order to save money. While almost every respondent in higher education notes that cost-differentials encouraged them to select a more affordable college, their limited financial resources often made it difficult to afford tuition prices, even at these relatively lower-cost institutions.
Financial resources dictate pathways through college, regardless of which type of institution one enrolls. Those few respondents who are able to directly matriculate to a four-year institution and/or continuously enroll full-time in any type of college have external financial resources. For example, David Soto, who was about to graduate with his B.A. at the time of his interview, explains how he was able to fund his first year after transferring from community college to a University of California institution:

Once I transferred in my mom … cause we used to buy things like crazy, … but my mom started saving money. So once I transferred in, she’s like, “You just worry about school.” … School was my sole responsibility apart from working [part-time] at [a fast-food restaurant]. … So the first quarter I paid for it, the second quarter she paid for it, and then I got a scholarship for the third.

David’s experience reflects three of the most common ways undocumented young adults pay for their education – personal employment and savings, parental financial resources, and private scholarships. These financial resources are often available when individuals begin their educational journey but they tend to exhaust these resources relatively quickly. As a result, individuals tend to attempt to balance work and school by either attending school part-time or taking time off in order to save money. Edgar Gonzalez, a community college student, and Antonio Mendez, a CSU student, explain:

*Edgar:* I was working and that’s when I decided to make [school] part time because it was hard. At a certain point, I had to quit my job until I finished that semester and then I became a part-time [at school]. I was working at night from 4 p.m. to 12 midnight. I was getting home at 12:30 p.m. and sleeping at like 1 a.m. and my first class was at 7 a.m.

*Antonio:* I'm in debt like $2,000. I need to pay that off. And then pay like $1,000 so I can come back for next quarter which is next week. So I'm not gonna be able to cuz it’s too much pressure. I'm just gonna take the quarter off, see if I can work [and] save some money.

While they began college with funds to sustain their full-time college enrollment, both Edgar and Antonio soon began to struggle to pay their tuition. To make ends meet, Edgar elects for part-
time enrollment and full-time employment, a strategy often and easily employed at the community college level as enrollment cost is determined by the number of units one enrolls in. Alternatively, Antonio, and many four-year college students, elect to take time off to work full-time and save money to pay their flat-rate tuition costs. The institutionally-specific nature of these two strategies likely contributes to attrition during the transfer process. Tanya Diaz who has been primarily part-time at a community college explains that she will likely not transfer to a four-year university: “It’s probably not gonna happen. I would like it but I know I could never afford it. … I’m gonna try it [but] I could probably only go to a [CSU] school nearby … because of my son and work. I don’t know. I’ll probably just take a class at a time. I don’t know how I’m gonna do it.” As Tanya suggests, this part-time enrollment strategy is no longer effective in a four-year university. Further, adopting Antonio’s strategy – enrolling full-time while taking quarters/semesters off to save money – will likely be difficult given the time-constraints created by her work schedule and family. This suggests that financial concerns dictate pathways through college by determining one’s enrollment status.

These financial constraints often lead to frustration as undocumented young adults are dismayed that they are not able to attend the colleges they desire or advance at the rate they would like. Being in Honors classes in high school, many respondents were ready for and had been accepted to four-year universities. With finances constraining them to a community college they often became frustrated. Lucy Covarrubias, a community college student, explains, “It was a challenge of course, going to [a community college] … when you know you had the chance to go somewhere else. So I had a hard time fitting in. I’m like, ‘No, I don’t wanna be here. This is not where I belong.’” CSU students who had sacrificed their UC acceptance due to affordability had similar feelings. Yvonne Zepeda, a CSU student who transferred from a community college
explains, “[In] September I started school at [a CSU] and I wasn’t too happy with it. I was still a little bit sad like, ‘Oh. This is [a CSU].’ Cause I have always wanted something greater for myself.” Attending colleges that they feel are not prestigious enough, Lucy, Yvonne, and many other undocumented college students struggle with feelings of frustration, anger, and exclusion because their undocumented status prevents them from being able to afford the educational institutions they would prefer to attend. Further, even when undocumented young adults are able to attend their “dream schools”, financial constraints often make them feel like they do not belong there. Raul Robles who went directly to a UC after high school explains how financial concerns, “made it very difficult for me to feel like a student 100%. … You belong to the institution but sometimes you don't feel like you're a student. Especially when you have to deal with money situations.” Despite receiving a rare renewable tuition scholarship, financial constraints have forced Raul to take a year off in order to save money to pay for fee increases and his living expenses. This, in addition to constantly worrying about money during school, led Raul, and many other students, to feel like they are different from their peers. All together, this suggests that undocumented status, expressed in terms of financial constraints, even makes this selective group of fairly successful undocumented students feel like they do not belong within educational institutions.

Despite these financial limitations and contrary to those who do not pursue higher education, undocumented college students tend to persist because they believe that they will be able to utilize their degree and find a job despite their undocumented immigration status. Most rely on the experiences of undocumented college graduates to feed these perceptions. For example, Edith Sandoval, a CSU graduate with a teaching credential, was able to find a job as a teacher at a private school because the director knew her college mentor. Despite being able to
directly use her degree and teaching credential, she explains that she is not using it in the way she wishes: “I wanted to be a teacher because I wanted to give back to inner city kids. I always pictured myself working for LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District] cause they have really bad schools in some areas. … Instead I’m in a private school … [with] kids who are not at a disadvantage. … They have enough support. I don’t feel needed there.” Edith is the only college graduate respondent who is employed in the profession she aspires to. Despite this, the limited employment opportunities associated with her undocumented status prevent her from working with her preferred student population. However, her experience also reveals the critical nature of social networks in securing skilled employment after graduation. Along this line, Omar Valenzuela, a CSU student, explains that he is committed to building his network while still in school. “[I’m] just pretty much networking and getting a network set up, so when you graduate you know who to call and maybe get an internship with somebody and go from there.” While most current students believe that networks will help them find employers who will hire them despite their undocumented status, few college graduates have found this to be the case. In fact, the majority are employed in similar, if not the same jobs, that they had did during college. Despite this reality, most undocumented young adults who are enrolled in or graduated from college believe that building networks and making small compromises will allow them to obtain stable employment that pays better than the jobs held by undocumented young adults who do not have a college degree. Further, they tend to believe that immigration reform is imminent – perhaps because of their tendency to be involved in or at least knowledgeable about the immigrant youth movement – and that this will allow them to obtain professional employment in the future.
Undocumented immigration status primarily disrupts educational pathways through college by creating financial instability by limiting access to financial aid and stable, well-paid employment. However, pathways into college are primarily determined by structural factors that limit the number of first-generation, low-income, Latina/o students who are structurally integrated into K-12 schools and able to access information about college. Thus, those undocumented youth who are able to transition to college tend to be students who were selected into college-bound tracks during their early educational experiences and prior to the point when they became aware of the limitations of their undocumented status. Thus, the educational pathways of undocumented youth and young adults are structured by undocumented status, as well as their raced, classed, and gendered social locations.

**LEARNING LIMINALITY: INTERNALIZING MESSAGES OF LEGAL AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE**

Regardless of the educational path they find themselves on, undocumented young adults experience simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary educational policies that teach them about their liminal legal status. As they navigate the transition between high school and college, they realize that the law treats them differently than citizens. Further, interpersonal experiences translate this legal liminality into feelings of social difference as they begin to feel different than their citizen peers. Overall, these experiences within educational institutions lead them to internalize their ambiguous legal status and develop simultaneous feelings of belonging and exclusion.

The prospect of transitioning from high school to college, whether they make it or not, exposes undocumented young adults to the legal contradictions embedded in the educational policies directed at 1.5 generation undocumented youth. The U.S. supreme court decision in
Plyler v. Doe guarantees undocumented immigrant youth full access to K-12 educational institutions (Olivas 2005). This protected legal status is responsible for most undocumented youths’ initial feelings that their immigration status is insignificant, especially in educational settings. Take the examples of Celia Alvarez, who did not complete community college, and Fabian Quesada, a high school graduate:

_Celia_: In high school they don’t ask you all that. You don’t have to show anything [legal status], you just go. You could go to an after school program, you could do anything, cause they don’t care about that.

_Fabian_: At school I was treated the same way [as citizens]. My friends treated me the same way. Teachers treated me the same way. … I’ve never felt like I was illegal. I never had that put on [me]. It only feels that way when I think about my future.

While Celia discusses the structural incorporation that she experiences through unlimited structural access to education, Fabian suggests that he always felt socially accepted because he was never treated differently in school. Being allowed to participate in educational spaces, many undocumented youth develop feelings of belonging, especially in schools (Abrego 2008). As Gabi Santos, a college graduate, explains, “Home for me has been school. I think that's where I can feel like I belong. … That's where I kind of feel protected. … No matter if you have papers [or] if you don't have any papers, if they see the potential in you, they try to help you out.”

Despite this legal inclusion in K-12 educational institutions, undocumented youth face legal exclusion as they near the end of their compulsory educational journey. Zen Cruz recalls learning the limited reach of these educational rights and legal protections as he neared graduation:

I went to talk to my college advisor. … She told us that we couldn’t apply to college because we didn’t have a social security number. That got me really depressed. All throughout high school, … I did as good as I could, went to summer school. But then when I got that bombshell I just completely stopped
caring and I just figured, “Well, what the hell? What am I gonna finish high school for if I can’t go to college?

Graduating prior to the passage of AB-540 which could have facilitated a path to college, Zen learned that the previous educational rights he had were quickly disappearing. Similarly other respondents mention legal barriers that prevent them from having equal access to financial aid and from gaining legal employment with their degrees. Like Zen, most respondents remember learning about their initial legal limitations in an educational context. As a result, schools are responsible for teaching them that they occupy a liminal legal status where they are simultaneously accepted and rejected through laws and policies.

Undocumented young adults also learn that they are different from citizens through simultaneous experiences of positive and negative interpersonal support. Marcela Avila, a student at a four-year university, recalls the support she experienced when telling her teachers about her immigration status. “When I would tell them, ‘Hey, I’m undocumented. Do you have any help that you can give me?’ They usually don’t, but they’re like, ‘Wow that’s encouraging. You should tell other students, maybe they would work harder and try and get better grades.’” While Marcela categorizes these experiences as positive and supportive, they also carried messages about how she is different from other students, in this case harder working and academically superior. While encouraging for her, these messages taught her about the social distance that exists between her and her peers. Alternatively these interpersonal messages could take on a more negative tone, as in the case of Cruz Vargas, who did not complete high school:

I was pretty smart in school, so they’d tell me, “Why don’t you try to get your papers so you can go to college properly.” … I’m like, “You wanna pay for it? I don’t have the money to do that.” … They would respond in a negative way too. They’d be like, “Well, you don’t have to be such a smart ass about it.” You’re asking me something that I’ve put up with my whole life. I kinda get tired of hearing it all the time. … Unless you’re in my position you won’t understand.
While Cruz’ interactions with teachers were significantly more negative, his experiences were similar to Marcela’s in that he learned that he occupied a different social position than his teachers who did not understand his situation and his citizen peers who had opportunities he did not. While these opposite messages contributed to divergent educational paths, both of them learned a similar lesson from these interactions – they are not the same as citizens – and they will forever have to straddle the tensions between seeming to belong and knowing that they will be made to feel different because of their undocumented status.

Internalizing these structural and interpersonal lessons of liminality, undocumented youth have to manage their conflicting feelings about their ambiguous future. Beto Bonilla, a community college student, explains,

They give you certificates and student of the month, honor roll, principal’s honor roll. All of those little things, it feels good because … I knew a couple of years before that I couldn’t speak English, … I was failing, I was getting Ds and Fs. All of a sudden I’m getting As, Bs. … For a moment you do feel [like], “Oh I’m going to do my best and I’m going to excel.

Celebrating his educational success, Beto received many awards that signaled to him that he belonged in school and was upwardly mobile with the potential for future incorporation. Despite these positive feelings, Beto’s undocumented status and his legal liminality served to remind him that he faced a future of exclusion as graduation approached and there was little support for his pursuit of higher education. In addition he recalls that a lot of his undocumented peers, “dropped out. … [which] creates that mentality that ‘Okay maybe you didn’t drop this year but maybe next year it’s going to be you.’ You are just hoping that you’re not going to be one more number in the statistic.” Faced with this plausible future of blocked opportunities and social exclusion, Beto had to learn to manage the tensions between the simultaneous feelings of belonging and exclusion that he experienced during high school. While he was able to focus on the inclusionary
messages and pair these with some structural opportunities to enroll in a community college, other respondents were not so lucky.

Regardless of their eventual educational attainment, high schools serve as one of the first places where undocumented young adults encounter these ambiguous messages about their immigration status and learn to manage these simultaneous feelings of belonging and exclusion. Building on Roberto Gonzales’ (2011) argument that undocumented young adults “learn to be illegal” during the transition into adulthood, which includes the transition out of high school, I suggest that schools are a key context in which undocumented young adults are taught about their structural and social liminality and learn (or do not learn) to manage these ambiguous emotions. In essence, it is not just that they learn the limitations associated with their undocumented status but that educational participation socializes them into their liminal social position, teaching them that they are different than their citizen peers.

**EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS: STRUCTURAL INCORPORATION AT THE RISK OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL EXCLUSION**

Most assimilation scholars find that participating in educational institutions is a key means of becoming incorporated into society and being incorporated into the U.S. social fabric (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008). However, the fact that undocumented young adults learn liminality within the school context suggests that educational participation may actually increase feelings of exclusion and disrupt their incorporation. Indeed, I find that attending school and making educational transitions contributes to the ambiguous institutional and social incorporation of undocumented young adults. Specifically, structural mobility within educational institutions leads to educational transitions (e.g. from English as a Second Language classes to “regular” classes, from high school to college, from college to the work force after
graduation) that expose undocumented youth to marginalizing institutional and interpersonal experiences and reinforce their liminally legal reality.

I contend that assimilation theory needs to better account for the role of emotions and feelings of belonging within these institutional settings in order to gain a fuller sense of the immigrant incorporation process. I argue that this can be achieved by conceptualizing incorporation as composed of two types – structural incorporation and social-emotional incorporation. Structural incorporation accounts for the extent of an individual's participation in the institution, while social-emotional incorporation accounts for their feelings of belonging and social acceptance while they are participating. I find that while their educational participation leads to structural incorporation, it also makes undocumented young adults aware of the barriers that exist, leading to feelings of exclusion and inhibiting social-emotional incorporation. As a result, I argue that structural incorporation and social-emotional incorporation are inversely related so that undocumented youth struggle to experience both simultaneously and so are ambiguously incorporated. In this section I examine undocumented young adults' institutional experiences and social relationships within educational institutions to demonstrate the negative effect that this simultaneous incorporation and exclusion has on their overall incorporation.

**Ambiguous Institutional Incorporation within Educational Institutions**

Participating in an institution is generally associated with being incorporated in that institution. Thus, many scholars tend to assume that educational participation leads to incorporation in educational institutions. However, I find that transitioning to and participating in higher education raises undocumented young adults’ awareness of the significance of their immigration status and leads them to develop feelings of exclusion as they confront the barriers created by their undocumented status. Thus, those undocumented young adults who transition
from high school to college and participate in higher education institutions become increasingly aware of the structural limitations created by their undocumented status and tend to see their immigration status as a major barrier that contributes to their feelings of exclusion and limits their social-emotional incorporation.

Participating in higher education increases undocumented young adults’ tendency to think about their status more regularly and recognize the structural barriers that it creates. Close to half of respondents who did not attend higher education or did not complete community college say that they think about their immigration status infrequently (a few times a year) and less than a third think about their immigration status with high regularity. Chuy Soto, who did not complete community college and does not anticipate returning for a degree, explains that he thinks about his status infrequently:

Probably only when I go to certain places where they don't accept either the matricula [Mexican consulate ID] or [Mexican] passport. I never had a lot of problems. One time I was trying to get into a club at Universal City Walk. … They're like, “We can’t let you in with your matricula.” But the guy who was at the door, he was Mexican, he's like, “Pero si agarras tu pasaporte [but if you get your passport], I’ll let you in all day.” … If you let all these things define what you do, then you're not gonna do what you want to do.

Undocumented young adults who are not struggling to obtain or utilize their higher education tend to confront the structural limitations of their status in situations like these where there are less severe consequences. Because these instances do not occur very often and most can find way to negotiate these limitations, this group of undocumented young adults does not perceive their undocumented status as a barrier that is salient in their everyday life. However, approximately half of respondents currently enrolled in college or who held an associate or bachelor’s degree

13 Those individual who thought about their status with high regularity tended to be struggling with unemployment and instable income because of their undocumented status.
think about their immigration status very often (ranging from once a week to multiple times a day) and another third think about it regularly (at least once a month). Irene Correas, a college graduate who works at a coffee shop, explains that she thinks about her status fairly often, especially “at work and [when] I have hard, difficult moments and you have to deal with shit. I wish I could just do so much, you know? Or I wish I could just quit today and move on. I know I can’t because I’m undocumented. And so you just have to just ignore certain things and just keep on going.” Irene, like many who are in college or hold college degrees, thinks about her status fairly regularly when she encounters structural barriers and directly recognizes that these have been created by her undocumented status and likely will not be able to overcome them (e.g. obtain a job where she uses her degree) unless she legalizes her status. In essence, participating in higher education raises barriers as undocumented young adults acquire credentials that their undocumented status does not allow them to fully utilize. This increases the frequency that this segment of the undocumented young adult population thinks about their immigration status and contributes to higher feelings of exclusion than those who are not enrolled or did not graduate from college.

Undocumented young adults tend to recognize their structural limitations and develop feelings of exclusion during educational transitions. Specifically, feelings of exclusion tend to arise in the high school to college transition and can, in some instances, decrease after college graduation. Daniela Sanchez, a community college student, explains why she thinks her immigration status is important in her everyday life: “If you would have asked me this in high school I would have said no, not really. But now I can over think it because at this point there’s nothing I can do. But it’s not so much thinking of my status because that’s done with, [decided]. I think it’s more to think about what I would be doing.” Daniela specifically marks a shift
between when she was in high school to now that she is in college and how that has forced her to think about the things she is not doing and wishes she were doing. In many cases, this arises as they compare themselves to their citizen peers who are progressing through college at faster rates and taking advantage of opportunities that undocumented students cannot access. Although those who do not attend higher education also wish that they were achieving more upward mobility, they do not see citizen peers on a daily basis who are able to achieve the mobility that they themselves desire. Further, the transition between community college and a four-year university increases awareness of ones undocumented status. Cameron Peña, who was applying to transfer at the time of our interview explains that he thinks about his status once a day:

I’m just getting ready to transfer and stuff and it always comes up when you’re thinking about the tuition. If you’re struggling right now, how is it gonna get even worse once you transfer to a Cal State [University] or any other institution? So I think that’s mainly the time when I think about [my status], like thinking about transferring and how that’s gonna bring its own negatives and positives as well.

This suggests that educational transitions increase awareness of one’s undocumented status because it forces them to struggle through a lesson in liminal legality. In this case, Cameron’s impending educational transition requires him to develop new strategies for navigating his liminal legality. Further, Julio Medina, a college graduate, notes that undocumented status becomes particularly salient in college because it contributes to academic, social, and extracurricular decisions which encourage individuals to develop a strong awareness of their undocumented status and its limitations.

I used to think about it everyday when I was in school. Now, since I'm out of school and I'm earning money, I don't really think about it as much. Unless I'm in a really bad predicament, like when I was working [and] they told me I needed to do E-Verify. … [But I did in college] because it was my identity. Everything I

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14 E-verify is a federal program run by the Department of Homeland Security that allows employers to verify that the social security number provided by an employee matches their name and is authorized for employment. Currently, employers choose to participate in E-verify at their own discretion; however, proposed immigration reform laws seek to make participation mandatory.
did revolved around me being undocumented. What classes I took, what I was gonna be doing in school, my career [plans] and how it mattered whether I had documents or not. And also the [political] organizing that was going on in school. It was always on my mind.

Julio suggests that leaving college removes a lot of the stimuli that cause undocumented students to think about their immigration status. Julio was able to successfully navigate this transition and utilize his educational degrees to some extent and obtain stable work at a non-profit organization. The undocumented college graduates who are able to make this transition allow the lived significance of their undocumented status to fade into the background. This suggests that educational transitions are key points for raising awareness about the limitations of one’s undocumented status because it forces individuals to actively navigate structural barriers and come face to face with things that they cannot do.

Structural limitations and an awareness of one’s undocumented status lead undocumented young adults to develop feelings of exclusion and limited social-emotional incorporation. Tanya Diaz, a community college student, explains why she felt like she belonged in high school but not in community college:

> It wasn’t something that I constantly worried about [in high school] because it didn’t matter so much then. You’re kind of not in the real world where it mattered so much. It’s when I got to [community college] that I felt the change and saw it was more of a struggle too. I had to take the bus … It used to take me like three or two hours to get there. It wasn’t until then when I had to do things for myself that I saw how much it affected my life.

Unwilling to drive without a license and forced to work at a job that was far from home because it was the only place that would hire her without a valid social security number, Tanya began to realize that her undocumented status made her different from her citizen peers. This caused her to develop feelings of exclusion while in community college. Further, Amanda Loera who is close to transferring from community college to a four-year university explains how she starts to
feel bad about herself when she compares herself to her citizen high school friends. “They're already graduating; they did it in four years. I've been here at [community college] for four and a half years. So I know I shouldn’t compare myself to them because they have way different circumstances … But then, I just want to finish. I'm tired. I'm tired.” Surpassed by her high school friends, Amanda is frustrated that her undocumented status has significantly lengthened her college career. Comparing themselves to high school friends as well as college friends who graduate before them, undocumented students become frustrated that they have different educational opportunities and experiences; this often heightens their feelings of exclusion.

Examining the institutional participation of undocumented students reveals that participation does not automatically lead to incorporation. Rather, transitioning to and participating in higher education raises undocumented young adults’ awareness of the significance of their immigration status and leads them to develop feelings of exclusion as they confront the barriers created by their immigration status. While pursuing a higher education leads to structural incorporation it also increases feelings of exclusion and limits their social-emotional incorporation. These opposing incorporation experiences lead to the ambiguous institutional incorporation of undocumented students as they participate but do not feel that they fully belong.

**Ambiguous Social Incorporation within Educational Institutions**

Amid these institutional experiences, undocumented young adults also experience shifting social relationships as they become increasingly structurally incorporated during educational transitions. Specifically, increased structural incorporation is associated with exposure to a broader group of peers with different immigration statuses and of different races. These opportunities for cross-group interpersonal interactions open up opportunities to highlight immigration status differences and increase feelings of marginality. In this section I examine the
social effects of two educational transitions: (1) interactions across immigration status that increase during the transition from English as a Second Language (ESL) to mainstream classes, and (2) cross-racial interactions that increase during the transition from high school to college. Examining these two transitions reveals that the structural incorporation created by this educational mobility is often coupled with social-emotional exclusion in friendships and romantic relationships. This suggests that there is a reverse relationship between structural inclusion and social-emotional inclusion so that it is practically impossible for undocumented youth to simultaneously experience both and declare definitive incorporation.

**Leaving ESL Class: Building Friendships across Immigration Status**

ESL classes represent opportunities to empower immigrant youth through English language acquisition and give them the language tools they need to pursue incorporation. However, these programs often further marginalize students by separating them from the mainstream for long periods of time and hindering their educational advancement (Gándara 2012; Olsen 1997). As students transition out of ESL classes, they are, at least in theory, structurally integrated into their schools as they have access to a mainstream curriculum and social networks. Yet, this structural integration has severe consequences as it makes it difficult to identify undocumented peers and contributes to the development of feelings of exclusion within citizen-dominated social circles.

Given their young age of entry, most of my respondents experienced fairly early structural incorporation into educational institutions as they transitioned from English as a Second Language (ESL) to mainstream classes with their U.S. born peers. While I did not systematically collect data on the organization of ESL programs\(^\text{15}\), many respondents recalled

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\(^{15}\) When recounting their educational experiences, most respondents had little specific understanding of their ESL programming due to their young age. In addition, collecting this type of data was not a primary focus of the project.
that their first friendships were with other ESL students. As their language skills advanced, they moved into “regular” classes and began to form a more mixed status group of friends. Natalie Torres explains her own transition,

I entered the 9th grade and … I didn’t know English whatsoever. They put me into ESL classes … and all of us were in the same classroom, all of us that didn’t know English. So my first year my friends were composed of undocumented students. … [During 10th grade] they transferred me to regular classes. Then I started making friends … but they were citizens.

Like most respondents, Natalie found that the immigration status of her peers and friends shifted as she transitioned out of ESL classes. For most respondents who left ESL either before entering high school, their peer groups became more mixed so that they were often the only or one of the few undocumented students in their social circle. Those few who remained in ESL at later ages, especially during high school, tended to have primarily undocumented friends.

While exiting ESL classes holds many structural opportunities for the academic advancement of youth (see Gándara 2012), this desegregation negatively impacts their incorporation by making it more difficult to identify and network with other undocumented youth. These undocumented networks are critical for sharing information about navigating the college application process as an undocumented student (Enriquez 2011). In addition, undocumented immigrant networks further facilitate structural incorporation by providing information and assistance with securing jobs that do not check one’s immigration status. Adrian Garcia explains, “I did call some friends to help me get another job. It’s hard getting a job without your social security [number], but if you’re recommended it’s easier for you to get a job. It’s pretty much how I started working.” Furthermore, these undocumented immigrant networks can facilitate belonging and social incorporation, Chuy Soto explains how having an undocumented friend kept him from feeling alone and made him a little more comfortable with
his status: “I had a friend that didn't have papers too. … He was more open about it. Kind of [telling me], ‘It’s okay. Saying it [that your undocumented] is okay. You don't have to be afraid.’” In either case, having friendships with other undocumented youth facilitated the structural and social-emotional incorporation of my respondents. Thus, transitioning out of ESL and into a less segregated space made it harder to identify other undocumented students and limited access to these positive social networks.

In addition, entering more mixed-status social networks created more opportunities for feelings of exclusion. Carolina Sandoval explains, “I feel awkward because most of my friends do have papers. … I wouldn’t wanna go hang out with them sometimes because … it started getting to me. … What if a cop pulls me over or something. I’m gonna be embarrassed cause everybody’s OK and I’m not. So I would hang out with people that didn’t have papers.” Recognizing the legal differences between herself and her citizen peers, Carolina became anxious about potential interactions that would mark her as different. Striving to avoid these feelings of exclusion, she slowly shifted her friendship networks to primarily include undocumented peers. Similarly, Claudia Arellano explains how she did not talk to her friends about her status because it tended to prompt questions that made her feel different. “Cause everyone is just really curious like, ‘I don’t get it. How did you go to school? How do you drive? How do you work? … Why don’t you just take a citizen’s test?’ I get that all the time! …So it’s not even so much because I’m gonna be judged or nothing. … It’s just more [because] of [the] questions and the [exhaustion].” While Claudia did not start avoiding her friends, she did start avoiding talking about her undocumented status so as not to be plagued by questions that constantly reminded her that she is different. In any case, Carolina, Claudia, and other
respondents struggled to maintain fully open friendships with citizens because they did not want to feel different or excluded.

Friendships between citizens and undocumented youth could also become tense, no matter how supportive or understanding the citizen was of their undocumented status. Karen Rodriguez explains how she feels that most of her citizen friends do not understand her situation, despite being Latina/o and having at least one undocumented parent:

[They say], “It’s not my fault that I was born here. It’s not my fault that I can go to school.” But it’s not like whenever I talk to them it’s my intention to make them feel like, “Well it’s your fault.” It’s not. I just feel like they don’t understand what it is to not have documents. … They have all these doors open [that] they don’t take advantage of. … They are not informed of their own laws of their own country. … I don’t think it created big time relationship breakups, but it has created a lot of arguments between [me and] people because they kind of feel like, “You’re in our space.”

While she tried to talk to her friends about her undocumented status, their reactions were not always positive, and could lead to arguments. While this did not end friendships, the arguments strained her relationships as Karen struggled to contain her frustration about the opportunities her friends did not take advantage of. Similarly, Cruz Vargas explains that his friends were always supportive but would sometimes tease him about his status, reminding him of his feelings of inequality:

It was kind of mean sometimes cause I would wanna do things and I wouldn’t be able to, and they would kind of taunt me about it. … I wouldn’t say I envy my friends or nothing like that, but some of ‘em … would always get into trouble and I tried not to. I tried to actually do good in school. … And I didn’t see the same opportunities they had, although I worked harder. So I found it a bit unfair that even though I wanted it I couldn’t have it, and then that they had it they didn’t want it.

While Cruz usually felt supported by his friends, their lighthearted teasing about his inability to get into places that required an ID or go with them on vacation to Mexico would make him feel
left out. Coupled with his frustration that he worked harder than them, this sometimes created
tension in their friendship group.

I find that those with citizen-dominated friendship circles tended to experience more of
these tensions and feelings of exclusion. In addition, these types of cross-status friendships
tended to emerge as individuals exited ESL classes and were more exposed to, and able to
communicate with, a broader group of students. This suggests that the structural incorporation
associated with this transition was coupled with respondents’ social-emotional exclusion.

**Going to College: Romantic Partner Preferences as a Response to Marginalization**

Despite these tensions with citizen Latina/o friends, most respondents acknowledge that
Latinas/os are more understanding of undocumented status-related issues than non-Latinas/os.
As undocumented youth leave these racially segregated schools, their social spheres diverge
based on their decision to pursue higher education or not. Those who attend college enter citizen-
dominated, racially-diverse institutions of higher education, while those who do not attend
college remain in their mixed-status, Latina/o-dominated neighborhoods. As with transitioning
out of ESL classes, pursuing higher education opens up opportunities for structural incorporation
but also increases the risk of feeling socially excluded. I trace how these educational differences
shape social incorporation through romantic partner preferences.

Entering an institution of higher education promotes educational attainment and
interracial interactions, two main measures of structural incorporation. Living in racially
segregated communities, most undocumented youth attend Latina/o dominated schools.
Francisco Garza recalls that his high school peers were “predominantly Latino. My classmates
were literally one [or] two Asians, … maybe 15 Blacks, maybe one or two Whites. And the other
was just Mexican, Salvadoreños, Hondureños, from Ecuador. … I felt like I was at home. … I
was never made fun of … cause I fit in perfectly.” Like Francisco, most respondents had primarily Latina/o, and usually Mexican-origin, peers and friendship networks, which made them feel as if they belonged but promoted their structural exclusion. After being primarily socialized within their neighborhoods, attending college was one of the first times that many undocumented youth moved out of these racially segregated spaces for extended periods of time. Celia Alvarez recalls how her friendship circle diversified upon entering community college. “They were pretty diverse. It was like, ‘Oh this is pretty cool because not everyone is Latino here.’ You get to know a little bit about everybody. You know we had an African American kid, we had two Armenian twins, and we had two Armenian guys and we had a Latino guy and we had Puerto Rican guys.” Thus transitioning into higher education institutions allows them to build more diverse social networks and opens up opportunities to meet non-Latinas/os.

While participating in higher education promotes social incorporation and interactions with a diverse group of people, it also puts undocumented young adults at risk for facing the legal and social barriers associated with their immigration status. In addition to trying to navigate institutional barriers on campus, cross-racial interactions turn out to be more strained than those they may have experienced with their citizen Latina/o peers (as discussed above). Marcela Avila explains the differences she sees between her citizen Latina/o and Asian American friends:

[My friends would ask,] “Why aren’t you getting one [a car]? Why aren’t you getting your driver’s license?” So then I explained [my undocumented status]. … Some of them really didn’t get it they were just like, “Oh okay” and they would keep re-asking every couple of months. But then other ones were like “I get it. If you ever need a ride we’re here for you.” My [Latina/o] friends that did get it, they had family who was undocumented too. My Asian friends, they didn’t really get it because they were already Americanized and their parents had been Americanized.
Marcela suggests that while her Latina/o friends are citizens, they at least have a sense of the limitations of undocumented status because of its pervasive presence in the Latina/o community; 81% of the undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are Latina/o (Passel and Cohn 2009).

Searching for understanding partners in the citizen-dominated spaces of higher education, undocumented youth develop a preference for Latina/o romantic partners so that only a handful of respondents had previously dated a non-Latina/o and only one person was currently partnered with a non-Latina/o. Some respondents, like Rebecca Rosales, remember their experiences dating non-Latinas/os as strained. She explains, “the majority of people I’ve dated have been Latinos with the exception of two— … a White guy and a Korean guy. But it made me feel uncomfortable.” She, like the others, suggests that cultural differences and preferences persist despite exposure to non-Latina/o individuals. Many respondents suggest that they would prefer to find a citizen partner of Latina/o origin because of shared cultural similarities (e.g. Spanish language, holiday traditions). This suggests that early residential and social segregation limits exposure to and comfort around non-Latinas/os and encourages individuals to maintain a preference for Latinas/os even in interracial spaces. This challenges assimilation theory and reinforces findings that Latina/o origin individuals prefer to date other Latinas/os (Landale et al. 2006; Morales 2012; Telles and Ortiz 2008).

These strained interracial experiences, as well as daily exposure to blocked opportunities on campus and anti-immigrant sentiment from peers, promote higher feelings of exclusion among college-attending undocumented youth when compared to those who do not pursue higher education. As a result, this group develops a stronger desire for finding a romantic partner who will help them mitigate these feelings of exclusion. For most undocumented college students, they place a high priority on legalizing their immigration status and so develop
preferences for citizen partners who may be able to legalize them through marriage.\textsuperscript{16} Twenty-six of the 37 individuals\textsuperscript{17} in this category express a preference for or have only dated citizen individuals. Having experienced the limitations of their immigration status, these individuals had a strong desire to legalize their status in order to secure their future opportunities. Felipe Moreno, explains his strict position to not date undocumented women: “If you care more about love than about getting your legal shit straight, you're wild. … [Legalization], that's my main priority.” Alternatively, five respondents explicitly state a clear preference for dating other undocumented young adults because they found them to be more supportive and helped them cope with their marginalizing experiences. Christina Guzman explains,

Let’s say something happens and I’m venting and I’m crying and I’m telling my partner about it. He understands what I’m going through and what I would need. My [citizen] partner before, I feel like I would have to tell them what I would need. … I guess [now I] just feel better faster. You know how sometimes you feel crazy because you feel like you’re the only person that’s feeling that or because sometimes you just need reassurance? Like when someone makes a stupid comment and no one says anything. … You look for that reassurance.

As undocumented students in educational contexts where most people are citizens, most undocumented respondents in higher education institutions feel that their immigration status is incredibly salient on a day-to-day basis. The emergence of demeaning interactions with ill-informed individuals often leads them to seek out emotional support, much like the experiences of minority students of color who look for validation in their peers of color. Some, like Christina and Noel, find this support in their undocumented peers. This emotional support and understanding causes them to develop an appreciation, and sometimes preference, for dating other undocumented young adults. Regardless of the partner preferences they develop,

\textsuperscript{16} This process is actually more complicated because most respondents entered the country without inspection (i.e. without a visa) which forces them to return to their country of origin to file their petition and places a 10-year bar on their return to the U.S. While this bar can be lifted, the petition process is lengthy and requires proving that their absence places extreme hardship on citizens.

\textsuperscript{17} While I interviewed 47 individuals in this category, I do not have data on these preferences for 10 individuals.
undocumented college students come to structure their romantic relationships around their immigration status. As a response to the exclusion they feel in these educational settings, this helps reveal the depth of the emotional consequences that come with structural incorporation.

Alternatively, those who do not attend higher education do not experience a high degree of marginalization and do not develop strong immigration-status preferences. When asked if they would date other undocumented individuals, most of these respondents said that they did not care about their partner’s status. In addition, although all respondents desire to legalize their status, they report facing few explicit barriers because of their immigration status. This limited interaction with explicit legal barriers and exclusionary social interactions reduces the attention they pay to legalization and lead them to be equally likely to be partnered with citizen and undocumented individuals. While this group does not experience the strong negative social-emotional consequences that the other group does, they do not have the structural mobility associated with education or intermarriage.

Educational transitions provide undocumented youth with more opportunities for upward mobility but simultaneously create opportunities for social-emotional exclusion. With each transition into a more diverse social space they are theoretically categorized as on their way to incorporation; however, they simultaneously navigate friendships and romantic relationships in ways that highlight their undocumented status and reinforce feelings of difference. Thus, while upward educational mobility may lead to structural incorporation it also increases feelings of exclusion and limits their social-emotional incorporation. These opposing incorporation experiences lead to the ambiguous educational incorporation of undocumented young adults.
CONCLUSION

Schools are one of the first social institutions that undocumented youth participate in and one of the most welcoming due to laws that guarantee access to primary and secondary education. Yet, schools also serve as a place to experience exclusion through policies, practices, and interpersonal interactions. As a result, undocumented youth negotiate a complex web of laws, interactions, and feelings, which simultaneously promote their incorporation and exclusion. I find that these contradictory experiences teach undocumented youth to internalize their marginalized social position and contribute to their ambiguous institutional and social incorporation. This suggests that the role of education in facilitating immigrant incorporation is more multifaceted than previously believed.

I find that undocumented youth experience ambiguous institutional and social incorporation within educational institutions because they do not feel fully accepted due to their undocumented immigration status. While opportunities for incorporation are associated with structural mobility (i.e. moving out of ESL classes, college attendance, college graduation), I find that undocumented young adults do not develop social-emotional incorporation during these transitions, but rather experience social-emotional exclusion. I argue that the reverse relationship between these two types of incorporation contributes to why they are not experiencing full incorporation, and likely will continue to be ambiguously incorporated until immigration policies change.

These findings have theoretical implications for how we think about immigrant incorporation. While scholarship has measured immigrant youth incorporation through educational advancement (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), I suggest that what is perceived as positive incorporation also creates a coinciding risk for exclusion. I contend that incorporation is actually
composed of two parts – structural incorporation and social-emotional incorporation. Disentangling these two pieces of incorporation allows us to center the social and emotional stress that can accompany the upward mobility of undocumented young adults, and likely other marginalized groups. Paying attention to only one side of this incorporation puzzle at a time overlooks the negative effects of the other type of incorporation and presents an incomplete picture of the educational incorporation process.

Most research has focused on undocumented college students and the limitations created by undocumented status (for an exception see Gonzales 2010). Yet, my examination of the educational pathways of a diversely educated group of undocumented young adults reveals that school structures and social locations unrelated to undocumented status are responsible for shaping a large part of their educational pathways. The experiences of undocumented young adults who did not complete high school, graduated from high school but did not pursue a higher education, or attended but did not complete community college reveals that many of these undocumented young adults were not primarily pushed or pulled out of school by their undocumented status but rather by their raced, classed, and gendered social locations. Further, those who were able to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college tended to be the beneficiaries of structural support. This suggests that the educational incorporation of undocumented young adults could be improved by undocumented specific-legislation (i.e. access to financial aid) but there is also a need for larger policy changes that address the raced, classed, and gendered inequality of the U.S. education system.
CHAPTER 3

Experiencing and Challenging “Excludability” in the Labor Market

As an undocumented person you don’t have the right to feel pain nor sorrow. ... You’re only good to work and just work and just work. And [you] don’t receive none of the fruits from your labor. That’s how I actually feel about being part of America, persecuted, discriminated, hated.

– Pablo Ortiz

When I’m taken advantage [off] I’ll say something. ... I’m [a] very outspoken person. ... If I’m getting treated bad I wanna tell you.

– Eva Santiz

Pablo Ortiz and Eva Santiz are both undocumented young adults who are struggling to make a living because of the limitations created by their undocumented immigration status. They both work in labor-intensive jobs – Pablo as a solicitor and Eva at a fast food chain restaurant – but they have developed alternative approaches and understandings of the significance of their immigration status within the workplace. While Pablo adopts a common representation of undocumented immigrants as workers who are constantly taken advantage of and discriminated against, Eva says that she is willing to speak up for her rights and challenge individuals who try to take advantage of her and other undocumented workers. These contradictory feelings suggest that undocumented young adults are both tolerating and challenging the structural limitations associated with their undocumented immigration status in the labor market. However, we do not know from where these diverging feelings emerge. How do undocumented immigrants like Pablo learn their position in the labor market and how do individuals like Eva learn to challenge this position?

Despite the fact that one in every 19 workers in the U.S. is an undocumented immigrant (Passel and Cohn 2009), relatively little research explores the labor market experiences of undocumented immigrants, particularly those of undocumented young adults. Quantitative
analyses show that undocumented immigrants earn less than documented immigrants with a 17% wage gap between undocumented and documented Mexican immigrant men and a 9% gap between undocumented and documented Mexican immigrant women (Borjas and Tienda 1993; Hall et al. 2010). While a portion of this gap is due to differences in human capital and occupational sector, some of it is due to the fact that undocumented workers are more likely than their documented peers to earn below minimum wage (Bernhardt et al. 2013). Additionally, undocumented immigrants are commonly subjected to labor violations including paycheck irregularities, wage and hour abuse, lack of access to safety equipment, and lack of basic knowledge about workplace rights (Gleeson 2010). In part, these labor violations occur because they are weakly enforced and have low penalties (Bernhardt et al. 2013). However, workers’ immigration status also limits claiming rights and reporting abuse as employers threaten to turn workers over to authorities for deportation (Fussell 2011; Gleeson 2010; Nessel 2001). Additionally, undocumented workers do not report labor violations because they imagine their work in the U.S. as short-term, suggesting that these are temporary conditions to be endured (Gleeson 2010; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). While research has grappled with the negative consequences of various immigration-related laws (e.g. deportation, employer sanctions, labor rights) for undocumented immigrants’ labor market participation, it has yet to cohesively conceptualize how these legal barriers impact their economic incorporation.

Further, most research focuses on the employment experiences of first generation undocumented adults and reflects Pablo Ortiz’ sentiment that undocumented workers are being discriminated against. However, this does not account for the experiences of undocumented 1.5 generation young adults who have different legal consciousnesses than their adult counterparts. Leisy Abrego (2011) demonstrates that first generation undocumented adults develop a legal
consciousness grounded in fear while the 1.5 generation focuses on stigma. She finds that the first generations’ fear of deportation limits their participation in social movements and hinders their claims-making while the 1.5 generation is able to counteract feelings of stigma in order to claim access to rights and legal status. Extending these generational differences to labor market participation suggests that undocumented 1.5 generation young adults may have different labor market experiences than their first generation counterparts. However, none to date have mapped the labor market participation and economic incorporation of undocumented young adults.

One of the most common limitations associated with undocumented immigration status is the constant risk of detention and deportation. Deportations are on the rise with President Barack Obama on track to deport over two million individuals by the middle of 2014, more than all deportations conducted before 1997 (Golash-Boza 2013). Although a significant number of individuals are deported, the threat of deportation, or their “deportability,” increases the marginalizing effects of deportation policies by promoting a constant state of hypervigilance and fear in everyday life (De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Attempting to minimize the risk of deportation, many undocumented immigrants limit their physical movement and social visibility which can limit their economic, political, and social participation (Menjívar 2011; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Sigona 2012; Yoshikawa 2012). Although the concept of deportability encompasses how the threat of workplace raids and the difficulties of driving to the workplace without a license could impact participation in the labor force, it does not capture other employment-related policies that teach undocumented immigrants about the limitations of their undocumented status.

Building on the concept of “deportability” and the idea that the threat of something can create limitations even if the event does not occur, I suggest that we think about the
“excludability” of undocumented immigrants. Like “deportability,” this concept highlights the threat of exclusion from the labor market, rather than the actual experience of exclusion, in order to explore how structural limitations may teach undocumented immigrants to limit themselves and affect their economic incorporation. This broader concept allows us to address employment-related laws and practices – not having access to a social security number, the E-Verify program, employer sanctions, unenforced labor rights – which are less intensely enforced and have less extreme consequences than deportation (e.g. loss of income, labor rights violations). It is particularly useful to study this concept in the context of economic incorporation because undocumented young adults’ employment is directly impacted by laws and structural barriers that cut them out of the labor market; this threat of exclusion is less obvious in educational institutions where they benefit from inclusionary policies (see Chapter 2) and social institutions where legal barriers can more easily be negotiated (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Despite their participation in the labor market, I find that undocumented young adults are incompletely economically incorporated because they struggle to feel like they belong in their workplaces. I argue that this largely stems from the threat of exclusion, or their excludability, rather than from actual experiences of being excluded from the labor market. Further, I suggest that many undocumented young adults are able to challenge the negative treatment they see and/or experience because they are only grappling with the threat of exclusion, rather than previous exclusionary experiences. In the first section I lay out the types of jobs undocumented young adults tend to occupy. I then discuss how employment-related immigration policies teach undocumented young adults about their excludability, limit their feelings of belonging, and curtail their participation in the labor market. Finally, I explore how undocumented young adults’ socialization to U.S. norms and rights, acculturation, and youthfulness can prevent them
from internalizing their excludability and encourage them to challenge abuse in their workplaces. Overall, this suggests that undocumented 1.5 generation young adults’ experiences in the workplace differ from those of first generation undocumented adults (e.g. their parents) who struggle to overcome their fear of exclusion.

**STRUGGLERS, SURVIVORS, CLIMBERS AND ELITES:**

**WHERE DO UNDOCUMENTED YOUNG ADULTS WORK?**

Undocumented young adults occupy a variety of jobs, including stereotypical jobs as gardeners, nannies, and fast food workers but they are also office workers, managers, and educational providers. Contrary to what we might expect, more than half are working in what they described as “good” jobs, usually in offices or as managers, where they had less labor-intensive work and received higher pay. I develop a typology of these jobs based on type of work, pay, and level of economic stability. I find that undocumented young adults who are working fall into one of four categories as *strugglers, survivors, climbers, and elites*. Further, the jobs they end up in largely depend on their education level and the extent of their social networks.

Approximately a sixth of participants (15 out of 85) can be classified as “strugglers” who have limited job opportunities and are earn less than minimum wage, often in cash. Like many undocumented young adults, this group entered into the labor market through the informal economies where they are paid by the day or through piecework, often at swap meets, in small stores in downtown Los Angeles known as the “alleys,” or in factories. Some strugglers took these first jobs and then never left them. Paco Barrera’s work history exemplifies this as he started working at a swap meet after finishing high school and never left. He explains, “I just

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18 Seven participants said that they were focused on school and were only intermittently working. They largely covered their financial expenses through scholarships, temporary paid internships, and resources provided by their parents.
wasted five years at a swap meet. … You ain’t moving up nowhere here. … But it’s a job and you gotta do what you gotta do.” While many undocumented young adults begin their work histories in these types of jobs, most recognized the limited financial opportunities they offered and attempted to move into more stable jobs that pay minimum wage. While many were able to find stable work and move into the “survivor” category, some like Alvina Villanueva continue to struggle as they only find temporary jobs or are let go and face long bouts of unemployment “because of the [lack of] papers.” Often, the inability to find work is linked to their limited social networks as they either do not know someone who can refer them at a new job or they are unwilling to take the jobs to which they can secure referrals.

A little more than half of participants (47 out of 85) can be classified as “survivors” who find a reliable, minimum-wage job and opt to stay there rather than looking for a “better” job and risking not finding one. Survivors find jobs in three types of occupations. A quarter (11) are in labor intensive jobs as hourly factory or warehouse workers, gardeners, or nannies. These tend to be men who find their jobs through undocumented family members who have the same type of job. Another quarter (13) occupy service-sector work as fast food workers, restaurant servers, and salespeople. Usually these are women who use family and friendship networks but also apply to jobs that display “help wanted” signs. Finally, half of the survivors (23) – or a quarter of all participants – work in offices as receptionists, assistants, and tutors. A third of these office jobs (8) are occupied by college students who work on-campus or in education-based non-profits. Office jobs are understood to be the best type of “survivor” employment as they are cleaner, less labor intensive, and require skills like English language and computer abilities. They are most likely to be held by women. Like others in service work, they obtain the job by responding to “help wanted” signs and through friends and family; however, when they use
undocumented family networks they tend to find work with the same company but in an office, instead of as a laborer.

Another sixth of participants (17 out of 85) can be classified as “climbers” who use their networks, work ethic, and acculturation to climb into better-paid jobs or into management positions. This differs from first generation undocumented adults who tend to be passed over for managerial positions (Gleeson 2010). For example, Nancy Ortega found a job at an auto insurance office through a friend and then moved through various office jobs as she met people in one place and then “that person offered me a better job – same job [but] better pay – so I went. And so on and so on.” While Nancy moved from job to job for better pay, increased financial stability, and more responsibility, others like Adrian Garcia got hired as a cashier in a fast food chain restaurant, showed them “I’m a good worker,” and got promoted through various managerial positions to eventually become an assistant store manager. The majority of climbers have some higher education experience and use that to demonstrate that they are responsible, trustworthy, and “management material.” However, they are often not using their educational degrees in the way they intended.

Finally, a small number of participants (6 out of 85) can be classified as “elites” who are able to deploy their educational credentials to obtain stable, salaried employment. Positions include: office manager for a large company, design engineer at an architecture firm, teacher, family counselor, and organizers at local non-profits. As Edgar Gonzalez explains, he has been able to use his community college engineering training and credentials because he developed relevant social networks. Specifically, a classmate offered him a job he was leaving at a construction company; he was able to build on the networks and skills he built in this first job to
launch himself into his current job. Similarly, others explain that relevant social networks, often to citizens who are embedded in these career areas, are critical for moving into elite jobs.

This typology of undocumented young adults’ jobs and employment trajectories suggests that the majority of undocumented young adults have been able to move beyond the jobs occupied by first generation undocumented adults like their parents. While most start out in jobs typical of undocumented workers, many are able to leverage their English language ability, education, and broad social networks in order to obtain self-proclaimed “good” jobs where they conduct less labor-intensive work and receive higher pay. On the surface, this suggests that undocumented young adults experience higher levels of economic incorporation than first generation undocumented adults. However, I suggest in the next section that this relatively high level of participation does not necessarily translate into high levels of economic incorporation.

“YOU WANNA JUST SPREAD YOUR WINGS … AND YOU CAN’T”:
THE PROMOTION OF EXCLUDABILITY

While undocumented young adults are participating in the labor market, they are not doing so in the way they desire and expect. This is because various employment-related immigration policies seek to exclude them from the labor market because of their undocumented status. Specifically, exclusion tends to stem from three policies\(^\text{19}\): (1) the E-Verify program that allows employers to check the validity of a social security number, (2) employer sanctions for hiring undocumented workers, and (3) perceived limited access to worker’s rights. While many undocumented young adults have not been directly excluded from the labor market because of these policies, the threat of exclusion – or their excludability – does lead to their incomplete

\(^{19}\) I do not discuss workplace raids and deportations because few respondents discussed these issues and most believed that their workplaces are very unlikely to be raided because they are not stereotypical undocumented immigrant jobs (e.g. in factories).
economic incorporation by encouraging them to limit their own participation and curtailing their feelings of belonging.

**E-Verify: The Threat of Not Finding Work and Feeling “Stuck”**

E-Verify is a federal government system which allows employers to check the employment eligibility of workers with relative ease (USCIS 2013). Although employers are not required to use the system to verify work eligibility, its use has grown in recent years. Karen Rodriguez explains the barriers it raises, “If I went to apply to Sprint, they actually do background checks [E-Verify]. … Certain restaurants, certain places like big stores – Kmart, Walmart, big brands you would know not to [apply]. … You just find out because somebody else knows and then somebody else knows and then they told that person.” While some businesses post signs saying that they use E-Verify, news often travels by word of mouth as Karen suggests. Additionally, E-Verify can push people out of their line of work as companies decide to begin checking work eligibility. Joaquin Salas recalls being fired from a clothing warehouse after two years because, “they decided to change the agency they were getting workers from and the new agency started checking papers.” After losing his job he was unemployed for eight months because the other warehouses and factories he applied to were either not hiring or had also begun using E-Verify. Finally, E-Verify can prevent individuals from advancing into management positions in their workplaces. Luis Escobar recalls leaving a job after many years once he was nominated for a management position: “They sent my paperwork to corporate to get checked and I get a letter saying everything is verified and there’s something iffy in your thing. … After that I’m like, ‘Sorry, I have to go.’” Essentially, as the use of E-Verify and support for stringent immigration enforcement rises, undocumented immigration status becomes a substantial barrier to finding a job and fully participating in the labor market.
The rising use of E-Verify creates a sense of excludability, which has affected undocumented young adults’ participation by discouraging them from leaving the jobs that they currently hold. Specifically, many believe that there is a real and rising threat of unemployment because they lack a valid social security number. Martha Sandoval explains that this has encouraged her to continue working at a fast food chain restaurant for the past seven years: “I still have dreams. I want to go back to school and get a little small career. … But I am afraid. I'm afraid to go somewhere and they’ll tell me, like, ‘Oh no [we can’t hire you].’” While Martha worries about her applications for other jobs being rejected because of her undocumented status, Claudia Arellano explains that she would not be able to return to her job if she quit and could not find another one: “Now they do E-Verify. So if I ever wanted to leave and come back or something, you can’t. … So it makes you think even twice or three times to leave or not because you think, ‘Well, I could lose this job and then not be able to come back to it.’ … It’s the whole being stuck thing.” Similar to Martha, Claudia feels “stuck” in her job and is also unwilling to quit out of fear of unemployment. Further, she worries about losing her job and so is careful to not get fired for fear of becoming unemployed. It is this rising threat of unemployment due to E-Verify that has contributed to the large number of “survivors” who find a minimum-wage job and seek to keep it, despite it’s unsatisfying, low-paying, and/or labor-intensive nature.

In addition to affecting undocumented young adults’ participation, the threat of unemployment limits their feelings of belonging as they realize that they are “stuck” in jobs while citizen peers are able to move on. Antonio Mendez exclaims that, “Fast food industries change personnel like they change underwear.” While this may appear true for citizen young adults who move in and out of these jobs looking for better opportunities, most undocumented young adults are not able to meet this expectation as they keep these jobs for long periods of
time. As a result, they develop negative feelings about themselves because they are not able to move on. Gabi Santos expresses negative feelings about working at a fast food chain restaurant while holding a bachelor’s degree: “It’s a very harsh working environment. … It kind of depresses me a little. Every time I go to work, its like, I mean I know my job and I know I can do it, it’s just I still get that anxious feeling in my stomach.” While she compares her underachievement to her citizen peers who have been able to obtain jobs that use their degrees, Paco Barrera compares himself and his job to his undocumented brother who subsists on the scholarships he earns as a student and immigrant rights organizer:

He went to fucking Georgia and then he went to Texas two weeks ago, and he went to San Antonio like a month ago. I'm fucking stuck at a swap meet and you're ass is rolling around the country. … I just go to the bathroom … and if you're not back in ten minutes they're like, “Where the fuck have you been?!” So it makes me a little mad. I feel like shit being there. I'm stagnant. I'm not doing anything.

Like Gabi, Paco focuses on his harsh working conditions and how these make him feel bad about himself and his economic position. Their similar feelings of exclusion suggests that a fear of unemployment leads to “stagnant” participation in the labor market which, when compared to either undocumented 1.5 generation and citizen peers, can lead to feelings of exclusion.

**Employer Sanctions: The Threat of Losing a Job and Feeling Hypervigilant**

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) implemented employer sanctions for hiring undocumented workers. This legislation has been relatively unenforced and ineffective because employers need to only confirm that documents do not appear false (Nessel 2001). In theory, these sanctions were meant to discourage undocumented immigration by cutting off employment opportunities. For a few participants, this did occur. Daniela Sanchez remembers interviewing for a job at a dog groomers: “I had an interview with her [the owner] and she really liked me. … I did tell her I don’t have any papers and she was like, ‘No I can’t risk it. I’m the
owner of the place. I can’t risk it.” Similar cases occur in small businesses, schools, or non-profit organizations where they seek to respect these sanctions on principle, rather than out of fear of their economic consequences. However, in most cases, participants believe that employers insulate themselves by hiring individuals through agencies or by using middle management to check documents. Because of this, participants who talk about their undocumented status at work only discuss it with coworkers or middle management so that owners or Human Resources departments remain unaware of their immigration status.

The threat of losing a job once an employer finds out about their immigration status can lead undocumented young adults to hide their immigration status at work and curtail their participation in order to achieve this. For example, Rafael Monetlongo explains that while he has worked for a single fast food chain for seven years:

I go from one store and then I move out. I don’t like staying in the same place … cause the same thing comes up often. People ask me, ‘Can you do this? Can you drive me? Can you go to another store and pick up something? It just complicates stuff. How does moving around stop that from happening? … If I go to another store they won’t put as much stress on me or work load on me. … They treat me like a new person.

Attempting to keep his undocumented status from being detected, Rafael takes advantage of the fact that the owner has multiple stores and switches workplaces often in order to avoid building strong ties with coworkers. Although this strategy may protect him from being identified as an undocumented immigrant, it also limits his labor market participation as he does not build the reputation and networks he needs to move into managerial positions and earn a higher salary. Similarly, Cruz Vargas explains that he avoids spending time with his predominately citizen coworkers so that they will not discover his status. He remembers, “They had a store party and they told me, ‘Why don’t you come?’ … I really can’t go because if I showed my ID they’re gonna see I’m not who I am and then they’re gonna see that I’m undocumented cause it’s a
Mexican ID. … So then I have to make up excuses.” This type of avoidance protects jobs but it also prevents undocumented young adults from fully participating and forming relationships in their workplaces in the ways that their citizen coworkers do.

Hiding one’s immigration status from owners, managers, and/or coworkers not only shapes participation but also encourages undocumented young adults to develop feelings of exclusion. Celia Alvarez explains that she feels, “like a criminal doing something bad but you’re really not. Well, you are because you’re lying but for the right reasons.” In addition, to internalizing negative feelings about hiding their status, some participants become hypervigilant and feel like their undocumented status makes them targets. Francisco Garza explains,

You always try to keep it [undocumented status] on the down low. You can’t expose yourself like that. You can’t. Cause maybe the one person who is up for manager, he wants your position cause you get paid well. And then if he finds out that you're undocumented, [he could say], “Why are you letting undocumented [people work here]?” It could create a whole mess.

While Francisco worries about losing his own job if his coworkers find out about his immigration status, others, like Christina Guzman who worked at a counseling office on her university campus, worry about how revealing her status to others can affect her supervisors. She explains, “I felt like they really cared about me and they were looking out for me. I didn’t wanna put them in a position where they would be in question [for] their actions.” Protecting their own and other’s livelihoods is stressful for Francisco, Christina, and others who struggle to hide their status. While the stress alone produces negative feelings, the act of hiding their status from others reproduces and strengthens feelings of criminality and shame which prevent them from fully feeling like they belong in their workplaces.
Unenforced Labor Rights: The Threat of Losing a Job and Feeling Taken Advantage of

Though labor protections like the right to minimum wage, regular breaks, and workplace safety extend to undocumented immigrants, a number of undocumented young adults do not or have not spoken up against these labor violations. Edith Sandoval remembers the workplace conditions at a small clothing store where she worked for four years while she was in college:

Nobody complied with the laws. I know there’s like [laws where] you work three hours you get 15 minutes off and or you get a half hour off if you work like six hours, and if you work eight [hours] you get an hour [off]. All those little rules. Nobody complied with those. They knew the [undocumented] population they were hiring and I think that’s why they never took care of those details.

While Edith initially allowed her rights to be violated because, like most undocumented immigrants, she feared the unemployment and financial instability that would follow being fired, she eventually built up the courage to speak out against these violations. While she was successful in securing breaks for herself and her coworkers, other undocumented young adults were not. Ignacio Nunez recalls the retaliation that occurred after he spoke out against the unfair treatment of his manager at a warehouse: “I started talking back to the manager [and] I got in trouble with the manager. So when they got a chance they sent the paper [about] how they're gonna check the papers and all the stuff. So this guy got the chance to fire me.” While a number of participants spoke out against labor violations like Edith and Ignacio, most had put up mistreatment at some point in the employment history because they feared the threat of losing their job. In other words, their excludability encouraged them to put up with their unfair work conditions rather than claim labor protections.

Remaining in jobs where they are not afforded labor protections often leads undocumented young adults to develop feelings of exclusion because they allow their rights to be violated. Irene Correas explains that she feels “stuck” because she is not using her bachelor’s
degree and is working at the same coffee shop she has worked at since community college. Further, she feels, “like they have taken advantage of me. … giving me the work that other people … would want a higher salary [for]. We’re gonna give it to you because we know you’re ok with the salary and everything [because of your status]. I guess for them it’s like, ‘No pueden pedir mas [they/workers can’t ask for more].’” In this case, Irene develops feelings of exclusion because she is unwilling to speak up for her rights and ask to get paid what she feels she deserves. Additionally, some, like Leo Campos, internalize negative feelings about themselves as Leo declares that he is “not smart” for quitting a stable job at a fast food chain restaurant when his manager was making unreasonable scheduling demands. Estefania Gutierrez develops similarly negative feelings because she refuses to take jobs that will compromise her rights. She explains, “I'm trying to look for a job, but I feel like I'm being selfish [not taking just any job]. I don’t want to give away my time for minimum wage, when I know I could be earning more [and] working less.” Irene, Leo, and Estefania’s experiences demonstrate that undocumented young adults develop feelings of exclusion whether they stand up for their rights or not. Further, it suggests that their fear of unemployment and financial instability disrupts their equal and positive treatment in the workplace. Yet, Leo and Estefania respective decisions to quit a job and remain unemployed do indicate that this fear can be overcome under certain circumstances.

Various employment-related immigration policies – E-Verify, employer sanctions, and the limited enforcement of labor rights – threaten to exclude undocumented young adults from the labor market. Though relatively few participants experience the intended consequences of these policies (e.g. persistent unemployment, being fired), most have been limited by the threat of these consequences at some point in their employment history. Despite having relatively stable and “better” employment than first generation undocumented adults, the threat of
exclusion, or their excludability, effectively prevents undocumented young adults from participating in the labor market in the way they desire and expect. This restricted participation then produces feelings of exclusion which limits their full economic incorporation. This supports participation and feelings of belonging are both key in explaining levels of incorporation.

**CHALLENGING “EXCLUDABILITY”: RIGHTS, ACCULTURATION, AND YOUTHFULNESS**

Despite the threat of exclusion discussed above (and in most previous research), a number of undocumented young adults challenge employers who attempt to take advantage of them or their undocumented coworkers. In other words, they do not let their excludability fully dictate their labor force participation. I contend that this resistance occurs because of undocumented young adults’ awareness of rights, high levels of acculturation, and youthfulness. Further, I suggest that these characteristics are unique to undocumented 1.5 generation young adults because, unlike undocumented first generation adults, they grow up in the U.S.

**More Awareness of Rights: Knowledge and Feelings of Empowerment**

Growing up in the United States, undocumented young adults have a greater awareness of and can articulate their labor rights. Edith Sandoval remembers learning in school that she has the right to take breaks at work: “I actually started taking an ROP [Regional Occupational Program] class for extra credit for [high] school. … You just go to a class and they teach all about how to get the job and your resume and so forth and that’s where they told us all this.” Edith eventually used this knowledge to convince the owner of a clothing store she worked at to give her and her coworkers proper breaks. She credits the ROP class saying, “That’s where I got this mentality [to stand up for myself]. I shared it with my friends, and, and we got it all done.” Similarly, Joanna Salas suggests that information about labor laws is broadly available through
K-12 education: “I went to school. The laws and stuff I learned about it in history class, government, and so on.” Although attending educational institutions and growing up in the U.S. makes undocumented 1.5 generation young adults more aware of their labor rights than first generation undocumented adults (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012), the excludability that stems from their undocumented status can still prevent them from using this information to claim access to rights.

Aside from labor rights, a number of participants relied on a sense of human rights to counter employers’ attempts to take advantage of them. Amanda Loera explains:

I think as a human I'm allowed to express myself. I don’t have rights to work. I don’t have rights to worker’s rights, like I'm not gonna go to workers comp because I don’t have those rights. … But I do have the right to say I don’t like this job then I'm gonna quit. Or they're treating me bad, I don’t have to put up with it. Human being rights. Like being able to speak, nobody should tell me not to speak.

While Amanda incorrectly asserts that she does not have labor rights, she still deploys a rights-based framework where she draws on the idea of human rights to assert her ability to speak out against unfair treatment. Building on this idea, Tanya Diaz compares herself to her undocumented first generation father who worked in the same restaurant as her:

He works as a chef and they basically abuse him. He works his ass to the bone. … My dad works from 11 in the morning to 10 at night and he probably doesn’t get a lunch hour break. … He doesn’t ask or say anything because of the position he’s in. He’s scared to. … I would definitely say it. Because although I wasn’t born here, I have human rights. So it’s more of a human right thing.

While her sense of human rights empowers Tanya to be unwilling to tolerate mistreatment, she recognizes that her father is too scared to make the same claims she makes. While her father’s fear is likely similar to the fear 1.5 generation undocumented young adults discuss in the above section, Tanya is able to overcome the fear created by her excludability as she draws upon her sense of human rights.
Armed with the knowledge of their labor rights and a sense of entitlement to human rights, undocumented young adults are more likely than their first generation undocumented coworkers to stand up for their rights. Sol Montes explains,

When a few of my coworkers got pregnant they asked for maternity leave and they almost got fired because of that. I admire those women because they’re hardcore women with this big ol’ belly working the whole kitchen, holding their pee, when they gave birth like their milk dripping [because] they had to pump and they don’t let them go pump because it’s so freakin’ busy. … [But] I always talked about … labor violations – … “I demand my break right now. I’m going to the restroom. Is someone staying here? Because I’m leaving.”

While Sol’s first generation, undocumented coworkers tolerate being denied the leaves and breaks they are entitled to, even when they desperately need them, she herself is unwilling to make these compromises in any situation. Despite knowing that others were threatened with being fired, she leverages her knowledge about labor violations in order to avoid punishment. While knowledge is key, this also suggests that individuals would need strong English language skills to communicate the extent of their knowledge to their bosses and more effectively make claims. As a university student with a minor in labor studies, Sol has both and so is able to successfully defend her rights with no retribution.

As undocumented 1.5 generation young adults stand up for their rights in the workplace they can also transmit this sense of entitlement to first generation undocumented adults. Eva Santiz recalls:

This guy got injured [and] I don’t think he wanted to say anything about it because he was probably scared that he would’ve been fired. But I told him that you could say something, you have to get checked [out]. … It got worse so I went and told him, “You know what? I’m gonna tell my supervisor so you can go to the hospital and check it out.” He was like, “Ok.” … Some people just need that little push to be able to stand up for themselves and know that they have rights as well.

Aware of the labor rights that she and her coworkers are afforded despite their undocumented status, Eva passed on this information and ensured that her first generation coworker was able to
be treated for a workplace injury. Most participants who have first generation undocumented coworkers recall similar instances of information sharing about legal rights. As this intergenerational transfer of information continues to occur in Eva’s workplace and in other workplaces, she believes that this teaches first generation undocumented adults to stand up for themselves: “I guess now that the younger generation’s standing up, they’ve [the first generation] seen that it’s getting better and we’re getting somewhere. So it’s like [they] kind of open up a little.” However, these intergenerational transmissions can also occur in the opposite direction as first generation undocumented adults attempt to teach undocumented 1.5 generation young adults to not report injuries or claim rights. Rafael Montelongo explains, “They [first generation coworkers] would be like, ‘It’s just a burn, you could take it.’ They're like, ‘I've gotten burned once.’ They would show you their burns. So they had bigger burns and bigger bruises and I'm like, ‘I can take it.’ It wasn’t a good idea.” Rafael’s experience suggests that this intergenerational transfer of information can go in either direction to encourage or discourage standing up for one’s rights. It is unclear why he acted differently than Eva; it is possible that this was because he was the only 1.5 generation worker there or because ignoring the pain was a type of masculine gender presentation. Future research would benefit from examining these intergenerational exchanges in order to understand how the 1.5 generations’ awareness of rights can be leveraged to decrease labor abuses of all undocumented immigrants.

**Higher Levels of Acculturation: English Language Ability and Passing as a Citizen**

Growing up in the United States and attending K-12 education, undocumented 1.5 generation young adults have higher levels of acculturation, particularly English language ability, than first generation undocumented immigrants. Abby Ortiz explains that this shields undocumented 1.5 generation young adults from abuse in the workplace: “I think if you don’t
speak English that’s one key that, ‘Ok we’re gonna go for you [to take advantage].’ … You don’t know what they’re saying about you. Most of the time you can’t defend yourself. … But if you do speak English and can defend yourself.” Essentially, English language ability ensures that you are less of a target for abuse and that you will be able to defend yourself in the event that you are targeted. Further, Karen Rodriguez notes that English language ability is key to learning your rights in the first place and can dispel feelings of fear created by undocumented immigrants:

My parents when they came they didn’t know how to speak English so they couldn’t communicate with anybody. They didn’t know anybody that spoke English and that knew about the laws and stuff like that. So they were taken advantage of. … And compared to us, … we know that they’re not gonna send us to Mexico for talking to someone that’s White. … I’m not scared anymore. So I think that’s how they kinda got taken advantage of a little bit more. They were more afraid.

As Karen suggests, English language ability is one of the key distinctions between first and 1.5 generation undocumented immigrants and can serve as a source of empowerment that can facilitate rights-claiming in the workplace. Overall, this suggests that acculturation, particularly the English language ability that accompanies it, is critical for securing better treatment and claiming access to rights in the labor market.

In addition to improving treatment, English language ability facilitates access to “good” jobs, particularly office work, and enables individuals to become “climbers” who move into management positions where they are less susceptible to mistreatment and rights violations. For many office workers bilingualism is a key skill that facilitated their hiring. Nancy Ortega explains that her boss is Persian and does not speak Spanish while the community surrounding his auto insurance company’s office in South Los Angeles is both Spanish-dominant Mexican and Central American immigrants and English-dominant African Americans. Thus, her fluency
in both English and Spanish was key in securing her a stable office job because it allowed her boss to develop a larger customer base. Similarly, Alicia Medina remembers that her English language ability helped her move up in the factory job she started after leaving high school at age 16. She explains, “I understood them well. … [The Korean owners] only spoke English and none of the workers could communicate well with them.”

Serving as an informal translator between the factory workers and owners, Alicia eventually moved into a secretarial position where the work was less laborious and she was able to leave work early in order to return to adult school to continue with her high school degree. Finally, these English language skills are key for advancing into managerial positions because they are a demonstrable skill, facilitate networking among managers, and allow them to attend managerial training programs. This helps explain why more than half of participants occupy less labor-intensive jobs and more managerial positions than would be expected of first generation undocumented immigrants.

Being acculturated, undocumented 1.5 generation young adults do not resemble the stereotypical undocumented immigrant and instead appear to be second generation citizens. Passing as citizens, they find that the hiring documents they present are less likely to be carefully scrutinized. Sol Montes recalls that her manager of three years did not realize until recently that she was undocumented:

I took my fake resident card and my [fake] social [security] card. … I was comparing my fake one and his [my brother’s] legit one. I was like, ‘Wow, this [false document] sucks.’ … But anyways, I took them to her [my manager] and she also thought I was a citizen. … She thought it was real. … [Laughs] She never suspected me ever. She said that she could suspect everyone else; that was obvious. But not me.

20 Translated from: “Les entendía mucho. … Como hablaban solo Ingles, y no todos los trabajadores podian comunicarse bien con ellos.”
While Sol’s false documents were poor quality and easily detectable, she believes that they were not only accepted but believed to be valid by her manager because of her strong resemblance to citizen employees. Similar to Sol, many participants report bringing in copies, rather than the physical versions, of their fake social security cards, driver’s licenses, green cards, etc. This allowed them to hide the obviously fake quality of their documents and was unquestioned because their managers and bosses did not suspect their undocumented status due to their self-presentation and the stereotypes that exist of undocumented immigrants. This also shapes the types of jobs undocumented immigrants receive. Zen Cruz explains, “They assume that I am documented. … There’s other people that work in restaurants that the managers know right away, just by looking at them, that they’re not documented. And these are the same people that tend to do the worst jobs – the dishwasher jobs, the cleanup crew jobs.” Building off of stereotypical assumptions used to identify undocumented immigrants, managers tend to place first generation immigrants in less desirable jobs in the back of the house (e.g. kitchen, busser, dishwasher) and 1.5 generation undocumented immigrants into “better” jobs in the front of the house (e.g. server, cashier, hostess). This difference is highly apparent in restaurant jobs where there is a mix of undocumented and citizen workers.

**More Youthful: Young and Educated with Few Financial Responsibilities**

Similar to acculturation, being young and educated shields undocumented young adults from suspicion of being undocumented as they resemble U.S. born citizens more than the stereotypes of undocumented immigrants. Claudia Arellano notes that it is easier to get a job in high school when you are under the age of 18. She remembers, “I just pretended like I was a resident or whatever. Because when you’re a student it’s kind of easier. … You could just get a
work permit [at school], you have a school ID, and you’re set.” Being young allows undocumented young adults to show a formal type of paperwork (e.g. the work permit which is issued by a school official who does not check work authorization) and make excuses as to why they do not have a state-issued ID. In Claudia’s case this allowed her to talk her way into a job that never checked her immigration status. Similarly, being a student, whether in high school, community college, or a university, allows undocumented young adults to demonstrate that they are hard-workers and “management material”. Enrique Escobar remembers,

[The oil change chain store] was paying for it so I took advantage of that. … I took a whole week of management classes. And it was weird how I got treated different in my job because most of the people that go in there, they don’t have college. Some of them they didn’t even go to high school or they didn’t graduate. And I was treated different by the previous owner because I was going to college at that time. So he actually treated me like – Oh this guy wants to do something. He brought me up quite a bit with new management; they were the ones that made me manager for the store that I’m at now.

Being in community college allowed Enrique be perceived as a hard worker who is upwardly mobile. This afforded him the opportunity to receive management training and eventually become a store manager. Despite leaving community college after a few semesters and not obtaining a degree, he was able to leverage his educational pursuits in order to move out of construction work and into a financially stable job. This suggests that educational affiliation facilitates hiring and mobility within jobs.

Youthfulness also translates into fewer financial responsibilities because of the early stage in the life course. Lucy Covarrubias notes that undocumented first generation adults often fear unemployment and are susceptible to their excludability because of their adult responsibilities: “My coworker, she had two kids. Even though she was around my age she had

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21 In California, high schools issue permission to students between ages 12-17 to allow them to work as minors. This does not constitute legal permission to work (e.g. a work permit issued by immigration authorities) but must accompany hiring paperwork for those under the age of 18 (California Department of Education 2014).
two kids, so she’s like, “There’s no option for me.” But for me, … I’m not in, in her shoes. … I just had dreams to achieve, and that [job] wasn’t gonna help me.” Pointing specifically to her life course stage and the fact that she does not have to financially support children, Lucy was able to leave her job at a small restaurant where her boss was constantly yelling at her and the other workers. Additionally, because she is only 21, she is able to live at home with her parents and hold out for a job where she will not face daily abuse. Similarly, Daniel Hernandez explains that he intentionally avoids accruing financial responsibilities so that he can minimize the amount of time he spends working at a fast food chain restaurant: “I don’t want to have to be like – ‘Shit, I need to stay at this job because I have a car.’ Car needs gas, it needs insurance. … Me having my own place [and thinking], ‘Shit I have to pay my rent, my bills.’ … The only reason why I’ve avoided those responsibilities is because it would mean working at a shitty job the whole day.” While Daniel is 27, he minimizes his expenses by riding his bike everywhere and alternating between renting a room or living with his parents. This allows him to put in a minimum amount of hours in at his job and feel comfortable speaking out against labor violations and mistreatment there because he feels confident that he will be able to financially survive a short bout of unemployment. While Lucy and Daniel’s strategies are effective for avoiding the threat of their excludability, these are strategies that are primarily available to youth and young adults who do not have financial responsibilities and can use their parents as a safety net.

The tenuousness of youth means that this opportunity to avoid abuse and mistreatment diminishes as individuals enter adulthood and shoulder financial responsibilities. Paco Barrera explains that he has taken on a large amount of financial responsibility in his natal family: “I'm scared of quitting one job and going for another. Cause that swap meet [job] I've had it for like five years. … It’s dependable. My mom depends on me a lot. So I think I'm just scared of that."
Paco’s father injured himself at work and his two older brothers focus on school and do not work full time. This leaves him to take on a lot of the family’s financial burdens and so he fears unemployment, becomes susceptible to the excludability created by his undocumented status, and remains a “‘struggler’ in low-wage employment. Similarly, Rebecca Rosales explains that, “Just for being illegal … I get paid a little amount. Whereas if I was from here I could demand for more without being afraid of getting fired.” Like Paco, Rebecca fears being fired from her job at an insurance office because she is a single mother and needs to financially provide for her daughter. This encourages her to accept a salary and long work hours that has her working for below minimum wage and with no benefits. This suggests that as undocumented young adults age they may come to resemble undocumented first generation adults who are more susceptible to the fear created by their excludability.

Despite the threat of exclusion created by their undocumented immigration status, undocumented young adults often challenge labor violations in the workplace and leave jobs where they feel taken advantage of. Most research suggests that undocumented immigrants are afraid to look for “better” jobs or stand up for their rights; however, I suggest that this may be more typical of first generation undocumented adults who have a number of financial responsibilities. Alternatively, undocumented 1.5 generation young adults are more likely to challenge inequalities in the workplace and access “better” jobs because of their awareness of legal rights, high levels of acculturation, and youthfulness. These characteristics largely result from their experiences growing up in the United States, participating in U.S. educational institutions, and developing a sense of belonging in the U.S.
CONCLUSION

Despite participating in the labor market, undocumented young adults are incompletely incorporated in the labor market because they struggle to feel like they belong in their workplaces. Undocumented 1.5 generation young adults understand themselves as holding relatively “better” jobs than first generation undocumented immigrants because more than half of them occupy less labor intensive jobs as office workers and managers or hold positions that earn (however slightly) more than minimum wage. Despite relatively high levels of participation, undocumented young adults are not fully incorporated in the labor market because they do not feel like they belong in the jobs that they occupy and have not been able to participate in the ways that they desire and expect. Specifically, employment-related immigration policies, including E-Verify, employer sanctions, and unenforced labor rights, increase the threat of unemployment, underemployment, employer abuse, and labor rights violations. Comparing themselves to their second generation citizen peers, rather than first generation undocumented adults, leads undocumented 1.5 generation young adults to become dissatisfied with their employment and thus experience incomplete economic incorporation. This suggests that theoretical understandings of incorporation need to account for both participation and feelings of belonging in order to capture undocumented young adults’ limited economic incorporation.

Despite the threat of exclusion raised by employment-related immigration policies, undocumented 1.5 generation young adults appear to be more likely than undocumented first generation adults to risk unemployment by standing up to employers about labor rights violations and/or quitting jobs to look for better ones. Most participants had at some point in their employment history accepted some form of labor violation or mistreatment and also challenged their employers and risked exclusion for the labor market. Comparing themselves to their first
generation undocumented parents and coworkers, undocumented 1.5 generation young adults feel that they are more likely to stand up for themselves and other workers because of their knowledge of labor rights, acculturation and English language ability, and youthfulness and early stage in the life course. These factors prevent them from internalizing their excludability and encourage them to challenge abuse in their workplaces. Overall, this suggests that undocumented 1.5 generation young adults’ experiences in the workplace differ from those of the first generation undocumented adults (e.g. their parents) who may struggle to challenge their excludability. Future research would benefit from comparing groups of undocumented workers across generation, length of time in the U.S., and English language ability to assess which factors are key in facilitating rights-claiming in the workplace. Additionally, examining intergenerational exchanges could shed light on how the 1.5 generations’ characteristics can be leveraged to decrease labor abuses of undocumented immigrants across the board.

Looking at employment experiences also suggests that the literature on “illegality” would benefit from theorizing a concept of “excludability.” While the concept of “deportability” has been useful in identifying how the threat of something that does not occur can create fear and limitations (see De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Dreby 2012), it does not account for the range of immigration-related policies that structure undocumented life. In the context of employment, the fear of deportation goes relatively unacknowledged as participants focus on the threat of unemployment and financial instability. The concept of “excludability” allows for a broader understanding of the ways in which immigration-related laws can be used to silence undocumented immigrants and resign them to living in the shadows.
CHAPTER 4

Undocumented Love Lives: The Dating Experiences of Undocumented Young Adults

_We are also human beings and have the right to express our feelings and date and fall in love. [We never talk about it] because if we ever talk about dating, people assume, if we date a U.S. citizen, that we are marrying because of papers. And that just makes me mad!_ — Sol Montes

Most of the literature on undocumented young adults focuses on their educational experiences, and to some extent their political participation and activism. Yet, as Sol Montes points out, undocumented young adults are more than just students, they are also human beings in search of loving and supportive romantic relationships. Like most young adults, respondents were currently participating in, or in the past had navigated, the dating market in search of a partner to share their life with. Despite this reality, Sol correctly points out that most undocumented young adults do not talk about dating because it is intertwined with complex and frustrating conversations about their immigration status and future legalization prospects. As respondents discuss their dating experiences, it becomes increasingly clear that undocumented immigration status limits their participation in dating by structuring the dating messages they receive, influencing their partner preferences, and restricting their ability to fully participate and feel comfortable in dating contexts. In this paper, I explore these experiences and draw on them to show that undocumented immigration status limits the social incorporation of undocumented young adults, especially men.

There is a growing literature on the institutional incorporation of undocumented students and young adults into educational and political institutions (Abrego 2008; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2008); yet, few have examined how undocumented immigration status might

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22 I only discuss the heterosexual dating culture/market because I only had a handful of LGBT identified individuals.
affect their social incorporation, or participation in significant relationships with other individuals. As immigrants build lives in the host country, they inevitably build a variety of social relationships (Menjívar 2000; Portes and Shafer 2007). For undocumented young adults, early social incorporation involved building relationships with peers, making friends, and building social capital for educational advancement (Enriquez 2011). As they grow older and enter young adulthood, social incorporation comes to include dating and identifying future potential partners. I argue that the significance of social relationships and social incorporation means that we need to consider how undocumented immigration status affects how these relationships are being built and navigated.

Following race scholars who use dating preferences to study racial boundaries (Feliciano et al. 2011), I suggest that an individual’s social incorporation can be assessed by examining their dating experiences – dating messages, dating preferences, and experiences on dates. Individuals who are not able to feel comfortable or fully participate in the dating market due to tangible and/or emotional obstacles would be considered socially excluded. Crossing significant social boundaries, in this case immigration status, could be considered a sign of social incorporation for undocumented immigrants.

There is relatively little scholarship on the dating experiences and romantic relationships of immigrants and ethnic minorities, especially Latinas/os (Raffaelli 2005). As cultural differences diminish over immigrant generation, Latina/o intermarriage rates rise, albeit slowly (Alba and Nee 2003; Levin et al. 2007; Telles and Ortiz 2008). While parental sanctions and messages influence these endogamous preferences (Morales 2012), limited contact with non-Latinas/os also contributes to the opinions about and opportunities for inter-racial dating (Feliciano et al. 2011). College attendance may facilitate inter-racial dating by increasing contact
with non-Latinas/os, the maintenance of endogamous pre-college friendships encourages Latinas/os to date other Latinas/os as these pre-existing social ties outweigh the socialization opportunities available in higher education and encourage individuals to maintain previous attitudes and feelings of inter-group anxiety (Levin et al. 2007). This suggests that undocumented Mexican-origin young adults will likely have preferences for Latina/o partners. In addition, high amounts of residential segregation, physical immobility, and maintenance of pre-college social ties would contribute to respondent’s high levels or contact with other Latinas/os, contributing to their endogamous relationship choices.

While race plays a significant role in structuring pre-dating factors (e.g. preferences, dating markets), gender plays a substantial role in structuring experiences while on dates. This difference is structured by gender schemas where women are expected to be dependent and nurturing caregivers and men are economic providers and protectors (Booth and Crouter 1998; Glenn et al. 1994; Lorber 1994; Ridgeway 2011). While these conceptions have shifted over recent decades so that women also prioritize work and independence, most men still desire to be the primary breadwinner (Gerson 2009). As schemas, these ideals represent the dominant cultural understandings of gender roles which individuals deploy as expectations for themselves and others (Blair-Loy 2001). Thus, these gender schemas and notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity promote explicit gender roles and expectations along the family formation process (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Women, and Latinas in particular, receive more explicit and intense regulation of their dating habits than their male peers as parents attempt to ensure that their children adhere to gender roles of women as chaste and men as virile (Morales 2012; Raffaelli 2005). Further, women expect their partners to perform as providers and so prefer men with economic resources (Buss et al. 2001; Impett and Peplau 2006). Additionally, dating
practices remain highly gendered as both male and female college students believe that men should ask the woman out, plan the date, pick the woman up, and pay the bill (Eaton and Rose 2011; Laner and Ventrone 2000). As relationships progress, young adult men typically continue to act as providers but their specific actions diversify to reflect their differing gender ideologies (Jaramillo-Sierra and Allen 2012).

Attempting to ascribe to these narratives, Latinos, and other structurally marginalized men, may struggle to live up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity because of systematic racial and economic inequalities (Dickerson vonLockette and Johnson 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 2008; McCall 2001; Western 2006). Previous studies of Black families suggest that non-traditional shifts in the Black family structure (e.g. rise in female-headed households, growing proportion of never-married women) are impacted by class-related phenomenon, specifically Black men’s high rates of unemployment, incarceration, and mortality (Western 2006; Wilson 1987). This suggests that gendered differences in the dating experiences of undocumented young adults are likely mediated by socioeconomic status. Specifically, I suspect that undocumented men struggle to meet the economic demands associated with their gender schemas since their immigration status prevents them from finding high-paying, stable employment. I explore how socioeconomic inequalities intersect with gender expectations to structure the dating experiences of structurally vulnerable populations. I pay particular attention to the family formation decisions and roles of men because their experiences are underexplored (Forste 2002).

This chapter explores the dating experiences of undocumented young adults in order to understand the extent of their social incorporation and how it is affected by their undocumented status. I find that undocumented status limits the dating experiences, and thus the social
incorporation, of all respondents; however, these limitations are also mediated by social factors, specifically educational status and gender. First, I demonstrate that most undocumented young adults receive strong messages about dating that force them to consider their future legalization prospects. Second, I explore the effects of educational status and find that participating in higher education institutions not only contributes to the development of immigration status-based dating preferences but also opens up opportunities to find partners who meet these preferences. Finally, I take a close look at actual dating experiences and reveal how gender intersects with undocumented status to limit the participation of undocumented young men who are unable to meet gendered provider expectations. Overall, I argue that undocumented immigration status severely limits the social incorporation of undocumented young adults, especially undocumented men, by limiting their ability to fully participate and feel comfortable in dating contexts.

THE MARRIAGE MYTH: MESSAGES ABOUT DATING

As individuals enter young adulthood, they are exposed to messages about dating and marriage from various sources including parents, friends, and the media. While most young adults are concerned about finding a compatible partner, undocumented young adults are forced to consider how their immigration status and future legalization opportunities will be affected by their partner choice. Specifically, their awareness of their immigration status is heightened as they receive messages in line with a two part “marriage myth” that: 1) it is easy to legalize one’s status via marriage, and 2) that the only reason undocumented young adults marry is to legalize their status through a citizen spouse. While the reality of legalizing one’s status through marriage is complicated, this popular myth encourages the development of opinions and messages that condemn undocumented young adults for their choice of romantic partner. In this way,
undocumented young adults face similar messages about dating and find that their immigration status affects their dating experiences in analogous ways.

Undocumented young adults are exposed to what I call the “marriage myth,” a popular assumption that marrying a citizen is a quick and easy pathway to legalization. While marriage is in fact a potential pathway to legalization, this process is complicated by laws that require individuals who entered “without inspection” (i.e. without a visa) to return to their country of origin and face a 10-year bar to their return before they are legalized. While individuals can file petitions in their home country to lift this “bar,” they must prove that their departure creates “extreme hardship” for citizen family members. If their petition is not approved, they cannot legally return to the U.S. for 10 years. As a result, legalization through marriage is a risky process with uncertain outcomes for most Mexican-origin undocumented immigrants, as they tend to enter without a visa. Ultimately, many undocumented immigrants choose not to take this path once they find out about the “bar.”23 Most individuals do not know these legal details, which contributes to the popular belief the marriage offers an easy road to legalization. The widespread nature of this misinformation then promotes the development of popular messages about the dating habits of undocumented immigrants. Specifically, undocumented young adults should or are assumed to be dating with the intention of securing a future chance at legalization by finding a citizen partner.

I find that marriage myth messages are presented in a way that condemns undocumented young adults no matter the immigration status of their partner. First, undocumented young adults experience criticism from within the undocumented community when they date another undocumented individual who will be unable to legalize them. Second, undocumented young adults

23 Alternatively, individuals who became undocumented by overstaying a visa are able to petition for legalization within the U.S. and do not have to demonstrate “extreme hardship.” Thus, this process is faster and significantly less risky to this segment of the undocumented immigrant population.
adults experience external community judgment when they are dating a citizen partner and citizens condemn them, assuming that it is motivated by a desire to legalize their immigration status. While there are times when undocumented individuals tease each other about dating a citizen in search of immigration status, these conversations convey approval, not disapproval, of this decision. Daniela Sanchez summarizes these two-fold messages:

If you’re dating somebody that has papers they think, “Oh you’re dating him because he has papers.” If you’re dating somebody that doesn’t have papers they’re like, “Are you stupid? What’s wrong? Go and date somebody that does have papers?” So sometimes it’s like you feel like you’re sick and somebody has the antidote. You feel like people are judging you because they think that all you want to get is that antidote.

Having dated both undocumented and citizen individuals, Daniela expertly recaps the messages that almost all respondents report receiving. Daniela then compares her immigration status to a sickness and legalization to an antidote. This dramatic comparison drives home her point that people assume that undocumented young adults’ life decisions are or should be based on acquiring documentation. The marriage myth contributes to this assumption and forces undocumented young adults to experience their dating choices in relation to their immigration status and the external and internal community judgment they face. No matter the immigration status of their partner, the vast majority of my interviewees report similar experiences of being judged by others and/or having a negative experience where they or a partner were questioned about their immigration status.

**Undocumented-Undocumented Relationships and Internal Community Judgment**

The marriage myth perpetuates the idea that it is easy to legalize one’s status via marriage. As a result, undocumented young adults who are partnered with another undocumented individual receive internal community judgment. Specifically, they receive messages from other undocumented individuals, mainly their undocumented parents, extended family members, and
friends. These messages suggest that they should not be dating another undocumented person because it limits their opportunities for legalization. Carolina Sandoval discusses her mom’s early interactions with the man who is now her husband:

> My mom made a dinner because I had a boyfriend, so she wanted to meet him. … And that was her first question, [Do you have papers?]. And I was … thinking like, “Oh my God.” … I was serving his plate, and I looked at him, and then he’s like, “Oh no, I don’t have papers.” And then after she’s like, “Hmmm. [disapproval].” … [He asked me [after], “Why did your mom tell me that? And I was like, “Well, because she says that I should marry somebody that has papers, but I really don’t care about that.”

This early interaction and her partner’s shared undocumented status created tension between him and her family for a long time. While she did not take her mom’s warnings to heart, Carolina’s experience demonstrates how families pass on early messages about the marriage myth as these undocumented young adults grow up in the U.S. and begin dating.

Some undocumented young adults internalize these messages so that these judgments circulate among undocumented young adults as they remind each other to pay attention to the immigration status of their partners. Leo Campos recalls advising his undocumented friend to stop dating his girlfriend because of her undocumented immigration status.

> I told him, “Look I’m not trying to be messed up. It looks like you really like each other, but you should really find somebody who has papers.” And he goes, “Yeah I think you’re right.” … It was already in his head, I didn’t put anything in there. He was already there. … You have to move forward, not two steps back. Getting with someone who’s undocumented just like you is two steps back! The boat’s sinking, what do we do? Add more weight? Add another hole in there? Sink faster?

Leo suggests that his friend was already aware of the limitations of dating another undocumented young adult, presumably from others’ marriage myth related messages. However, Leo reinforces this message and suggests to his friend that he find a citizen who will be able to legalize him and
keep his boat from sinking. In this way, undocumented young adults who have internalized the marriage myth continue to pass it on and reinforce it in the minds of their peers.

Beto Bonilla explains how these messages and the continual circulation of the marriage myth has the potential to lead undocumented young adults to think about their partner’s immigration status as an eligibility requirement:

You automatically think, “Well I have to get with someone who is a citizen in order for me to be good.” … I mean [it’s like] you don’t have to look whether you like them or not you just have to look for those qualities. It’s just more qualification, “Are you a citizen? Or not?” There’s no whether you’re a good person or not.

Beto explains how the marriage myth becomes self-perpetuating as undocumented young adults are taught to think about the immigration status of their partner as a requirement. These messages reinforce the secondary piece of the marriage myth—undocumented young adults only care about the immigration status of their partner—as undocumented young adults integrate immigration status into their checklist of qualities that potential partners must have.

The internalization of these marriage myth messages can have emotional consequences as undocumented young adults do not pursue or prematurely end relationships with potential partners because they share an undocumented status. For example, Juan Valle’s eyes filled with tears as he recounted how he did not pursue two separate relationships because of their shared undocumented status:

I was talking to somebody from campus. And I think he had other objectives in his life. He wanted someone that had better opportunities or, you know, … just someone that had status in this country. … Someone that could provide. I was like, “That probably won’t be me. [Laughing] Just because of my status. So that just ended. And then this year I was dating an individual who is undocumented as well, but I was very hesitant about it. … I think he was my ideal guy, and I had put up this wall between us cause I didn’t wanna let him in. We both knew that we were undocumented. We just understood that it probably wouldn’t work out.
Despite the fact that identifying as gay currently bars him for being able to legalize his status through marriage\textsuperscript{24}, Juan had internalized the marriage myth to a point that he developed emotional blocks to pursuing relationships with otherwise promising potential partners. While he thought that one of these men might be his “ideal guy,” Juan remains single and has raised emotional barriers, which are preventing serious relationships and inhibiting his social integration. Karla Jimenez recounts a similar experience saying, “There’s been times when I’d rather just, and its bad, but I just sort of walked away.” Antonio Mendez had a similar experience in high school where he and his undocumented female friend both recognized that they liked each other but did not pursue a relationship because of their immigration statuses. When explaining this to others, he feels that they get upset and tell him that, “love conquers all.”

Receiving and managing these messages, undocumented young adults struggle with the reality that their future legalization may rest in the hands of a citizen partner. In many instances, love does not conquer all; instead, they break up with their partners and suffer emotionally as they imagine what could have been.

\textbf{Citizen-Undocumented Relationships and External Community Judgment}

The marriage myth’s secondary assertion requires undocumented young adults who are in relationships with citizens to justify their relationship and prove to their partner and others that they are not just “using them for papers.” Lena Gomez, a legal permanent resident who was able to legalize her undocumented status, explains how she had to constantly prove that her previous relationships were for love and not papers:

\begin{quote}
Once it gets more serious, [you think], “Are they gonna think you’re trying to marry them because of the papers?” … And even if they don’t, will their family think that? How much can their family influence them into thinking that’s why you’re getting married? Do you put it off to prove that that’s not why you’re
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} At the time of the interview, same-sex partners are not allowed to petition spouses for legalization. This has since changed as the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional (USCIS 2014).
getting married? And if you decided to marry out of love, it’s just such an awful experience to have to prove that you love him. No one else has to do that.

There is a point in every relationship in which partners begin thinking about the future and the potential for marriage. Popular media messages encourage most young adults to make these decisions based on ideas of love and if they can see themself spending the rest of their life with the other person (Nazzari 1991; Nguyen et al. 2011). Yet, in Lena’s case, decisions and thoughts about marriage are intertwined with external community judgment. Not only does she have to prove to her citizen partner that she loves him but she must combat other citizens’ suspicions, mainly those of his family, that she is using him to legalize her status. In this case, the marriage myth shades her thoughts about marriage and makes it hard for her to be in a committed relationship with a citizen because she is constantly forced to prove her love. This speaks to the unique ability of popular conceptions about marriage to contribute to suspicions about unsavory marriage motivations. Narratives about “gold diggers,” young women marrying rich, older men, are similar in that these women are forced to prove their love in order to contend with the external community judgment. However, the experiences of these women and undocumented young adults differ in that they do not face the simultaneous internal community judgment.

While Lena discusses having to prove her love to the citizen partners, others focus on having to combat the judgment of citizen friends and family members while dating and even after getting married. Daniel Hernandez recalls the reaction of his citizen girlfriend’s mom after finding out that he was undocumented:

The whole thing started about her mom telling her, …“Oh, ok, well, he doesn’t have papers, so that means he only wants you for one thing.” … It was like her mom thinking that I’m just trying to get her pregnant or married for papers. I was fucking annoyed. Like what the fuck? You seriously think that? It was like honestly cause, I can get you pregnant. Force her to settle down with me. Like, “Hey, we’re gonna have a kid. You should help me get my papers.” Like it was a Jedi mind trick.
Daniel heatedly recounts this accusation and sarcastically references *Star Wars*, implying that, even if he wanted to, there was no way for him to control the actions of his partner. These accusations or questions from friends and family members during early dating experiences were fairly common among my respondents and represent the application of the marriage myth in peoples’ everyday lives.

Undocumented young adults, regardless of other social factors, are faced with similar messages about dating due to the pervasiveness of the marriage myth and romantic love in the popular imagination. Together, internal and external community judgment force undocumented young adults to consider the immigration status of their partners as they enter the dating market and search for a marriageable partner. This brings their immigration status to the forefront of their minds as they develop dating preferences and approach the dating market.

**EDUCATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN INDIVIDUALS’ DATING PREFERENCES AND PARTNER CHOICES**

The development of romantic relationships is tied to both individual’s partner preferences and the opportunities that exist to meet these preferred partners (Feliciano et al. 2011). While confronting the limitations of their undocumented immigration status and navigating messages about the marriage myth, undocumented young adults search for potential partners like any other young adult – tapping social networks and spaces that they frequent. While their strategies and desires are similar, the dating markets and preferences of respondents differ by educational status. Specifically, residential segregation paves the way for social segregation so that most undocumented young adults are exposed to a local dating market of potential partners who are low-income Latinas/os of varied immigration statuses (e.g. undocumented, permanent resident, citizen). However, those who pursue higher education have higher levels of physical mobility
that moves them outside of their segregated neighborhoods, opens up their dating market, and exposes them to larger numbers of prospective citizen partners. In addition, participation in higher education exposes them to increased legal barriers and heightens their awareness of the limitations of their immigration status. This strengthens their desire to legalize their status, which, in conjunction with the marriage myth, encourages them to develop preferences for citizens. Thus, individuals with experiences in higher education (e.g. currently enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college or graduated with a BA) have increased access to, prefer, and date citizen partners. Alternatively, those without higher education experiences (e.g. high school or did not complete community college) do not have immigration status preferences and equally date citizen and undocumented partners. This suggests that participating in higher education promotes social incorporation (i.e. expanded dating markets and interactions with citizens) while also promoting feelings of exclusion (i.e. increased legal barriers) which raising undocumented young adults’ awareness of their immigration status limitations and encourages them to develop immigration status-based preferences that are in line with the marriage myth.

**Residential Segregation and (Im)mobility: Racialized Partner Preferences and Dating Markets**

As low-income Latinas/os, respondents live primarily in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. This segregation leads to heightened exposure to Latinas/os and contributes to a preference for Latina/o partners. Because most of their fellow Latina/o residents are also undocumented, respondents who did not explore dating markets outside of their neighborhood had less access to citizen partners. However, the pursuit of higher education provides a key means of moving outside of segregated neighborhoods and accessing dating markets with larger concentrations of citizens.
In keeping with the literature’s findings on endogamous dating preferences (Landale et al. 2006; Morales 2012; Telles and Ortiz 2008), most respondents report primarily dating Latinas/os. Many suggest that residential segregation limits exposure to non-Latinas/os and promotes participation in Latina/o-dominated dating markets. While some respondents, like Rebecca Rosales, grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods, they remember their experiences dating non-Latinas/os as strained. She explains, “I used to try to just hang out with Latinos, and the majority of people I’ve dated have been Latinos with the exception of two – … a White guy and a Korean guy. But it made me feel uncomfortable.” She, like the others, suggests that cultural differences and preferences persist despite exposure to non-Latina/o individuals. Despite messages about finding an “American”, or White citizen, to legalize them, many respondents suggest that they would prefer to find a citizen partner of Latina/o origin because of shared cultural similarities (e.g. Spanish language, cultural traditions). Thus, residential and social segregation limits exposure to and comfort around non-Latinas/os which limits the availability of non-Latina/o partners and encourages the development of preferences for Latinas/os (Telles and Ortiz 2008). This challenges assimilation theory and reinforces findings that Latina/o origin individuals prefer to date other Latinas/os.

In addition to helping foster a preference for Latinas/os, the residential segregation of low-income Latina/o immigrants exposes undocumented young adults to a dating market where they are likely to encounter many undocumented immigrants. As a result, Ivan Cardenas explains that all of his past girlfriends were undocumented: “I always dated girls that were the same as me, in the same boat. Always girls that lived in the same environment as me. … that lived around my neighborhood. … Everyone that lives where I live at, the majority, don’t have papers.” In Ivan’s case, racial and economic segregation created a dating market with large
numbers of undocumented Latinas. Those undocumented young adults who do not pursue higher education are more likely to socialize primarily in their segregated neighborhoods and thus encounter a Latina/o dating market that has a large number of undocumented immigrants.

Solidly situated within this mixed-status dating market, individuals who did not attend higher education, and those who attended but are not currently enrolled in 2-year colleges\textsuperscript{25}, have similar dating experiences. This less educated group, composing half of my total respondents, did not express many preferences in reference to immigration status. When asked if they would date other undocumented individuals, something that directly contradicts marriage myth messages to only date citizens, most of these respondents said that they did not care about their partner’s status. I contend that this is due to the fact that many of these partnered individuals are with people who they had met while in high school and prior to realizing the significant limitations associated with their immigration status (see Gonzales 2011). In addition, although all respondents desire to legalize their status, they report facing few explicit barriers because of their immigration status. This limited interaction with explicit legal barriers and exclusionary social interactions likely reduces the attention they pay to legalization and thus their internalization of the marriage myth.

The only portion of this group to state a immigration status preference are six women (out of 25) who defy these messages and express a preference for undocumented men. While expressing the same preferences as a few respondents in higher education, these women developed these preferences as a result of their dating market rather than as a consequence of the significance of their immigration status. Nancy Ortega explains her reasoning for choosing to date an undocumented man who eventually became her committed partner:

\textsuperscript{25} Those who attended 2-year higher education institutions had the potential to expand their dating markets, but their limited social participation on campus prevented their exposure to new dating markets as most were only there for a few quarters or only took classes towards a technical degree.
I knew his immigration status was the same as mine, but I guess because he has a lot of willpower and he’s not afraid to work for what he has. I guess that’s mainly why. I wanted someone that had that same mental strength as I did. *And the other guys that you dated didn’t have that?* I guess they just assumed that because they were U.S. citizens, life would be easy on them, and that’s not how it is.

Like the five other women, Nancy explains that she found undocumented men were more likely to have preferred characteristics such as being hardworking. For these women, undocumented men appear to be the better choice for stability when comparing them to their second-generation Latino peers who are plagued by racism and hyper policing which limits their educational and economic upward mobility. In addition, they found that immigrant men were more likely to share cultural understandings that make them preferable dating options. Fabiola Ramos explains why all her previous boyfriends have been undocumented: “I think that it’s because of the type of person that you associate with. … For me, everything is Spanish. So I’m not going to look for someone … who only speaks English, English, English. I feel strange.”

Looking for culturally similar, Spanish-speakers, these women sought out immigrant men; the demographic reality of Los Angeles and Latina/o migration ensures that many of these immigrants are undocumented.

In reality, this lack of preference appears to play out as these 45 respondents were currently partnered with almost equal numbers of undocumented and citizen individuals – 15 with undocumented partners, 13 with citizen partners. Men do not state any specific immigration status preferences and end up with a fairly even distribution of their partners’ immigration statuses—six citizen and four undocumented. Alternatively eleven women were with undocumented partners and seven with citizen partners. If you remove the three who prefer and partnered with undocumented men, these numbers are more equitable and support respondent’s assertions that they do not prefer either status. A lack of reported preferences and fairly equal

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26 Translated from: “Yo pienso que es por el tipo de persona que te relaciones. … Para mi todo es español. Entonces no voy a ir a buscar a alguien … nomas hablando ingles, ingles, ingles. Me siento como extraña.”
numbers of undocumented and documented partners suggests that undocumented young adults with none or limited experience in higher education are exposed to generationally mixed social spaces – high school, work, friendship networks – where they are able to meet both documented and undocumented partners.

Moving into Education: Incorporation, Exclusion, and the Development of Immigration Status Preferences

While those with limited exposure to educational institutions exhibit few preferences regarding immigration status and equally date citizen and undocumented individuals, I find that college-educated respondents have strong preferences for citizen partners and are able to live out these preferences due to their presence in citizen-dominated social spaces which expands their dating markets. I argue that these preferences stem from individuals’ experiences with the legal barriers associated with their immigration status; those individuals who pursue higher education are more likely to experience explicit immigration status-based roadblocks and so develop a stronger desire to legalize their status. This, coupled with marriage myth messages, encourages them to develop preferences for and primarily date citizens.

Respondents pursuing higher education had more physical mobility and exposure to social spaces with larger concentrations of citizens. In addition to simply traveling outside of their neighborhoods to attend college, the demographic reality of higher education institutions provided an opportunity for many undocumented students to interact with potential citizen partners. Daniel Hernandez explains how many of the women he was interested in and/or dated were citizens: “They were citizens. I don’t know if that’s a subconscious thing or not. … Then again, I wasn’t hanging out with other undocumented people. … So then it’s all citizens, just like that’s what’s there.” Daniel’s experience is similar to other student respondents who found
themselves surrounded by citizens while in school. This suggests that attending college provides a strong source of physical and social mobility that opened up dating markets outside of segregated neighborhoods.

Their high levels of participation in higher education institutions allows them to build more diverse social networks and open up opportunities to meet potential citizen partners. While participating in higher education promotes social incorporation and interactions with citizens, it also puts undocumented young adults at risk for facing the legal and social barriers associated with their immigration status. Their marginalized position within higher education forces them to contend with the limitations of their immigration status on a daily basis. This heightened awareness of their immigration status contributes to the ways in which they develop immigration status-based partner preferences.

Twenty-six of the 37 individuals\textsuperscript{27} in this category express a preference for or have only dated citizen individuals. For fifteen, the strength of the marriage myth led a large number of respondents in higher education to internalize these messages and limit their dating options to citizen individuals. Having experienced the limitations of their immigration status, these individuals had a strong desire to legalize their status in order to secure their future opportunities. As a result, they develop dating preferences that align with the marriage myth. Abel Leon explains his strict position to not date undocumented women:

\begin{quote}
One of my friends … called me [and] said, “Hey [Abel], I have two girls, can you help me with one of these girls?” I'm like, “Sure, but are they AB-540?" He's like, “Yeah man.” I’m like, “No, … I don’t even want to waste my time. I don’t want to waste my money. I don’t even want to try. I don’t care if they're cute. … I'm sorry dude, call somebody else. I don’t go out with AB-540 girls.”
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} While I interviewed 47 individuals in this category, I do not have data on these preferences for 10 individuals. 

\textsuperscript{28} California Assembly Bill 540 (AB-540) allows any individual who attended high school in California, regardless of their immigration status, to pay in-state tuition. While not explicitly serving undocumented students, the bill higher education more affordable for undocumented young adults and increased the number of undocumented college students. The bill’s name, AB-540, is commonly used to refer to undocumented students (Abrego 2008).
Abel, and eight other respondents, clearly state that citizenship is one of their requirements for selecting potential partners. In Abel’s case, he refuses to go on even a single outing with an undocumented woman because he knows that he will not pursue the relationship. An additional six individuals used more tempered language, stating that either dating a citizen was simply an added benefit. For example, contrary to Abel’s primary focus on immigration status, Sofia Gonzalez explains that the immigration status of potential partners is a secondary characteristic that she considers: “I think about their schooling. And then maybe status. … It’ll be probably on the list [of dating criteria], but it wouldn’t be a priority. If it comes down to it, it was not gonna matter his status if we fall in love. But I would rather him be born here, you know, have a cool status.” While she states a preference for citizen partners due to the opportunities for legalization and upward mobility, Sofia and others leave room for the possibility that they will fall in love with an undocumented partner. Yet, in most cases these respondents only leave hypothetical room to date an undocumented person and have not actually dated another undocumented person. In fact, an additional eleven individuals say that they do not care about the immigration status of their partner but have only dated citizen and/or documented individuals. It is possible that this is due to their lack of dating experience, their limited exposure to potential undocumented partners who meet their other requirements, or their unwillingness to profess biased and discriminatory preferences, similar to color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Whatever the reasons, these experiences demonstrate that most undocumented young adults in higher education institutions tend to prefer and date citizens.

Alternatively, five respondents explicitly state a clear preference for dating other undocumented young adults because they find them to be more supportive and understanding of their immigration status. Christina Guzman and Noel Barrera speak about their relationship and
the internal community judgment they receive for dating each other despite their shared undocumented status. While they both note that this might limit their legalization opportunities, they both feel that sharing experiences as undocumented students strengthen their emotional connections to each other. Christina explains,

Let’s say something happens and I’m venting and I’m crying and I’m telling my partner about it. He understands what I’m going through and what I would need. My [citizen] partner before, I feel like I would have to tell them what I would need. … I guess [now I] just feel better faster. You know how sometimes you feel crazy because you feel like you’re the only person that’s feeling that or because sometimes you just need reassurance? Like when someone makes a stupid comment and no one says anything. … You look for that reassurance. And so I feel like that’s what’s afforded to me quicker when I share those things with him.

As undocumented students in educational contexts where most people are citizens, most of my undocumented respondents in higher education institutions feel that their immigration status is incredibly salient on a day-to-day basis. The emergence of demeaning interactions with ill-informed individuals often leads them to seek out emotional support, much like the experiences of minority students of color who look for validation in their peers of color. Some, like Christina and Noel, find this support in their undocumented romantic partners. This emotional support and understanding causes them to develop an appreciation, and sometimes preference, for dating other undocumented young adults.

These marginalizing experiences, combined with the citizen majority of the social reality in which they operate, means that most of these individuals have a preference for and are able to actually date citizen individuals. Of the twenty individuals in relationships, sixteen are with citizen individuals. While three of the respondents partnered with an undocumented individual express this as a preference due to their exclusionary experiences, the remaining respondent states a preference for citizens but has begun a new relationship with an undocumented young adult in order to see if it is more satisfying. Yet, two thirds of the individuals currently in two or
four year colleges are not currently dating anyone, nor are most of them looking for partners.

Omar Valenzuela explains that this is primarily due to de-prioritizing romantic relationships:

I don’t think I have time for a relationship cause I'm so busy. Not only is it like school, work, study, homework, [undocumented student] club. And stuff like this [interview], and then helping out organizations, going to events, doing workshops, presentations. I don’t really have time. I tried. … There’s no way in hell you can work it out to have time for a girl.

Focusing on their education, the jobs that they need to pay tuition, and the extracurricular activities that come with college, undocumented students choose, or are forced to, abandon the hunt for a romantic partner. I suggest that deprioritizing these relationships during college means that undocumented students do not necessarily take advantage of the college dating market. Those that make time to date in college are able to find partners of the immigration status they prefer, as evidenced by the fact that eight of the ten 4-year college graduates in relationships met their partner in college. Alternatively, the six who put off relationships during college find themselves removed from this dating market upon graduation and struggle to find potential partners that meet their preferences, as they no longer have easy access to citizen-dominated dating markets.

The dating markets, preferences, and partners of undocumented young adults are largely bifurcated by educational status. Participation in higher education institutions exposes individuals to a dating market with larger numbers of prospective citizen partners and promotes preferences for citizen partners by increasing awareness of the limitations of one’s immigration status. In this case, preferences and opportunities to date citizens match up so that respondents are more likely to desire, find, and date citizens, reinforcing the marriage myth. Alternatively, those without significant higher education experiences (e.g. high school only or did not complete community college) do not develop immigration status-based preferences and encounter a more
mixed-status dating market so that there are equally likely to date undocumented or citizen individuals. Regardless of the status of their partner, most respondents had to similarly contend with the limitations of their immigration status while on dates.

“WHEN I’M ON A DATE”: GENDER, IMMIGRATION STATUS, AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In addition to these educational differences, gender mediates the effect of undocumented status on dating and differentiates the dating experiences of men and women. The contemporary dating scene is still full of gendered expectations where men must demonstrate their ability to be strong providers and promising prospective partners (Eaton and Rose 2011; Laner and Ventrone 2000). This leads to a gendered ideal dating experience where men are expected to invite the woman on a pre-planned date, pick her up in a car, and pay for the date. These expectations rely on gender schemas of women as vulnerable and needing protection and men as providers and protectors (Booth and Crouter 1998; Glenn et al. 1994; Lorber 1994; Ridgeway 2011). While the vulnerability of undocumented status is consistent with these gender schemas for women, it violates the gender schemas of men.

Undocumented immigration status affects individuals, regardless of gender, by preventing them from having a universally accepted form of identification, dissuading some from purchasing a car or driving without a license, and limiting their ability to obtain a well-paying job. While these shared vulnerabilities could affect both undocumented men’s and women’s dating experiences, gendered schemas and dating expectations dictate that these limitations affect men much more than women. Undocumented immigration status puts individuals in a precarious financial situation which limits men’s ability to participate in
normative dating experiences and causes them to experience less social incorporation than undocumented women.

**Gendered Norms in Dating Culture**

Despite the fact that most women respondents exhibit a desire to be independent and self-sufficient, traditional gender norms predominate within the context of dating. Beto Bonilla speaks to these conflicting messages:

I mean I always hear these comments that … women and men are supposed to be treated the same, equally. But sometimes even women enforce the idea that men should be first. So when a woman is telling a man, “Oh you have to drive because I’m supposed to be the passenger.” [I think,] “Well, I thought you wanted to be treated equally?” That doesn’t make any sense.

Despite the feminist revolution and assertions of the need for gender equality, Beto’s analysis suggests that gender equality has not reached into the dating sphere. Rather, women still expect that men will court them and should plan, drive, and pay for the date.

Women respondents report few limitations to their dating experiences. In fact, while men are quick to cite the limitations their immigration status poses while dating, most women respondents struggle to answer the question about how their immigration status affects their dating experiences. It was not until I asked them to think about if they pay or drive on dates that they spoke about gendered expectations. Patricia Santamaria is a representative example: “I know I'm a girl. I have no problem with a guy paying for everything. I would make him pay for everything.” Additionally, when asked if she thought her dating experiences would have been different if she were a man, Lili Moreno compares her experiences to her two undocumented brothers in their early 20s:

I’m trying to put myself into my brothers’ shoes. … I think their social norms in terms of guys being the providers, guys taking the girls out on [a] date, guys have taken the initiative to do a lot those things. And when a guy is undocumented, I feel it disempowered [them] from fulfilling those social norms. … This is based
on my brother’s experiences. But because they don’t have a car, they can’t drive girls around. And you see those social norms. So I think definitely, I think it shies them away from putting themselves out there.

Witnessing the experiences of the undocumented men in their family, women became aware of the ways in which their gender privileged this social aspect of their lives as they do not face the same requirements for what they were expected to provide on dates.

These findings are reflected in a conversation I witnessed during my fieldwork where three men – two of which I interviewed for this study (Daniel Hernandez and Julio Medina) were lamenting about the difficulties of “being the man” while dating. The conversation continued for about half an hour as they made posters for a protest the next day. As they shared dating stories, a few undocumented women joined at different times contributing their own perspective. While listening intently and being sympathetic, they noted that they did not have problems dating. One woman even explained that she sometimes took advantage of these gender roles so that she would not have to spend much money when she went out. Another described how she could hide her immigration status from potential partners who were citizens because they would not ask her to drive or pay. While very few respondents report such positive effects of their gender roles (perhaps because they do not enter into direct conversation with men), most do acknowledge that gendered dating expectations meant that they do not have to plan, pay for, or drive on dates.

On the other hand, these gendered dating norms are so strongly ingrained that most undocumented men strive to meet these expectations despite the limitations of their immigration status. Take the example of Gilbert Morales, a single, 29-year old man,

I was kind of tired of not having a car and [my dates] always pick[ing] me up or [taking] the bus. I should have a car, and thank god I have it [now]. … I don’t like that [they would pick me up] because I feel like I should be the one. … My mom always taught me like that, not to be … [having] the lady doing everything. Not [to have] the girls pick me up and everything. … I don’t like the girls paying. … Sometimes I don’t have money. When we go out it’s because I have money.
When we don’t go out and everything [it’s because] I tell them I don’t have money. I have to pay this, this, and this.

Like the vast majority of the male respondents, Gilbert buys into the dating norms and asserts that he is the one who should be driving and paying when going out on dates. Not only is this what women expect, but he believes that diverging from these expectations would be inappropriate. Counter to his early dating experiences when he did not have a car, he now meets these gendered dating expectations by driving without a license. These expectations are so strong that he would rather take the risks associated with driving without a license – being pulled over, receiving tickets of upwards of $1,000, having his car towed, potentially being detained for deportation – than have his citizen date drive him. In addition, he chooses to scale back on dating activities, canceling dates or cooking at home, rather than having a woman pay. Taking risks and scaling back activities allows Gilbert to meet gendered dating expectations despite the limitations of his undocumented immigration status.

At the same time, some men are unable or unwilling to take the risks necessary to sidestep the limitations their immigration status puts on meeting these gendered norms. Take the example of Daniel Hernandez, a 27-year-old community college student who explains early in the interview that he did not date for a long time because he could not meet the standard “stereotypical stuff of like you’re the guy – you’re supposed to have the car, and drive, and pay. Very cliché, TV teen melodrama kind of shit.” After deciding to date despite his inability to meet these expectations, he explains that he felt that these factors contributed to his girlfriend’s decision to break up with him:

She was three years older. She finished school, even grad school too. … [She] had her stuff together. And I was still in school … working part-time, going to school full-time. The whole me not being independent thing just started becoming too much for her. Cause she’s the one driving everywhere, and I didn’t even know how to drive. … [She’s] like “I’m investing more time in this than you are and
sometimes more money.” Cause I’d be like, “Hey, I don’t have money right now.” … I think she realized that she might end up having to support me in some way while I finish school. … So she’s like, “No, it’s over.”

In Daniel’s case, as well as many other men respondents’, this experience reinforced the idea that gendered expectations needed to be met in order to successfully date. As a result, Daniel avoids dating even years afterwards.

Gendered schemas and expectations pervade U.S. dating culture. Undocumented young adults contend with these gendered roles as they attempt to date and find that it intersects with the limitations of their undocumented immigration status in gendered ways. While women’s gender schemas are in line with their vulnerable position as undocumented immigrants, men are limited in their ability to perform as providers. However, comparing the experiences of Gilbert and Daniel suggest that undocumented young men have varying experiences as they strive to date amid gendered expectations. In some cases experiences depend on the man’s decisions about how much risk to take, and in some cases, they depend on the partner’s willingness to alter her gendered expectations. Despite the outcome, most respondents confirm that men had more difficulty meeting gendered dating norms.

The Intersection of Gender and Immigration status and its Effect on Dating Experiences

Undocumented immigration status affects dating experiences in a variety of ways. It directly affects dating experiences by limiting driving and the types of activities that can be enjoyed without a form of identification. In addition, it indirectly affects dating experiences through financial limitations that encourage individuals to avoid dating or face negative receptions from partners. In these cases, class functions as a mediating variable as immigration status prevents undocumented young adults from securing stable, well-paid employment and limits their future prospects of upward mobility. While undocumented immigration status clearly
shapes dating experiences, I find that the implications of these limitations are different for undocumented men and women because of the way that gender intersects with the limitations created by undocumented immigration status. While gendered dating roles privilege undocumented men in their ability to choose dating activities, it inhibits their ability to meet gendered expectations in other aspects of their dating experiences and promotes their social exclusion.

“Trust Me”: The Privileged Position of Undocumented Men when Choosing Dating Activities

Undocumented immigration status directly limits these young adults dating experiences by restricting the types of activities that can be pursued on dates. In California, undocumented young adults are unable to obtain a state issued ID; most respondents use their Mexican consulate ID (*marticula*), Mexican passport, or school ID as identification. As a result, going to a place that required proof of age, including normalized dating destinations such as bars or clubs, can force individuals to reveal their immigration status before they are ready. For example, presenting a non-California ID can raise questions from their date or lead to them being refused entrance or service. This identification hurdle, coupled with gendered expectations, causes undocumented men and women to experience and manage their immigration status differently – men do so in private prior to the date and women do so in public while on the date. This means that undocumented men have a slight advantage in this instance since gendered expectations allow them to choose activities that will minimize the limitations of their immigration status.

Gender roles dictate that men ask out women and plan the specific activity for the date. This uniquely situates men to be able choose an activity and/or destination that will not be affected by their undocumented immigration status. Representative of most men who pursue

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29 Some respondents suggested that more upscale clubs and bars have stopped accepting Mexican IDs, especially Mexican consulate IDs, as a way of excluding ‘undesirable’ clientele.
normative dating activities, Cruz Vargasc explains that he used this power to reduce the significance or limitations of his immigration status:

When it came to dating and stuff like that it really didn’t matter to me. Cause I’m very good with words so I’d just work my way around it. I’d just talk my way out of it. I’m very convincing. … Let’s say like some girl wanted to go somewhere. I’ll just be like, “Oh, well, you know, I heard the place is wack. It’s not even good.” Like, “Nah, trust me. I know a better place. Trust me.” … And then I’ll just convince them … [to go where] I know I can go.

Expected to plan activities for their date, most of the men I interviewed suggest, like Cruz, that they consciously select locations where they know their immigration status will not be a limiting factor. In addition to selecting acceptable locations for normative activities, some men pursue non-normative activities that do not require identification. For example, Paco Barrera says he likes to take his dates to a café where they have poetry events because it is free, allowing him to side-step his financial limitations, and, more importantly, it does not require ID. This further benefits him, as women “think you're all cultured and this cool guy.” In his case, a decision that was made to avoid the limitations of immigration status includes a silver lining where he ends up rising above the dating competition. In this case, gendered expectations and male privilege provides a rare opportunity for men to sidestep the limitations of their immigration status within the context of dating.

In their role as courters, most men are able to avoid being asked for an ID or being told that their form of ID was unacceptable. In a few instances when this was not anticipated, men tended to become embarrassed and conflict arose. Take the example of Cesar Paredes who stopped by his local Blockbuster to rent a few movies with his girlfriend:

They asked me for a license or a California ID, and I gave them the matricula, [the] Mexican ID, and they told me that they couldn’t accept it. So then I got angry, and then I started going off on the guy like, “Why don’t you guys accept this? This is ridiculous. They accept this at other places. Are you serious? I can’t
get a membership here to check out movies because I don’t have a [driver’s] license?”

Unprepared for such rejection, Cesar became very upset and stormed off, despite the fact that his citizen girlfriend could have provided the necessary ID and rented the movies. He explains that this was one of the few instances in which his status frustrated his dating experiences due to not being able to provide what his girlfriend wanted. In addition, he feels that he overreacted because this was just another example of the limitations his immigration status presented to his daily life.

While Cesar felt unprepared for this affront, most of the women respondents report having to navigate issues related to IDs while on dates. Gendered dating norms dictate that as the invited partner, they do not have control of the activity or location of the date. As a result, they have to negotiate venues’ ID policies while on the date. Some women are able to shield their ID from their date when showing it to personnel; this helps them avoid revealing their immigration status to their partner if it is not rejected by the venue. However, most, like Mayra Castillo, explain that this forces them to worry about the ID policies they might encounter and sometimes avoid dates:

When I’m going to a new place, [I think], “Are they going to take [accept] my passport? Are they going to give me crap about it?” Because I’ve gotten that. … [Sometimes they] go through it and see if there is a visa or not. Sometimes they’ll be assholes … And then there’s times they’ll be nice and … it will be fine. But it’s an anxiety, “Oh my god I drove this far and now they are going to let me in or not?” The embarrassment it’s going to cost because they are going to put you on blast. Or how are you going to explain, “Oh wait I can’t go in.” [Answering questions like,] “Why don’t you have a California ID?” So I hate it. I hate it I really do. … It did [make me avoid dating]. If I didn’t know the place or if I heard of other people that they can’t get in then I would just avoid it.

Unlike Cesar who was unprepared for being denied because of his ID, this was a common issue for Mayra and other women. They had a variety of experiences presenting people with their IDs and so were not often surprised or caught off guard because they had been imagining these
scenarios. In spite of being prepared for whatever occurs, women respondents are less able to hide their immigration status from their partners because they were forced to navigate their status in such a public manner. Mercedes Velez recounts an experience in which her ID was rejected on one of her early dates with a man who came to be her boyfriend:

We wanted to go out to a bar … and it was a cool place he had been to and he wanted to show me the place. But I got denied because of my matricula. … And I was like “welcome to my world.” … I think it showed a lot about him too though [that] even though I got denied, he was like “well let’s go somewhere else.” … I think that’s what made me get more attracted to him.

While embarrassed, Mercedes found that this experience actually strengthened her bond and attraction to her date because he reacted so supportively. In addition to providing an opportunity to measure the supportiveness of her potential partner, Mercedes’ experience shows that it also places women in a situation to be cared for and rescued by their male partner. This is in line with gendered expectations of men rescuing their “damsels in distress.” While traditional gender roles put women in a position to be invited to a place that rejects her ID, the gender norms of dating also seem to protect them from significant negative reactions from their partner.

Gendered expectations dictate that men plan the dates. This enables undocumented men to navigate one of the limitations of their immigration status – their lack of a state-issued ID – in a private manner. Within the context of navigating dating activities, gender and gendered expectations prove advantageous for undocumented men. However, these benefits do not persist in other aspects of their dating experiences.

“I Suck!”: The Gendered Disadvantages of Undocumented Men When Dating

Despite the advantages of being able to preemptively navigate one of the limitations of their immigration status, undocumented men face far more disadvantages than women when dating. Specifically, the direct and indirect limitations of undocumented immigration status are at
odds with the male provider role. As a result, undocumented men are forced to postpone dates, feel perceived as less desirable partners, are limited in their transportation opportunities, and develop emotional barriers to dating. While pre-date experiences – postponing dates and feeling less desirable – are triggered indirectly by the effects of their immigration status on their financial situation, driving negotiations are directly linked to the limitations of their undocumented status. These direct and indirect effects of their immigration status on individual dates contribute to the development of long-term emotional consequences – feeling guilty about dating or avoiding dating all together – as they participate in the dating market over time. Together, these experiences demonstrate that, within the context of dating, undocumented men face more limitations than undocumented women due to the ways in which gendered provider expectations intersect with the limitations of their immigration status.

Postponing Dates

Postponing or avoiding a date is one of the main ways in which immigration status indirectly affects dating experiences through financial limitations. Specifically, undocumented immigration status forces individuals to work in the underground economy or the service sector, both places that are unlikely to check for proper documentation. As a result, many respondents report working in minimum wage jobs where there is little opportunity for upward mobility or increased pay. As a result, most undocumented young adults have limited discretionary funds, especially if they are trying to pay for college expenses. As a result, class functions as a mediating variable and allows immigration status to indirectly affect men’s ability to afford dates. This forces some men to either avoid dating all together or postpone a date until they have a little more money.
Some men avoid dating because they simply cannot afford to date. When I ask about his dating experiences, Jesus Perez explains that he has been single for two years and does not expect to start dating again in the near future. He says that this is a result of his undocumented immigration status because, “It makes me afraid. … The money. … Let’s say my partner wants to go out and she asks me to go out. I don’t want to say, ‘I don’t have any money.’ [It] makes me embarrassed I guess. I want to be the one in power of the situation.” Despite the fact that he is a manager at a fast food chain restaurant, Jesus does not make enough money to pay for his living expenses and tuition for one class at a community college. This lack of money has forced him to stop himself from dating because he is afraid of not being able to live up to his partner’s expectations and take her out whenever she wants. In addition, he accepts that in his role as a man, he should be in power and able to provide what a partner desires. While this is an extreme approach, Jesus’ experience demonstrates that some men’s financial limitations are so severe that they are unable to meet the gendered expectations and so avoid dating all together.

In a related trend, some men find themselves temporarily unable to afford dates and so seek to postpone already scheduled dates. In these cases, they sidestep their inability to live up to these gendered expectations by simply avoid going out on a date when their particular circumstances leave them unable to cover the cost of a date. Take the case of Ivan Cardenas, a 24-year-old high school graduate, “If I get my paycheck and I already paid my bills and all I have left is $50 bucks and I rather tell her lets go out next week when I have more money or I say, ‘I can’t go out. I’m busy.’ Sometimes it’s a bad feeling when you go out and you can’t really buy everything you want because all you have is $50.” In Ivan’s case, a limited and fluctuating income caused by his job as a landscaper pushes him to cancel a date to ensure that he will be
able to afford the date and not have to be faced with admitting that he cannot afford to buy something.

While women respondents have comparable jobs and similarly small and/or unstable incomes, no woman I interviewed discusses limited funds as a reason to not date. Specifically, women either assume that the man is going to pay or they want to split the cost. For example, Edith Sandoval, a twenty-nine year old college graduate, explains the evolution of her expectations, “My mom, she has these really old rules. … So she always said like, ‘Oh no, the guy has to pay, the guy has to pay.’ I grew up with that, so I think in my first two relationships I felt that it was their duty. … But now … doing this 50/50 thing makes me feel so much better.” This idea of splitting the cost of the date emerges more in the narratives of women in higher education and those who assert the importance of feeling financially independent in a relationship. However, unlike the men, they never cite finances as a reason to not date. This suggests that while some women may strive to pay, they are not expected to. Thus, their gendered role, as the one being provided for, lessens the financial burden their immigration status puts on dating.

Feeling Less Desirable

Similar to how their immigration status indirectly encourages undocumented men to postpone dates because of a temporary lack of funds, it also contributes to their long-term socioeconomic stagnation, making them feel like less desirable partners. As a common tool for getting to know one another, dates often consist of trying to present oneself in the most attractive light possible. Some of the men I interviewed discuss how their jobs, socioeconomic status, and sometimes immigration status make them feel like they are viewed as less desirable partners on
the dating market. Specifically, they believe that these characteristics make it hard for them to present themselves to prospective partners in a positive light.

In some cases, undocumented men find that the type of job they hold is a barrier to securing a date while women do not encounter this problem. Specifically, men are met with the expectation that substandard jobs are not going to allow them to provide for their future wife and so makes them an undesirable partner. Enrique Escobar, explains how his job presented a barrier to securing an introduction to the woman who has now been his girlfriend for over two years:

Actually the friend that introduced me to her, she told me that she is not going to like you because your job. “You only work at [an oil change station]. … [and] because you don’t earn that much. She used to date this guy that had a Mercedes and he had a company.” I was like “I don’t think that really matters” and it didn’t. … People think that I don’t deserve her just because my situation. … They say I won’t be able to provide for her as other people can.

While his girlfriend did not necessarily care about his job because he was then pursuing a mechanics certificate and is now considering returning to community college, he notes that they both receive a lot of criticism because his job indicates that he will not be able to meet the gendered expectations of providing for her in the future. Enrique’s experiences reflects those of low-income Black and Latino citizen men because they share structural constraints to upward socioeconomic mobility (Dickerson vonLockette and Johnson 2010; McCall 2001; Western 2006); however, their citizenship status at least makes them eligible, and perhaps hopeful, that they will be able to obtain a better job or utilize educational credentials. In Enrique’s case, his pursuit of upward mobility, via technical education, was unsuccessful because his undocumented status prevented him from being hired as a mechanic and being compensated for his acquired skills. If he were a documented low-income man, Enrique might be able to achieve the upward mobility he desires and move out of his undesirable work status. This suggests that
undocumented status makes it more difficult for men to present themselves to potential partners in ways that conform to the gendered and classed expectations that they have good, stable jobs.

Alternatively, women do not experience such judgment when partners find out where they work. Claudia Arellano, a college graduate and waitress notes, “[I’m doing] the online [dating] thing. … If a guy puts online [on his profile] like they work at a restaurant. It’s like, ‘Ahhhh.’ [Warning sign]. But if a girl puts it, the guy doesn’t even care. It’s like, ‘Oh, whatever, she’s cute.’ … So I kind of feel like I can get away in that sense a little bit more.” Compared to Enrique, Claudia’s experience demonstrates that gendered expectations do not limit women’s ability to present themselves as potential partners.

Similarly, some men struggle to find a way to present their immigration status in way that allows them to live up to gendered expectations of being the provider. Luis Escobar, a college graduate who has worked as a waiter since graduating high school, explains the pressure to demonstrate that he can be a good provider despite his immigration status. He also explains how his immigration status produced an emotional block to dating when he was in college and before meeting his wife:

I mean you're talking about making the best impression you can to that other person that you just met. So even when you're dating you just create this perfect person in front of that person, whose not real. And then add to that this idea that society tells you that you're a criminal and later on, its almost like you feel like you're actually a criminal, and you are pretending not to be so someone can like you. And then sometimes you feel that you're not worth it.

Having spent a lot of time thinking about these connections, Luis explains that he avoided dating because he couldn’t measure up to the gendered expectations set forth for him as a man who should be an economic provider. In addition, he feels that having to combat the criminalization attached to undocumented status made it hard to present himself as an attractive partner. While few respondents make Luis’ point in such a direct manner, the spirit of his point is one
experienced by many men, especially those who are in higher education, aim to enter non-service sector work, or are dating citizen women who expected future upwardly mobility.

Navigating Driving Expectations

While financial limitations indirectly signal the limitations of undocumented immigration status on dating, undocumented men also find that their immigration status directly impacts their ability to provide transportation, and meet gender norms, while on dates. Physical mobility in southern California generally requires that individuals drive, especially on full-fledged dates. As a result, many respondents, regardless of gender, report having a car and/or driving, either frequently or on special occasions. As a result, the vast majority of male respondents have to balance the risks of driving without a license with meeting gendered expectations that they drive. Omar Valenzuela explains how his girlfriend will drive to pick him up but once together he drives her car. When asked why this is, he answers,

I don’t know. She's like, “I don’t know where you're taking me, so you drive.” It’s kind of like the man’s role. … It does come up [that it’s dangerous to drive without a license]. Especially after … I got pulled over. … That's why I try to avoid driving. But then when you're with somebody [and] crazy about them, a fear of status goes out the window. Everything goes out the window.

As a result of striving to meet his girlfriend’s gendered expectations, Omar has in fact suffered consequences for driving without a license – being pulled over and given a ticket for over a thousand dollars. Despite the fact that his citizen girlfriend could have driven, which she did for a few dates after he was pulled over, he believes that love, and I would argue gender roles, take over and blind him to the risks of driving without a license. The fact that these gender roles persist in a context when they are not warranted, and in fact create dangerous and costly situations, speaks to the their strength and social pervasiveness. The majority of male

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30 This would likely be less of an issue for undocumented young adults in cities with reliable and normalized use of public transportation (e.g. New York), or in states that allow undocumented immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses (e.g. Washington).
respondents find that driving and transportation present the potential for conflict where gendered expectations either force them to drive without a license, as Omar does, or causes conflict when they do not want to risk driving.

A few male respondents refuse to risk driving and find that they can not meet gendered expectations; this severely limits their dating opportunities and/or causes conflict with their partners. Pablo Ortiz, recounts his early dating experiences in his late teens and early 20s after prematurely leaving high school:

I constantly struggle within myself [about] dating not only because of my experience but also because of my immigration status. … My analysis of the situation of love and undocumented people is that women or, in my case, especially Latina women, are taught to hate me. To hate my features, to hate my color. To hate my everything, especially my immigration status. What do moms usually tell their daughters? “Make sure that the person has a car. Que te saque a pasear [At least so he can take you out].” As an undocumented person, [you can’t] … unless you wanted to break the rules and get in trouble, and then pay more for breaking the rules. I learned the hard way not to do that anymore.

Pablo presents a nuanced analysis of how his immigration status prevents him from driving, something that he believes women are taught to desire and require from potential partners. He explains that while he drove in the past, he paid the price for this by receiving multiple tickets and having cars towed and ultimately abandoned in impound lots. These experiences and his refusal to take risks led him to struggle emotionally with dating and avoid it for a long time.

Erick Godinez, a high school graduate, had a similar experience with his refusal to drive and found that it led to the ending of relationships: “When I used to go out with girls, they see the difference. Because they ask me, ‘Why don’t you get a car?’ They know I could get a car [despite my immigration status], but I don’t want to do it, because I don’t want to risk it. … They get tired of going in a taxi, or a bus, or all that.” He continues, explaining that they would fight about the type of transportation they took and the women always ended up breaking up with him.
While these women were aware of the limitations of his immigration status, he feels that they expected him to get a car in order to meet their expectations that he provide.

While Pablo and Erick are unwilling to risk driving, Cruz Vargas explains that he often seeks to limit this risk by asking his citizen girlfriend to drive. While this non-traditional gender role has become the norm for them, it often leads to conflict: “The thing is sometimes she doesn’t wanna drive, you know? … And sometimes it’s like, ‘Dude, I don’t wanna drive! … I don’t wanna feel like this [insecure/unsafe] every day. You can drive. You can actually legally drive. You know? So why don’t you just drive.’ She’s like, ‘Oh. Well, I’m tired. I don’t wanna drive.’ So I’ll drive.” While Cruz is able to negotiate a way to not risk driving, it leads to continual conflict within his relationship where his girlfriend will sometimes refuse to drive, forcing him to take a risk that makes him uncomfortable. In most cases, conflict arises when men seek to avoid driving or have female partners drive.

Contrary to the conflict that men face when not meeting gendered driving expectations, women do not report conflict nor do they worry about transportation issues, regardless of their partner’s immigration status. Amanda Loera explains the situation between her and her citizen boyfriend who lives forty-five minutes away:

I'm pretty sure there’s couples that alternate like I’ll go see you, you come see me. I can’t do that. _Does he come and see you every weekend?_ Yeah. _Does he ever complain about that?_ He's never complained.

While Cruz has a difficult time convincing his girlfriend to drive, Amanda suggests that this arrangement happened in a seamless way; it is not a constant negotiation in the same way that many of the men discuss, rather her boyfriend automatically drives. This suggests that the limitations imposed by women’s undocumented status align with their gender roles and thus lead to significantly less conflict. In addition, no woman respondent mentions that she is expected to
drive and only one – Christina Guzman – mentions that she, rather than her partner, drives on a regular basis. She explains that this arrangement is due to a combination of her partner’s undocumented status and her possession of a driver’s license. Despite the logic of their arrangement, it still led to some conflict as she reports that her partner felt insecure with having her drive and not meeting his expected gender role:

I think that it helped me reassuring him that I just don’t see him that way and I don’t see him as less of a person. If we’re being really realistic about our situation, … it just makes more sense for me to drive. Maybe it’s a cut to your ego, but then let’s talk about that. Do you think you sitting over here [in the driver seat] and me sitting over there [in the passenger seat] is gonna fix it?

As the only woman respondent who drives her partner around on a consistent basis, Christina’s experience suggests that the embeddedness of traditional gender roles can push undocumented men to desire to risk driving, despite the existence of safer alternatives. While her feminist attitudes empowered her to negotiate this arrangement with her partner, most undocumented women respondents simply accept the benefits and safety of not having to drive.

Avoiding Dating and Feeling Guilty: Emotional Consequences of Gendered Dating Experiences

The direct and indirect effects of undocumented immigration status on men’s experiences while preparing for and going on dates can lead to long-term emotional consequences. Specifically, the develop feelings of exclusion as they continually experience internal and external conflict from postponing dates, feeling like a less desirable partner, and negotiating driving. These feelings of exclusion can lead undocumented men to avoid dating in order to prevent the recurrence of these negative experiences. In addition, their limited ability to meet provider and protector roles promotes feelings of guilt as dating advances into a more committed

31 While California does not allow undocumented immigrants to get drivers licenses, some states do. Christina traveled to one of these states and was able to get a valid license from there.
relationship. This suggests that immigration status not only has tangible effects on dating experiences but it also has emotional consequences for undocumented young adults.

Undocumented men are more likely to develop emotional barriers to dating because of negative experiences with potential partners when they were unable to live up to gendered expectations. Leo Campos, who left a 4-year university after transferring from community college, and Chente Zumaya, a high school graduate, both explain that they have stopped dating because they were repeatedly broken up with because of their immigration status:

Leo: I don’t call them dates because the minute we went out, … the minute they found out my situation it’s like, “Oh I never liked you.” So if they never liked me then it wasn’t a date. … Even though we might have made out, but apparently you don’t like me. Apparently you never liked me, my mistake. … [I have stopped dating] because it wasn’t just one or two girls. … If I would count between the time I was 18 to like now [that I’m 27], like 20-25 girls have rejected me like that.

Chente: I had a couple of girlfriends and that’s the first thing they asked. For instance last year, she had car problems, we exchanged numbers. … It was promising and that’s one of the first things she asked me. … I had another girlfriend. She kind of did the same thing but over the phone. … She was telling me her last relationship was a dead end. It took me a while to figure out that the person was only trying to get his documents through her.

Discussing their dating experiences, both Leo and Chente discuss how financial limitations curtail their dating opportunities. Despite this, both attempted to date and believe that their immigration status directly prevented potential partners from perceiving them as datable. While Chente also points to suspicions about his intention to use her to get his documents (a suspicion consistent with the marriage myth discussed above), he later discusses how he is not the type of person women are looking for and that he is unwilling to take the risks to become that type of person. He points directly to how “some ladies like to go out of state” and he is unwilling to risk driving and going to such a far place for fear of deportation. Similarly, Leo explains that he believes women break up with him because of the immobility created by his immigration status:
It’s difficult not having a car, … not being able to go to certain clubs. [Being undocumented], it makes it almost impossible [to date] because that’s what girls want to do. … They want to travel, they want to see the world. It’s like – Ahhh! I can’t do any of that. … I don’t want to hold her back. So I rather be by myself. If I’m gonna have this crappy life, then I rather just be doing it [by] myself, going through it and not bring somebody else down with me.

His experience of continual rejection for his immigration status leads Leo to decide to stop dating because he is unable to meet gendered expectations of providing for his partner and her every desire and protecting her from a downwardly mobile living situation. Both Leo and Chente, in addition to other single men, were fairly pessimistic about their future chances of finding a partner who would accept their immigration status and the limitations it put on their ability to meet gendered expectations.

While it was mostly male respondents who had negative dating experiences, a few women report facing emotional consequences due to their immigration status. However, these experiences were infrequent, were not sourced by immediate rejection, and were not tied to gendered expectations in the same way. For example, Tanya Diaz explains how she resorted to prematurely ending a relationship with a citizen partner who she thought would reject her because of her immigration status: “He was well-off and liked to travel. I kind of eliminated myself before I could be eliminated. … His lifestyle was totally different than what I live and what I have to experience. The fact that it was too different, I didn’t even want to question if he would go through it with me.” While this sounds fairly similar to what Leo discusses above in terms of negotiating a different lifestyle than a citizen partner, Tanya does not tie this potential rejection back to gendered norms. Rather she is simply avoiding potential rejection rather than reacting to past rejection that has occurred. In addition, Tanya’s experiences are not representative given that most women did not report avoiding relationships in this way. This suggests that while women are at risk for developing emotional barriers to dating because of
their immigration status, this is less likely to occur when compared to men’s experiences. I suggest that this is due to the fact that their gendered dating norms as dependent partners are not incompatible with their undocumented immigration status.

In addition to pushing undocumented men to avoid dating, their limited ability to meet provider and protector roles promotes feelings of guilt as dating advances into a more committed relationship. In the case of relationships between two undocumented individuals, gendered expectations collide with the marriage myth to promote feelings of guilt among undocumented men. Lili Moreno explains how this guilt infiltrated the romantic relationship between two of her undocumented friends: “I was talking to my friend about it and she was telling me that he [her partner] feels bad about being undocumented because he feels that she could be going out with someone who is documented and could potentially get married to fix her papers.” While other respondents in relationships with undocumented individuals only hinted at some of this guilt, my fieldwork suggests that guilt is a common feeling in these relationships. In fact, the popular social media group, Dreamers Adrift (2011), have a video about these issues in which one member confesses his feelings about dating his undocumented girlfriend: “Dating someone who is also undocumented has its ups and its downs. It just seems like the downs are a lot rockier than other relationships. And I battle with it. With her ex proposing this idea of getting married to her and helping her out in her situation. And I feel like I’m holding her back. And so there’s this guilt behind it.” Similarly, Aaron Ortiz talks about how his immigration status, and this guilt, crept into his decision to get married to his undocumented girlfriend, now his wife: “I was hoping that I didn't disappoint her. It depressed me because I didn't want to hold her back. Maybe she was looking for someone with papers. But she told me she wanted to marry me. ... I hope I don't disappoint her.” In Aaron’s case, he was convinced to overcome these guilty feelings,
marrying his wife and cutting off both of their chances for legalization through marriage. While he overcame this guilt enough to get married, these emotions still plague his feelings about their marriage as he worries that she will become disappointed with him because he cannot help her legalize her status.

Undocumented women who are in relationships with undocumented men do not report guilt. Edith Sandoval talks about her budding relationship with an undocumented man and her attempts to avoid thinking about or discussing the future of their relationship:

I think it’s because I still have this idea that if you’re undocumented you’re in need of help. Even though I don’t feel that way I think that idea is still in my head. … I’m starting to ponder, you know? So what if you find out this guy is your “one true love” or whatever? Wow! Then we’ll pack up and go to Mexico! [Laughing] … That’s a really difficult question. … Like if this person happens to be undocumented I should be able to live it. But it’s easier said than done, right? So I’m trying to do it. [Laughing]

Like the men discussed above, Edith is struggling with the marriage myth and the consequences of dating an undocumented man. However, she does not express the same guilt that undocumented men do. Rather she jokes about moving to Mexico and struggling to learn to live with the idea of being undocumented. Nowhere does she discuss feelings of guilt about limiting his future opportunities for legalization through marriage. Other women who, like Aaron above, were in more committed relationships with undocumented men had overcome their struggle with the marriage myth and did not express any form of guilt. For example, Irene Correas says simply “I guess he helped me because he’s in the same situation as me.” This lack of guilt suggests that women’s gendered expectations are not incompatible with undocumented immigration status. Unlike men, they do not feel the expectations of having to protect and provide for their partner and so they do not experience the same guilt and emotional consequences.
Examining the direct and indirect effects of the limitations undocumented status puts on dating reveals that gender plays an important role in differentiating how undocumented men and women participate in dating. While both men and women are directly limited by their inability to obtain a driver’s license, secure a valid state ID, or obtain financial resources, gendered expectations make these limitations more salient for men within the context of dating. While men are advantaged in their ability to choose activities that will not lead to a rejection of their IDs, they are by far more disadvantaged on the dating market – postponing dates, feeling less desirable, negotiating driving limitations, and incurring emotional consequences. While male privilege may benefit them in other aspects of their lives, their experiences in dating contexts suggest that gender intersects with undocumented status in a way that makes undocumented men uniquely vulnerable to being excluded from this aspect of social life because they cannot meet popular expectations of men as courters and providers.

CONCLUSION

Having grown up and been socialized in the US, undocumented young adults are assumed to be socially incorporated. Discussions of their exclusion tend to focus on institutional barriers to higher education or jobs, rather than how their immigration status excludes them from social situations or blocks them from building healthy romantic relationships. As they transition into adulthood, undocumented young adults strive to find a romantic partner and end up negotiating their immigration status throughout this intimate process. In this chapter, I have shown that undocumented immigration status limits the social incorporation of undocumented young adults by structuring their dating messages, access to and preferences for partners, and ability to fully participate and feel comfortable on dates. Immigration status alone does not
produce these limitations, rather it intersects with educational status and gender to produce differential experiences.

I find that the dating experiences of undocumented young adults are shaped by a heightened awareness of the limitations of their immigration status. Influenced by the incorrect popular belief that undocumented individuals can easily legalize their status through marriage, undocumented young adults receive messages that force them to constantly navigate their immigration status and the immigration status of their partner. These messages not only intertwine dating with legalization opportunities, but they also contribute to the development of immigration status-based dating preferences. Specifically, individuals who spent a significant amount of time in higher education institutions experience higher levels of physical and social mobility which not only heightened awareness of their immigration status but increased their exposure to and preferences for citizen partners. Immigration status also contributes to the development of emotional barriers to dating as some respondents avoid repeating past negative and exclusionary experiences by not dating and seek to secure potential future inclusion but prematurely ending relationships with undocumented individuals.

These findings suggest that previous feelings of exclusion – via messages, educational experiences, and dating – lead to a heightened awareness of one’s immigration status. These compounded feelings of exclusion are at the root of why many undocumented young adults limit their participation in dating contexts. This not only speaks to the way in which participation and emotions are interconnected but also suggests that immigration status significantly differentiates the romantic lives of undocumented young adults and citizens.

This also suggest that past, present, and future social incorporation are tightly intertwined. Specifically, the educational divide in asserting dating preferences suggests that
those who experience physical and social mobility through education are more likely to have higher levels of social incorporation and so are increasingly able to participate in the dating realm, if they so desire. This present incorporation and desire to partner with citizen individuals is tied to their desire for future social incorporation as dating a citizen theoretically keeps open opportunities for legalization through marriage. In addition, their present incorporation, made possible by matriculation to a higher educational institution, is connected to their past social incorporation and their ability to harness social capital and networks to navigate educational institutions (see Enriquez 2011). The desire for future incorporation and legalization is also the result of their past social exclusion as their experiences navigating hostile institutional contexts solidify their suspicions that legalization is required in order to be fully socially incorporated. Alternatively, those who did not pursue higher education and did not express dating preferences note that while their immigration status is a barrier to finding stable work, they do not see it as a significant barrier to all aspects of their life. This suggests that social incorporation is a complex process that evolves over time as individuals gain more opportunities for social incorporation and face more exclusionary barriers.

In addition to affecting their feelings about dating, undocumented immigration status intersects with gendered dating expectations to limit the social incorporation of undocumented men. These findings confirm that gendered dating expectations still exist in respondent’s social contexts and dating markets and have significant implications for their romantic outcomes. Specifically, men’s immigration status, and its ability to limit their jobs and financial resources, disadvantages them in the dating scene. While women struggle to negotiate dating activities that require ID, they are generally protected from exclusionary dating experiences because their gendered position means that they are not expected to drive or pay for dates. Alternatively,
men’s gendered expectation to provide is at odds with the structural vulnerability created by their immigration status; unable to live up to these gendered expectations, undocumented men have to curtail their participation. The differential dating experiences of undocumented men and women suggests that an immigrant’s social incorporation can be heavily affected by other mediating variables, such as socioeconomic status, and social locations, like gender.

My findings suggest that dating is an important aspect of social incorporation that merits future study. Assimilation theory accounts for social incorporation in addition to more structural forms of incorporation including educational, economic, and political incorporation (Alba and Nee 2003; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008). However, discussions of social incorporation focus mainly on social capital and the building of social networks, especially co-ethnic networks, to facilitate immigrant’s navigation of a new social context (Menjívar 2000; Portes and Shafer 2007; Zhou and Bankston III 1998). For 1.5 and second generation young adults, social incorporation has largely been assessed through social capital and its utility for educational achievement and advancement (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995; Valenzuela 1999; Zhou and Kim 2006). Perhaps this is because it is assumed that immigrant youth have fairly little trouble navigating social contexts due to their significant amount of socialization within the U.S. context. While the consequence of dating (i.e. marriage) has been assessed as a measure of social incorporation or assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003; Arias 2001; Feliciano et al. 2011; Gordon 1964; Telles and Ortiz 2008), few have studied immigrant’s experiences navigating dating contexts (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Thus examining dating experiences can be a fruitful means of assessing the lived experience of the social incorporation process, rather than simply observing the outcome of dating (i.e. marriage choices).
CHAPTER 5

“You Don’t Need Papers to Have a Kid” but “It’s Twice as Hard”:

The Direct and Indirect Effects of Undocumented Immigration Status on Parenthood

How am I gonna have a kid if I’m undocumented? [My family says], “You don’t need to have papers to have a kid.” And I’m like, “No, but I want to be able to give my kid a good life. And if you’re undocumented you can’t do that.” So they’re like, “So that’s why you’re not gonna have kids?” And I started thinking, “Why am I gonna have this ruin my life. I gotta fight it.” So then I decided to have a kid. – Celia Alvarez

It’s not impossible [to raise kids]. It’s just more of a struggle than what regular people would do. I notice that I do twice as much more work than a regular person does. – Ray Guzman

Both Celia Alvarez and Ray Guzman are undocumented young adults who are now settling into their lives as undocumented parents of citizen children. Discussing their experiences and feelings about being a parent, both speak directly to the impact their immigration status has had on them and their families. Specifically, Celia explains how her immigration status initially caused her to avoid having children and, in the end, also influenced her determination to finally have a child with her husband. Similarly, Ray discusses how being undocumented has limited his ability to raise his children because it forces him to work twice as hard to provide and care for his family. Their experiences, along with 29 other parents and 61 non-parents, reveal that for undocumented young adults, immigration status plays a major role in the intimate decision to have children and the personal experience of being a parent.

Popular conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood pervade individual’s lives and shape their experiences of the parenting process. Within the dominant U.S. narrative, mothering has been defined as “a socially constructed set of activities and relationships involved in nurturing and caring for people” (Forcey 1994, 357). These conceptions of motherhood are so dominant
that they have been used to frame social problems like environmental pollution, nuclear proliferation, and political terrorism and recruit women to participate in social movements combating these problems (Forcey 1994; Pardo 1998). Alternatively, fatherhood has been conceptualized as being the breadwinner and financial provider (Cherlin 1998; Lamb 1998). As a result, men tend to base their self-worth on their jobs because it allows them to meet the demands of fatherhood (Coltrane 2004; Townsend 2002). While these dominant cultural concepts are based on white, middle class values, they represent the expectations that all U.S. young adults, including undocumented young adults, are socialized to believe as they grow up exposed to U.S. institutions, narratives, and media messages (Segura 1994).

Parenting occurs in specific social contexts where parents have to operate in reaction to the dominant cultural definitions discussed above and in light of their material resources they have available to them. These resources and alternative conceptions of parenting are shaped by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender (Collins 1994). Specifically, we see that class differences can lead to differences in childrearing philosophies and that low-income parents are constrained by insufficient financial resources (Edin and Lein 1997; Kaplan 1997; Lareau 2003; Rubin 1992). Additionally, racial differences in the historical positions and stereotypes of groups can encourage them to abide by or develop new cultural conceptions on parenting roles (Landry 2000). For instance, Latinas stress their need to work to help financially support the family while also trying to secure part-time work or jobs that will allow them to care for their children (Chinchilla and Hamilton 1996; Dill 1998; Fernandez-Kelly 1990; Zavella 1987). Alternatively, immigrant woman who have left their children in the home country, or transnational mothers, seek to justify their choice by expanding definitions of motherhood to encompass both care work and breadwinning; they believe that they can only fulfill care work responsibilities (e.g.
providing clothes, food, and educational opportunities) by working in another country (Abrego 2014; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001, 2005). These racialized differences highlight the vulnerabilities of racial minorities due to negative economic and structural conditions that plague marginalized communities (Kaplan 1997; Wilson 1987). For the Mexican-origin community in particular, the restructured U.S. economy leads to the high labor force participation of Mexican-origin women, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, absence of family members who are out seeking jobs, a sense of demoralization, and leaving children in unsafe environments with limited resources (Baca Zinn and Pok 2002; Vega 1995).

This previous work demonstrates that low-income, people of color, and immigrants experience unique constraints that lead to instability and can prevent them from meeting dominant conceptions of parenthood. While previous research demonstrates how they negotiate and define parenthood in light of these constraints, we know little about how they approach decisions to have children.

While there is a significant amount of work on the gendered, economic, and racialized differences in parenthood experiences, relatively little research addresses how the limitations associated with undocumented status impact parenting experiences. Undocumented first generation immigrant parents struggle to provide for their children, accessing social resources, or spending time with children (Chang 1994; Yoshikawa 2012). Further, the structural limitations of undocumented status have implications for family reorganization as well as the lives of citizen children (Dreby 2012; Hagan et al. 2008; Human Rights Watch 2007; Menjívar 2006a). For example, Yoshikawa (2012) traces how parent’s undocumented immigration status creates economic hardship, psychological distress, bad working conditions, and limited access to good child care which has implications for children’s early cognitive development. While this is path-
breaking work, he looks at young children ages one-to-three and first generation immigrant parents who migrated at adult ages.

Building on this, I look at a wider age range of citizen children being raised by undocumented young adults who migrated to the U.S. as children. I address how this specific experience not only affects their citizen children but also how it affects family formation. To do this, I draw on Menjívar and Abrego’s (2012, 1287) concept of legal violence which they define as, “the suffering that results from and is made possible through the implementation of the body of laws that delimit and shape individuals’ lives on a routine basis.” In elucidating the effects of legal violence on undocumented families, they focus on the effects of laws which have caused a fear of immigration raids, detention, and deportation. I expand on this by looking specifically at how these forms of legal violence affect family formation decisions and experiences of parenthood for undocumented young adults.

Growing up in the U.S. without immigration status, undocumented young adults are making decisions about and experiencing parenthood in light of their history of blocked opportunities and uncertain futures (Abrego and Gonzales 2010). This is different than undocumented immigrants who migrate as adults because they may already be parents, are steeped in home country norms of parenting, and/or experience the U.S. as a more positive context for parenthood when compared to their home country. Given that the literature on legal constraints primarily address this first generation of undocumented adult immigrants, we do not know much about how undocumented 1.5 generation young adults approach and experience parenthood in light of their legal constraints, nor how this interacts with their raced, classed, and gendered positions. As a result, this chapter aims to answer the following questions: How does undocumented immigration status affect the children of undocumented young adults? How does
undocumented immigration status affect their decisions to have children? How does undocumented immigration status affect their ability to live up to dominant conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood?

I argue that undocumented immigration status has both direct and indirect effects on the parenthood experiences of undocumented young adults. Immigration status directly affects parenting experiences as this population is uniquely at risk for detention and deportation. This pushes parents to develop risk management strategies and can lead to their citizen children’s adoption of their immigration status limitations and a sense of intergenerational punishment. Secondly, immigration status indirectly affects their experiences through financial limitations which threaten their feelings of stability and impinge on their ability to meet gendered expectations placed on mothers and fathers. In this way, immigration status creates a platform within which class and gender can operate and differentiate the experiences of undocumented 1.5 generation parents. Contending with a multitude of legal exclusions, undocumented young adults are forced to navigate their immigration status as they attempt to live their lives and build families in the U.S., the only place they feel like they belong.

DIRECT EFFECTS OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION STATUS ON CHILDCARE EXPERIENCES

Undocumented immigration status can directly affect childcare experiences on both the part of the undocumented parent and the citizen child (Menjívar 2006a; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Yoshikawa 2012). Being undocumented puts parents uniquely at risk for detention and/or deportation which threatens to separate parents and children for an indeterminate amount of time. In light of these risks, parents develop new risk management strategies in order to protect their
child’s future in the United States. In addition, children absorb the limitations of their parent’s immigration status as they grow up in the shadows of their parent’s immigration status.

**Taking Fewer Risks: From Undocumented Young Adult to Undocumented Parent**

Being undocumented is inherently associated with risk-taking. Prior to having children these individuals behaved as other undocumented young adults, taking chances in order to gain access to opportunities. As parents who are now responsible for their children, they desire to take fewer risks in order to protect their and their children’s future in the United States. During this transition, undocumented immigration status intersects with their new position as parents so that they are more likely to accept and work within the limitations of their immigration status. While all undocumented young adults engage in risk management strategies, the equation changes for parents as they seek to protect their children’s future in the U.S. rather than push the boundaries to secure their own future. In this way, being undocumented deeply influences parenting as can be seen in my respondents’ shift in their approaches to work, activism, and asserting their rights.

Most of my respondents, regardless of being a parent, worry about losing their jobs and desire to switch to a better job with higher pay and/or a more flexible schedule. However, having children increases their responsibilities and, as a result, increases their aversion to risk-taking in relation to work opportunities. For example, Pablo Ortiz explains why he kept his job as a solicitor rather than accept a job offer to be a union organizer:

I was able to get a job opportunity to work with them [a labor union], but I didn’t take it. Because my baby had just came up during that summer. ... So I just didn’t want to take it because there’s a big risk of traveling. When I travel I was actually one of the so-called “randomly selected” people for them to check my fingerprints. And that was actually very scary. ... I’d rather not risk it because if I do get caught up in that thing and get deported, I can’t provide for my daughter.

Pablo, a college graduate, acted unlike many of his non-parent college-going undocumented peers who often elected to take similarly risky jobs or switch to a new, sometimes temporary, job
for a shot at better opportunities. He directly attributes this change in his outlook to the birth of his daughter and his commitment to take fewer risks in order to ensure that he will be able to remain in the U.S. and provide for her. While Pablo minimizes his risk of being deported, his decision limits his financial opportunities and the future upward mobility of his family. This shift in his and other parents’ approaches to employment suggests that entering parenthood causes undocumented young adults to prioritize remaining in the U.S. rather than pursuing more lucrative employment prospects, an act that they perceive as risky. This is uniquely different from undocumented young adults without children and low-income citizen adults who pursue better employment as a means to ensure their stability.

While only seven of the parents I interviewed had ever been involved in undocumented student organizations and/or activist work for immigration reform, those who had found that becoming parents affected their participation. For example, Aida Mendoza stepped back from one organization after becoming pregnant:

I did a lot of the rallies, I did a lot of speeches, and when we were about to take off to Sacramento they asked me [to go]. ... When I was getting ready to go was when I came out pregnant, and my husband said no. [He said,] “Before you could put yourself in danger, and if you get deported then that’s on you. ... I know that I can be back and forth and see you [in Mexico]. But now that you’re carrying my child, no, you’re not going. That’s it.” So then that’s when I stopped [going to DREAM Act events].

For most, being involved in activist rallies or events is assumed to be risky as someone might discover their undocumented status or police and immigration officials could get involved. As a result, Aida and her husband saw limiting her activism as a way to minimize her risk of deportation and protect their baby. Alternatively, Irene Correas maintained her high-levels of participation in the DREAM Act movement but found that, in some ways, her motivations had changed. While her initial involvement with her community college’s and university’s groups
were fueled by her position as an undocumented student, she found that her choice to participate in a civil disobedience action was affected by being an undocumented mother:

I knew a lot of parents that were being deported and leaving their kids behind here in the U.S. with family members. I met one little girl that was crying because her daddy was detained and she didn’t know when he was gonna come back home. And so it kind of made me think of my daughter, and now I have a son. … It made me realize the pain that all those parents go through, and I just wanted to [participate in the civil disobedience], do it to help them stop the deportations of parents and kids. I just felt that being a mom helped me understand the pain.

While being arrested during the civil disobedience technically put Irene at risk for deportation, she felt that there was actually little risk and that it helped her conquer her fears and feel safer in the long run. In this way, her participation, while risky, was a way for her to manage her long-term risk by trying to create a policy that ends low-priority deportations such as those of undocumented students and parents.32 Despite taking opposite approaches, both Aida and Irene found that their new position as mothers shifted their activism in order to decrease their risk of deportation so that they could remain with their children.

Undocumented single parents also struggle to learn if and how they can assert their parental rights. Most respondents struggle to assert their right to educational opportunities and civil protections because they did not know what rights they have access to. Yet, undocumented single parents struggle to assert the parental rights they know they have out of fear of having to reveal their immigration status when interacting with legal institutions. Tanya Diaz recounts her interactions with her son’s father regarding his child support payments:

He would give me money before but it wasn’t consistent. I’ve avoided going to court … because I don’t know how that will affect [me]. He could get mad and be like, “Well she’s not even a citizen here.” And I don’t know how that would play out in court. But it’s that fear that you don’t know. … I think it’s because he knows I can’t do anything about it. … My son’s dad would try to scare me before

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32 These activist efforts essentially paid off in the form of a new Department of Homeland Security policy for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Thus, her temporary risk did lead to a less risk in the long run.
when I was younger. He’d be like “I’m taking you to court, and I’m gonna keep my son anyways because you’re gonna get deported” and things like that.

For years Tanya has struggled to assert her right to child support out of fear that her ex-partner will reveal her status in court and carry out his threats to file for full custody of her son and deport her. While she knows she has a right to child support, she refuses to demand it in order to minimize conflict with her son’s father and reduce her risk of deportation. Sara Romero took a similar tactic with her son’s father until she reached someone at the child support office who informed her that her immigration status does not matter. She explains: “It did stop me at first, because when you call the child support offices, the first thing they ask you for is, ‘Okay, what’s your social security number?’ And you’re like, ‘Really? Great.’ But they told me you don’t have to worry because it’s not going for you, it’s going for him [my son].” After multiple phone calls and consulting with her friends and family members, Sara found out that she could assert her right to child support despite her immigration status. Armed with this information, she felt it safe enough to demand her son’s father meet this responsibility knowing that it would not increase her risk for deportation. This suggests that undocumented young adult parents seek out multiple sources of information in order to decide whether an action would put them at increased risk of deportation. Their position as parents encourages them to develop behavior that specifically limits the risk of deportation when asserting their rights.

**Intergenerational Punishment: The Transfer of Undocumented Status to Citizen Children**

As undocumented young adults adjust their risk-management strategies to their new positions as parents, they also find that the limitations of their undocumented immigration status can transfer to their citizen children. Specifically, this occurs in relation to the threat of detention and deportation which in theory only affects those who are themselves undocumented. However, children’s dependence on their parents means that their parent’s immigration status directly
affects their lives, particularly in connection to issues of deportation threats and limited physical mobility.

**The Specter of Deportation**

Deportation is one of the clearest negative repercussions that haunt undocumented immigrants in their daily lives and one of the main sources of legal violence. While my interviewees worry about deportation, few have intimately experienced its consequences through the deportation of family members and/or friends. For most, deportation is a danger that haunts them through constant media coverage of workplace raids, separated families, and rising deportation statistics. While they develop strategies for minimizing the risk of deportation, they also have to negotiate discussions of deportation with their children and assess how their deportation might affect their children. Through these conversations, fear of deportation becomes an intergenerational concern of both undocumented parents and citizen children.

Parents’ choice to discuss the possibility of deportation with their children depends on what they feel will best protect their children from fear in the long run. For instance, Janet Godinez explains that she talks to her children about it because she wants to prepare them in case she or her husband is taken into immigration custody and/or deported:

> With my kids what I've been telling them is that in case something happens and I don’t go for them at school, to stay in school. Don’t come home, or don’t run away. Don’t get scared, just be in school, or whatever place you are, stay there until I come back. Or if you guys see someone that you know, go to them. ... I see that they get sad. And they get thinking about it, but then I tell them, we hope that nothing happens to us.

Talking to her children, Janet sets out an emergency action plan so that her children are prepared and know what to do in case she is detained. While this saddens her younger children, she believes that it affects her pre-teen son more because he understands what she is talking about and sees it as a real possibility since he watches the stories about deported parents on the news.
Despite the temporary fear or sadness these discussions bring to her children, she believes that this is the most responsible way to protect her children from danger in the future. Alternatively, some parents like Norma Mercado believe that it is best to not discuss her undocumented status or deportability with her children in order to protect them from this fear and sadness. “I really don’t tell them much of my situation because I don’t want them to carry that burden with themselves. ... I knew since I was little that I didn’t have papers and that I couldn’t go anywhere. My parents would say, ‘We can’t go there because immigration will come.’ So I don’t want them to be scared [like I was].” Seeking to give her children an unburdened childhood, Norma believes that it is in their best interest to protect them from the fear and sadness that comes with thinking about deportation or the barriers that arise because of her undocumented status. This emanates from her own experiences as a child and also from her belief that she is unlikely to be deported. Like other parents, both Janet and Norma struggle with when and how to discuss issues of immigration status and deportation with their children. Despite opposite approaches, both seek to protect their children from the dangers brought about by their undocumented status.

Regardless of their approach, children come to share their parents fear of deportation either due to these preemptive discussions or in the event that deportation occurs.

While these conversations can be tough for children at first, many parents find that their children respond in resilient and supportive ways. For example, Martha Sandoval recounts her daughter’s reactions over time:

My daughter doesn’t like to talk about that. … I’m afraid when I think about it. Before I never liked to talk about it until I started hearing [about it] on the news. … So, I tell my daughter, if something ever happens to me like that, you're gonna be okay. … She asks me questions. Or … she comes to me, “Mom, my little friend told me her mom was undocumented too. That’s so cool. We both get to spend vacation together.” She’s so positive about it. She is my strength. Even though I don’t tell her [this], sometimes she has very wise answers for things that I sometimes don’t understand.
While initial conversations were uncomfortable for both her and her daughter, Martha finds that continuing the conversation helped them both work through their fears. As a result, her daughter has become so comfortable with it that she has bonded with friends over their parent’s shared immigration status and their shared inability to travel outside of Los Angeles. Martha even draws strength from her daughter’s cheerful reactions and innocent understandings. In this way, discussions with children can help parents process their feelings about their immigration status as well as help children work through their fears. While these conversations have positive outcomes and can counter fear, they still ensure that deportation remains an intergenerational concern, one that other fully documented families do not have to navigate.

During these discussions children often assert that they will go with their parents in the event of their deportation. For instance, Victoria Sandoval explains her children’s views: “They say, ‘We’re going with you. We’re gonna tell them [immigration], ‘We want to go with our mom because she’s the only one that we have. We cannot stay with anyone else. We have nobody else but our mom.’” So yeah, they back me up. My kids are so sweet.” Innocently children assume that they will be able to go with their parents and most parents assume that they will take their children with them. This suggests that in addition to the shared fear of deportation, there is the actual potential for intergenerational deportation as citizen children assert that they will self-deport and follow their undocumented parents to countries both of them barely know.

Only one of the parents I interviewed had experienced the deportation of a partner. In this case, Flor Vega’s ex-partner was deported shortly after their daughter was born. Her daughter was only a few months old when this happened and so does not really understand deportation or feel the effect of having a parent taken from her. Yet, Flor explains that her ex-partner had helped her financially prior to being deported and her daughter lost a chance at having a father
because of deportation: “She asks for her dad and I don’t lie to her. She knows where her dad is. She knows her dad is in Mexico and knows that he’s not with me. … Sometimes she’ll see another little girl with her dad and her mom and she’ll ask me, ‘Where’s my dad?’ I want her to live with both of her parents too, but she can’t.” In this case, Flor’s daughter lost a chance at knowing her father and having him be a part of her life because of deportation. If this had happened later in life it is likely that she would experience increased fear of deportation, emotional harm, and psychological distress (Capps et al. 2007; Dreby 2012; Hagan et al. 2008).

While deportation is not a central experience in my respondents’ lives, it is a growing concern in other areas with growing anti-immigrant policies. Specifically, this includes the growth of police reporting undocumented immigrants to Immigration and Customs Enforcement and placing them in deportation proceedings as part of the Department of Homeland Security’s Secure Communities 287g program (Armenta 2011). These policies have not only separated families through deportation but also placed thousands of children in foster care and even removed the parental rights of deported immigrants (NYU School of Law 2012; O’Neill 2012). This reality haunts the daily lives of these mixed status families as they share their feelings and plans for dealing with deportation.

**Driving and Physical Mobility**

Given children’s dependence upon parents, especially at younger ages, their physical mobility is tightly interwoven with that of their parents. As a result, citizen children are highly affected by their parents’ exposure to detention and deportation when driving in local areas or traveling to farther, more unfamiliar, or dangerous places. This not only leads to traumatizing experiences for children, but can limit educational and social opportunities as well.
Driving without a license is a constant negotiation for all of my respondents, regardless of whether they have children or not. However, having children often complicates decisions to drive as this puts children at risk for the traumatizing experience of interacting with police and having a car towed. For example, Cruz Vargas talks about limiting his driving when he has his one-year-old son in the car. He explains, “What am I supposed to do if I get pulled over and I have my son? Some cops don’t care. They’re like, ‘So? Take your son out and go walk.’ My son doesn’t deserve that. My son’s done nothing wrong to deserve that. I wasn’t born and was like, ‘Ehhh, I don’t wanna have papers.’, you know?” Like most respondents, Cruz is fully aware of the risks involved in driving without a license and that his undocumented immigration status can have consequences for his citizen son. He goes further and insists that this is completely unfair for his son who has done nothing wrong and suggests that his son is being punished for his father’s undocumented status. As a result, the punishment for being undocumented – having your car towed and being left on the side of the road – has become intergenerational and extends de facto to citizens.

The application of this particular punishment can also lead to intergenerational trauma. For example, Janet Godinez recounts having her car taken away while her children were with her:

They told me that since I don’t have a drivers license, they were gonna take away my car. And they see my kids crying because they were taking the car. But they don’t care at all. … I had blankets [and clothes] because I was gonna go wash [at the Laundromat]. And they told me, “Since your situation [with having your kids with you], I’m gonna, under the table, let you take out stuff [even though I’m not supposed to].” … Then my kids start[ed] crying when they were taking the car in the [tow] truck. And then the cops told me. … “Well, we’re gonna take you home.”

In Janet’s case, the police were particularly helpful and went against two standing policies, letting her take the laundry out of her car and then driving her family the few blocks to their
house. She feels that this was because of the fear and tears of her 12-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter. Despite the slightly positive outcome of this interaction with the police, she feels that she and her children were traumatized and confused by this event.

Children reacted to the limitations of driving without a license in a variety of ways, including helping their parents avoid police and checkpoints. Alicia Media explains how her eleven-year-old daughter has come to understand her mother’s fear of being pulled over when driving: “Now she understands many of the things I can't do. When I'm driving, she understands. She helps me. She says, 'Pull over to the side mommy. Over there I see a police car.' She alerts me to dangers that come with driving without a license.”33 In this way, her citizen daughter has adopted her mother’s vigilance and taken it upon herself to help her mother. As a result, citizen children come to adopt a similar outlook to their parents – avoiding and villainizing police officers. This then fosters an intergenerational cycle of fear and vigilant driving, even when citizen children are driving legally. For example, during my fieldwork I had a conversation with Ally, Nancy Ortega’s 20-year-old sister who was born in the U.S. She explains,

Watching them makes me drive carefully as well [as be] a bit scared of cops. Because they may not have shown it, but they were scared. ... But I do drive faster then them. I’m careful but I know the different consequences- for me it’s a ticket, for them, [a] car being towed. [But] checkpoints it does make me be more aware [than my friends] so I can let them [my family] know if there is any.

While she recognizes the distinctly different consequences for herself as a licensed driver and her unlicensed family members, Ally has still adopted their hyper-vigilant driving practices – driving cautiously, being afraid of police, and making a note of checkpoints. In this way, licensed citizen children may share the driving fears and practices of their undocumented parents and come to

33 Translated from: “Entonces ella comprende muchas cosas que no puede. O cuando manejaba, ella entendía. Me ayudaba. Como dices, ‘Volteaba por un lado, Mami. Por allá se mira una patrulla.’ So ella me alertaba en los peligros que trae pues si andas manejando sin licencia.”
share parts of their undocumented immigration status. In addition, this can take a psychological
toll on the children, adding stress and fear that other citizen children are not forced to deal with.

While parents fear these interactions with police and the potential consequences, they
also struggle with explaining to their children why they did not have licenses. For instance,
breaking the law by driving without a license presents a problem when parents attempt to teach
their children to follow the rules and obey the law. Tanya Diaz explains her ten-year-old son’s
reaction to her driving without a license:

He jokes around, “I can’t be in the car with you because you don’t have a
license.” He’s a law-abiding citizen. “Mom that’s not right, you’re driving
without a license, I can’t be in the car with you mom.” I’m like, “Fine, get out”.
But things like that he doesn’t understand it too much. … I feel like a hypocrite,
“Here son, follow rules, while I’m gonna break them.” It’s hard to teach that to
him. So I’m sure he’s confused. Is it wrong or isn’t it wrong? We’ll see when he
gets older how it affects him.

In this case, Tanya and her son are teasing each other but it has real implications for how they
feel about themselves in relation to the law. Tanya explains they she herself feels like a hypocrite
and that it is frustrating to try to teach her son to follow a system of laws that she believes in but
is forced to break because of her immigration status. Additionally, she worries that this my have
implications for her son’s relation to the law in the future – Will he drive without a license? Will
he follow the laws or become a criminal even if he doesn’t have to? This suggests that citizen
children could adopt oppositional stances to the law because they see how it unfairly treats their
parents or that their parents do not follow it.

Related to a fear of driving and the threat of deportation, undocumented immigrants have
limited physical mobility and are insecure when traveling outside of their immediate
neighborhood; they automatically pass this limited mobility on to their children. For example,
Martha Sandoval explained that she did not think being undocumented would affect her children until they started going to school and interacting with children who had citizen parents:

I was like, “Oh my god. I can’t offer them what other people could offer them.” Like when my daughter started going to preschool. … My daughter right now, she’s telling me, “My friend is gonna go here for vacations. They’re gonna go to San Francisco. They’re gonna go here. When am I gonna go?” And I do tell her … [I can’t take her because I don’t have papers]. She tells me, “Mommy, don’t worry. You’re a good mom, I love you. I don’t care if I can’t go. When I grow older, I’ll be able to go with my friends. Or I’m gonna find a way to help you out and you're gonna come with me.”

Many of the other parents I interviewed report similar conversations with their citizen children about their friend’s vacations and why they do not go to Mexico or travel to local vacation destinations like San Diego or Sea World. For many, these questions are similar to those they asked their own parents as young children and were one of the ways that they began to learn the limitations of their own undocumented status. In this way, the limitations of undocumented immigration status that are learned by undocumented young adults as children are passed on to their citizen children as they learn that they are still different from their citizen peers who have documented or citizen parents.

While this inability to travel appears superficial, parents long to take their children to San Diego or the Sea World theme park so that their children can fit in with their peers and also to open their children’s eyes to new opportunities and expose them to new places. Not being able to drive or travel limits their children’s development of cultural and social capital. For example, Estefania Gutierrez explains, “Being able to drive my son to school would be huge. And basically taking him to wherever he needs to go [like to] after school programs.” Knowing the importance of academic enrichment, Estefania longs to provide her son with these opportunities but is unable to because driving presents a direct risk to remaining in the U.S. Similarly, Nancy

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34 San Diego is recognized as a common place to avoid because of its proximity to the US-Mexico border and the existence of permanent checkpoints on major freeways connecting Los Angeles and San Diego.
Ortega explains why it is important to her that her two- and four-year-old sons be able to travel both in and outside of the United States: “So they can see other places. Learn different customs and traditions. Not [only] to San Diego [but] all around, especially in third-world countries. That way they can see how easy they have it but also give them that desire to one day help [others].” In this case physical mobility and traveling become a key means of educating and raising her sons so that they become successful and responsible men. As undocumented parents, she and her husband struggle with providing their sons with these opportunities, thus compromising their children’s current physical mobility and possibly their future social and economic mobility.

Being unable to provide these opportunities to their children highlights a disjuncture between the visions their own parents had for them when they migrated. As children, my respondents were all brought to the United States filled with American dreams. For some, like Luis Escobar, this dream took the shape of Disneyland – a wonderful place full of magical opportunities. He says, “When you are a younger kid you come to the U.S. and it looks like this. You think you're gonna walk into the magic castle and Mickey [Mouse] is going to greet you and pat you in the back and it wasn’t like that.” As they grew up, the reality of being undocumented set in and shadowed all aspects of their lives. As they start their own families and raise their own children, these unrealized dreams haunt them as they see the limitations that their immigration status has also placed on their citizen children. Not being able to financially afford a trip to Disneyland or physically take them to Sea World fills them with disappointment as another generation is limited by immigration laws.

I find that undocumented immigration status directly affects the experiences of both undocumented young adult parents and their citizen children. This population’s unique risk for detention and deportation forces these parents to develop new risk-management strategies that
prioritize family unity and place these mixed-status families at risk for intergenerational fear, punishment, trauma, and deportation. In this way, we see that legal violence applies not only to those targeted by the laws but also to individuals who are close to members in the targeted population. Given that four million citizen children are in mixed-status households, there is a significant amount of legal violence happening to citizen children of immigrants (Passel and Cohn 2009). In addition, these risk-management strategies suggest that the legal violence committed by immigration laws has implications for the daily navigational tactics of undocumented parents.

**DECISIONS TO HAVE KIDS OR NOT: UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION STATUS AND FEELINGS OF STABILITY**

While we might expect that the limitations and legal violence imposed on undocumented parents would affect their children’s lives, I also find that undocumented immigration status directly affects undocumented young adults’ decisions to have children. Given the general population’s tendency to seek out financial, emotional, and relationship stability prior to starting families (Benzies et al. 2006; Proudfoot et al. 2009; Tough et al. 2011), it makes sense that the blocked opportunities and feelings of uncertainty experienced by these undocumented young adults affect their decisions and feelings about parenthood. Drawing on the experiences of the six parents who planned their pregnancies, the feelings of twenty-five parents who were faced with unplanned pregnancies, and the childbearing plans of sixty-one individuals who do not yet have children, I find that undocumented immigration status creates unique feelings of instability which limit this populations ability to feel prepared to have children. Attempting to counter the sense of uncertainty and lack of secure employment caused by their undocumented status, these
individuals justify their childbearing decisions through narratives of stability brought on by romantic notions of partnership and financial preparedness.

**Emotional Preparedness: Uncertainty vs. “It Was Time”**

Many respondents, especially those without children, assert that their immigration status directly discourages them having children because of the uncertainty it places on their lives. The impact of immigration status on these decisions emerges clearly in Daniela Sanchez’s emotional recounting of how her immigration status forced her to make the difficult decision to have an abortion. She explains that while she believes in a woman’s right to choose, she never imagined she would choose to have an abortion. Upon finding out that she was pregnant, she explains that her immigration status played a large role in her final decision to have an abortion:

> For me, in my [undocumented] situation, what I had to offer, I felt like there’s no way [I could have a baby]. … It was the hardest thing [having an abortion] I’ve done so far within myself. … I don’t know if I’m being selfish or if I’m just being honest as I can. … I feel it would be too irresponsible of me to bring somebody into this world where I’m not ready. … Just being undocumented, any situation it just makes it a little harder for anything. When you’re dealing with your own life, you work it through. But when you have somebody else and … their life is depending on you, you can’t just be [like], “Oh we’ll just see what happens.” … I don’t think women that are undocumented shouldn’t have kids; I’m just saying for me personally.

Daniela was the only respondent who talked about having an abortion but her experience is revealing because she actively choose not to have her child because of her immigration status.

Forced to make a decision that she sometimes regrets and feels guilty about, she believes that she needed to make that decision to protect both her future, as she is enrolled in college, and the baby’s wellbeing since she felt it would have been drawn into a world of uncertainty due to her immigration status. As a result, being undocumented can place individuals between a rock and a hard place as they tackle the decision to have a baby; they see the uncertainty of their undocumented lives as presenting limitations to both their and their baby’s futures. While
Daniela refers to an uncertain future with limited opportunities, others use uncertainty to refer to the possibility of deportation and their uncertain ability to remain in the U.S. to raise their children. Many long for the certainty and safety of legalization before having children.

While this uncertainty deters many from having children, there are six individuals, two men and four women, who consciously decided to have children and planned their first pregnancies in spite of their immigration status. All of these individuals are in married or committed relationships and feel they had met the other life goals they had set for themselves, usually achieving their desired education level. In this position, they felt that they should start building the family life they had always envisioned for themselves. Luis Escobar explains how he navigated this decision:

[I kept telling my wife], “I don’t want to have a baby.”… [But then I thought] if I had papers, how do I see myself? I was like, I definitely see myself with a baby by 29. ... I want to be able to retire, be old [and] have my grandkids. ... That’s how I see my life. ... [But] that fear and guilt feeling [from being undocumented] was preventing me from having the future that I wanted. So even with that guilt feeling it was like, I want that future. ... I don’t want that fear [of being undocumented] that I had growing up … to affect my future even more.

Luis’ initial reaction to having children was much like Daniela’s above. His undocumented status had limited him as he struggled to attend and graduate from college and as he continually turned down job advancement opportunities. These experiences cemented the notion that his immigration status would inevitably affect his children and so he avoided having a child. He allowed these emotions to dictate his decisions until he reached the age at which he had previously assumed he would have children. At this point he made a conscious choice to not let his immigration status prevent him from achieving the family life he desired. A similar feeling is reflected in a different way in the family planning decisions of Nancy Ortega, a community college graduate. Nancy explains that after five years of living with her partner, “We decided it
was time. ... [because we] just felt like we wanted a baby with that person.” In this way, she and her husband decided to not let their immigration status limit them and their desires to start a family together. She relies on romantic notions to justify this decision. These romantic notions of marriage and family formation are what also led other women to begin planning to have children after a year or two of marriage, simply because it was the expected result of marriage.

While undocumented young adults may share Daniela’s feelings of uncertainty, their participation in committed relationships and their progression along the life course force them to re-evaluate their feelings about having children while being undocumented. In most cases, they choose to rely on their personal desire to start a family to justify their decisions. They then seek to mediate the financial limitations of their immigration status as best they can.

**Financial Preparedness: Jobs, Savings, and Education**

In addition to the feelings of uncertainty, most respondents assert that their undocumented status directly affects their childbearing decisions because it determines their financial stability. They find that their undocumented status produces limited job opportunities and financial instability due to legal limitations to working, including lacking a valid social security number. Specifically, their undocumented immigration status forces them to limit their job prospects to minimum wage work because these are easier to secure without proper documentation and there is a low risk of being identified as undocumented. These navigation strategies effectively prevent their advancement into well-paying, stable careers. Cesar Paredes explains the connection between the two: “They go hand-in-hand because most people that have high-paying jobs are legalized. ... They don’t necessarily go hand-in-hand 100% of the time, but maybe 97% of the time they do.” Most of my respondents’ experiences resonate with Cesar’s assertion as they occupy low-wage jobs, regardless of their educational attainment. In addition,
most of the respondents who do not have children but are in committed partnerships assert that this was due to a lack of financial stability. While these financial concerns are shared by documented, low-income adults who struggle to piece together financial resources (Edin and Lein 1997), undocumented young adults experience more precarious employment situations and are limited in their ability to search out new jobs or switch employers. This tightly intertwined nature of financial stability and immigration status demonstrates that undocumented status indirectly affects childbearing decisions through financial instability.

Given the connection between undocumented status and financial instability, parents who did not plan their children often felt unprepared because they had not made plans to combat their financial instability. For example, Abby Ortiz, who has been with her husband for five years, did not react to her recent pregnancy as happily as would be expected:

I just found out I’m pregnant like two weeks ago. I wanna give my child a better future and … [because of that, I] cry about it. I’m more aware of it [my immigration status] now than before. … I know that an education it’s a lot better, you know? And I could provide for my kid better. ... It kind of puts me feeling kind of blue.

Talking more about her pregnancy, Abby worries about her lack of education, she recently got a GED and was planning on starting community college, and her inability to financially provide for her child in the event that her husband cannot care for the family. She feels that this might be a real concern in light of his past history with drug abuse. As a result, she feels unprepared, and often depressed, about her pregnancy due to her financially unstable household. Similarly, Victoria Sandoval reflects back on her unplanned children, the first of which led her to leave high school without graduating. She says, “I think it would’ve been better if I would’ve planned it. I don’t know, maybe a different future for them and for myself … Maybe a better education, better job. … not going through what I’m going through now.” Victoria did not have these
worries when she initially became pregnant and was living with her children’s father. Yet, she has grown to understand the impact of her immigration status due to her more recent experiences as a single mother with recurring bouts of unemployment due to employers growing use of the federal E-verify program which checks applicants’ immigration status. As a result, she, like Abby, longs for a better job in order to provide for her children. In this way, undocumented immigration status can affect parent’s feelings about their pregnancy both during and after the fact as it jeopardizes their ability to build stable households for their children.

Attempting to avoid the feelings of instability Abby and Victoria discuss, undocumented young adults who planned their pregnancies devised specific strategies to assert a sense of financial stability. For example, Adan Olivera says that he knew he was ready to start having children with his wife “because she was the one. I wanted to be with her my whole life and I wanted her to be the mother of my children.” While he centers the romantic notions of family planning discussed above, Adan also admits that he felt ready, “Because I had a job and I was going to be able to support both of them.” In this way, we see a glimpse in which his undocumented status could have delayed his plan if his status had prevented him from acquiring a stable, well-paying job. In his case, he had been able to secure a well-paying, managerial job where he felt financially stable. For those who did not feel as comfortable in their employment situation, they tried to prepare a financial cushion prior to having their children. For example, Nancy Ortega, who worked in an auto insurance office, and her husband, who was working at a factory, both made below minimum wage when they were planning to have their first baby. To account for this, Nancy explains that they, “Tried to save up as much as we possibly could” in order to feel ready. It is likely that Nancy and her husband’s experience is more representative of undocumented young adults than Adan’s as their jobs and household income are more in line
with the low-wage work of my other respondents. By including financial preparation in their family planning decisions, my respondents decision making processes are no different than their citizen peers; however, their immigration status presents a clear obstacle as it can affect their decisions by limiting their ability to obtain well paying jobs, build savings, and feel financially prepared.

Those respondents who do not yet have children explain that they are working on building up their financial stability so that they will be financial prepared at the point when they are emotionally prepared to have children. For those who are not pursuing a higher education, they plan to continue working and saving money or to find additional jobs. For those pursuing a higher education, they believe that their financial stability hinges on educational achievement. They see education as a means to secure upward mobility and so its achievement is a precursor to child-bearing. Cesar Paredes, who is attending a 4-year university, explains, “I wish I were more financially stable to have a kid. ... I plan to have children … after I’ve graduated from law school and hopefully have a stable, high-paying job for them to have everything that I didn’t have as a kid.” All the undocumented college students I interviewed believe that a higher education will secure them a stable and high-paying job and allow them to provide for their future children. While this may not necessarily be true given the inability of many undocumented college graduates to fully utilize their degrees, most expect that they will be able to find a job that will hire them despite their status or that they will be able to legalize their status in the future. Similar to the general population who pursues higher education, many see education as a means to securing future financial stability and becoming prepared to have children (Wu and MacNeill 2003).
The lives of undocumented young adults are inherently unstable due to their uncertain futures in the United States and the financial insecurity created by limited employment opportunities. They contend with these emotional and financial instabilities when making decisions about having children and devise means to justify their decisions in response. While these types of concerns have been recorded in the childbearing decisions of the general population (Benzies et al. 2006; Tough et al. 2011), the limitations of undocumented immigration status make these decisions unique. These feelings of emotional and financial instability reflect the ways in which immigration enforcement policies like E-verify not only do legal violence to the employment experiences of undocumented young adults but also have implications for other parts of their lives, in this case their family formation decisions.

**BEING “GOOD” MOTHERS AND FATHERS: INDIRECT EFFECTS OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION STATUS**

While undocumented status directly affects experiences of parenthood and decisions to have children, I find that it also indirectly affects undocumented young adults’ personal feelings about being a parent. Specifically, gender emerges to play a strong, intersecting role in determining how parents feel about their positions as mothers and fathers. Traditional gender norms dictate that to be a good father men should be breadwinners who provide for the basic needs of their families while women must spend time with and care for their children (Cherlin 1998; Forcey 1994; Ladd-Taylor 1994; Lamb 1998; Leonard 1996). While these popular conceptions are based on White, middle-class norms, subsequent generations of immigrants internalize these definitions as they assimilate (Segura 1994). The acculturation of my respondents exposes and encourages them to adopt these dominant narratives about gender roles and parenting expectations. As undocumented young men and women seek to meet these
gendered parenting expectations, fathers in particular find that their undocumented status impedes their ability to measure up. While most women felt like good mothers, a few find that their undocumented status prevents them from fulfilling their caretaker role because of financial and employment limitations. Overall, this suggests that undocumented status has a large impact on financial resources which can then impinge upon undocumented parents’ ability to meet gendered parenting expectations.

**Undocumented Fatherhood: Struggling to Be Providers**

The undocumented fathers I interviewed often talk about their children with tinges of guilt. Luis Escobar speaks directly about the guilt he feels and how it is connected to gendered expectations of the male provider:

I have my wife and I have my baby and I'm still [supposed to be] perceived as this male provider [who’s] strong. And the fact that we lost our place, and now I'm [living] with my in-laws, and it's hard to find a great paying job. And I have this uncertain future for myself. ... It makes you feel guilty that you have a family and that you have a baby. It makes you feel guilty that you are trying to live life. It makes you feel like [people are saying], “How dare you do that to a little child. The child doesn’t deserve this reality.” It’s hard because you do feel guilty, you feel that you're punishing someone that shouldn’t be punished. You don’t feel that its society’s fault, you feel that it’s your fault because that’s who you are.

Reflecting on his inability to fulfill society’s expectations for him as a father, Luis feels like a failure. His undocumented status prevents him from pursuing more lucrative work opportunities and maintaining a stable living situation for his family. As a result, he cannot fulfill the provider role which is expected of him and which he expects of himself. Having recently been forced to quit one of his jobs and move his wife and daughter into a trailer behind his father-in-law’s house, he struggles to see himself as a good father. In order to claim this title he has to literally make an exception for his inability to provide saying: “When you put all of our restrictions aside, which is money, life, car, and bills, ... I feel like I'm the best father ever.” He recognizes that his
situation is due to his undocumented status and that is out of his control and not a reflection of who he is as a person; yet, he still feels guilty and judged by others for deciding to have a baby with his wife. Similarly, Ray Guzman reports that he feels “worthless” because he is unable to secure a stable job and consistently provide for his two young children:

As a father, I feel worthless. ...What I mean by worthless is that I have no record of me working. I have no record of me paying any type of bills or anything... I’m 28 and when I go apply for something for my kids or [at their] school or anything, they want to know what I’m doing [for work]. They look at me a lot different, they tell me, “Oh, well you’re not doing nothing. How do you provide for your family?” Well I do side jobs. And they say, “Well you don’t have a stable income”. ... I feel like I’m handicap[ped] in some way, you know? I don’t know how to bypass that.

Similar to Luis, Ray explains that he is being judged by others for not having a stable job or providing for his children. While he is involved in their lives, picking them up from school and sometimes volunteering in their classroom or with the PTA, he is dismissed by others as a bad provider and worthless father because he can only find intermittent work as a handyman. Mothers with similar experiences do not report a sense of judgment or worthlessness when they are unemployed or underemployed.

Unlike Luis and Ray, Adan Olivera explains that he feels that his undocumented status does not affect his ability to provide for his children or be a good father: “I take them places like Disneyland, to the park. I buy them anything that I didn’t have. My dad couldn’t afford buying me toys every time we go out. And every time we go out we’ll just buy them something, either small or big they don’t care as long as it’s something. ... They make you feel like you love them and they make you feel like they love you.” Like the others, Adan adopts the gendered definition of fatherhood as provider and finds that he is able to live up to these expectations because he has been able to find himself a well-paying, stable job as a salaried office employee at a large company. Due to his stable income he is able to provide for the basic needs of his wife and two
children as well as afford a few extra luxuries that he did not have as a child. Despite his insistence that immigration status does not affect his ability to be a good father he admits that it would be a lot harder to do so if he had a different job, one more like his undocumented friends, “Because it would be not providing me enough money.” In this way, Adan’s, and most of the men’s ability to see themselves as a good father, is tightly tied to their jobs and their ability to find a well-paying job that will ignore their undocumented immigration status. Adan was one of the lucky fathers who was able to achieve this and so is able to position himself as a stable provider and “good” father to his children.

**Undocumented Motherhood: Struggling to be Caretakers**

While many of the fathers I interviewed struggle with their position as “good” fathers, most of the mothers feel like they are “good” mothers because they care for and spend time with their children. For example, Sylvia Cortez defines herself as a good mother because “[I] take care of him, you know, raise him as a good boy [to] be respectful with other people, … be there for him when he is sick.” Unlike most of the fathers, a majority of mothers feel that they are able to live up to these requirements despite their undocumented immigration status. They strongly believe that being undocumented does not prevent them from properly raising their children. However, a few found that their undocumented status presents limitations that prevent them from living up to these expectations.

Buying into the definition of mothering as caretaking, Aida Mendoza categorizes herself as a mother in need of improvement because her undocumented status has prevented her from getting a job, effectively limiting her family’s financial resources and thus her ability to be a good mother. She gives an example from when her son was sick:

[If I were documented] I could’ve had a better job, could’ve been able to provide a lot for him [my son]. ... Just recently he got very sick. He needed a humidifier
and we had to look around with people that we knew to see who could lend it to us. ... It breaks my heart that I can’t do anything for him because we don’t have that extra money. But if we had two good checks … obviously it does make you a better mother being able to provide.

In this case, Aida does talk about mothering as providing; however, she is not referring to providing in the traditional sense but rather as being able to provide medical care to her sick baby. In this way, being undocumented can prevent undocumented women from feeling like they were good mothers if their financial situations prevent them from being able to fulfill their caretaker role. Similarly, Sara Romero reports that her mother has used these same expectations to define her as a bad mother to her toddler son:

Sometimes my mom would be like, “You’re a bad mom because all you care about is work and on your days off all you want to do is sleep.” And it’s like well I have to get home and be a mom. He wakes up in the middle of the night when he gets hungry. ... You know how it’s hard to go back to sleep or you’re falling asleep and getting comfortable and he wakes up early in the morning and I get home like 3:30 at night.

As an undocumented single mother, Sara struggles to meet the gendered caring expectations set forth for mothers. Her mom specifically suggests that she should focus more on spending time with her son than on working to support him financially. In this case, her dual responsibilities as provider and caretaker are jeopardized as her undocumented immigration status forces her to take the only stable job she could find – working nights at a bar and nightclub. Despite being able to provide for her son, something Luis and Ray struggle to do, she is judged to be a “bad” mother because her job limits her ability to perform her expected parenting role.

Generally restricted to low-wage work with little flexibility or opportunities for time off, undocumented mothers also found that their jobs limit their ability to be the actively involved parents that they wanted to be. Irene Correas explains how her job working in a coffee shop
affects her ability to participate in her children’s lives and provide them with educational opportunities:

Whenever they have asked us to volunteer in their schools, we can’t because we have to go to work. We have long working hours, and so we can’t really participate in her school as much as we want to. So it [our undocumented status] affects us in that way. For example, right now with the summer camps, they’re so expensive that we want her to be active but we can’t really pay the tuition.

Irene links her employment opportunities directly to her undocumented immigration status explaining that her job does not pay enough nor provide the flexible hours she would need in order to provide educational opportunities to her six year old daughter. Seeking to avoid these limitations, Delia Trujillo elected to switch jobs, taking a job selling cookware door-to-door rather than work in a factory. She says, “In this job, if you sell, what you [used to] make all week you can make in two days. You don’t have to spend 40 hours making it, but it’s a risk. It’s not definite. I like it … because I can take care of my kids. Because I can have time for them, their sports and everything.”

While her job pays much less and she struggles to financially support her four children, she is able to accompany them to a variety of extracurricular activities in the afternoons. Comparing the experiences of Irene and Delia demonstrates that undocumented status can limit a mother’s ability to both make the money they need to support their children while also actively involving themselves in their educational and extracurricular activities. Making these hard decisions, they often feel that they are falling short.

**Gendered Parenting Expectations and Decisions to Apply for Immigration Status**

These gendered parenting expectations also contribute to each eligible parent’s decision to apply to legalize his or her status through a citizen partner. Contrary to popular belief, the

35 Translated from: “En este trabajo, si vendes, lo que ganaste en toda la semana lo puedes ganar en dos días. No tienes que estar 40 horas para ganarte eso, pero eso es un riesgo, que no es seguro. ... Me gusta por el tiempo, porque yo puedo atender a mis hijos. Porque puedo tener tiempo para ellos, para su deporte y todo.”

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process of legalizing one’s status through marriage is complex and for most applicants, it includes returning to the country of origin to file the petition and potentially facing a 10-year bar from re-entering the United States. As a result, decisions to apply for legal status require the individual to weigh the benefits of legal status with the reality of spending months to years petitioning for approval and then applying to lift the 10-year bar and risking rejection and exile for 10 years. Faced with this, the nine mothers and fathers in my sample who have citizen partners weighed their gendered parenting expectations and use them to justify their reason for applying for legal status or not.

Consider the negative responses of Jessica Martinez and Cruz Vargas to a question about whether they would apply for legal status:

*Jessica:* When I was going to go [to Mexico] for my [immigration] interview, I was going to take him [my son] … because I don’t want to be away from him. … I guess what stopped me [from going] was him. Because even though he was smaller, I was like, “I can’t be without my son.” That’s when I didn’t know if I was going to be approved [to lift the 10-year bar] or not.

*Cruz:* It’s not that I don’t want to do it, but it’s like it’s not that easy. It’s more complex when it comes to an undocumented person marrying a documented person. … Either they’re gonna be like, “Oh, gimme a bunch of money.” [But I need to] actually pay what I need to pay right now and take care of what I need to take care of.

Aware of the 10-year bar and the expenses associated with applications, Jessica and Cruz both conclude that they will not apply, despite their increased desire for the security of legal status now that they have children. Despite the same conclusion, they come to it for opposite gendered reasons. While Jessica is concerned about the possibility of deportation, she sees facing the 10-year bar as a sort of de facto deportation since she will potentially have to leave her son for either a short or extended period of time. Initially intending to take him with her and then deciding not to risk a possible denial of her petition, her decisions were dictated by popular conceptions of
motherhood where a good mother is expected to physically care for her child. Alternatively, Cruz is concerned about money and providing for his family’s current and future financial needs; he is aware that applying for legal status will compromise his present finances and jeopardize his ability to provide in the future if he is in Mexico for a long period of time. This suggests that while children increases one’s desire to legalize, gendered expectations of caring and providing for their children temper their reactions to the potential risks of this process.

The experiences of the four individuals who legalized their status after having children further reveals the gendered nature of this negotiation. Compare the experiences of Nicolas Fernandez and Blanca Marin who choose to risk petitioning the 10-year bar in Mexico after having children:

Nicolas: [My girlfriend got pregnant and] I guess it was more like, “Oh, I should get my stuff straightened out cause I don’t want you to be struggling.” So I can work and help support the family now. ... The worst part [about being in Mexico was] … not being with him [my son]. Cause I left and he was already verbalizing, but not like articulate. And then I would Skype with him and all the things he would say. And I’m like, “Oh my God, I’m missing all this.” It was probably by far one of the most difficult things to try to endure.

Blanca: When we first got married [10 years ago] I wasn’t trying to get the risk of being there for 10 years. ... After eight years, [my husband] he told me that he was talking with one of his coworkers and he told him about a lawyer and that we should talk to him and get a second opinion. .... [He] said it was a good chance to get approved [and remove the 10-year bar]. Because I didn’t have any felonies, we have kids, we have been married for a long time. .... We talked about it and we decide that if we didn’t do it, there was no chance we could succeed together as a couple. We decided to be together through all that. If I had to stay, he could stay with me. And if we had to take the kids, and once we were ready to come back, we would come back together.

Both Nicolas and Blanca decided it was worth the risk to return to Mexico to apply to legalize their status and petition to remove the 10-year bar. Both were hoping to legalize in order to provide for and better the future of their families; however, they went about the process in differently gendered ways – Nicolas going alone and only seeing his young son and wife via
Skype and two weekend visits; Blanca electing to have her husband quit his job and taking him and their two children with her. While this experience was traumatic for Nicolas as he missed his son growing up, as a man, he felt he was expected to go through this process alone while his wife took care of the baby while being a full-time college student. Alternatively, as a woman, Blanca expected to take care of her own children and enjoy the protection of her husband. Given gendered norms of parenting, they each adopted differing approaches to the legalization process.

Undocumented men and women face popular gendered expectations where men are expected to be providers and women are expected to be caretakers. Being undocumented can limit a parent’s ability to meet these expectations when his/her status significantly limits employment opportunities and financial resources. Given the nature of these expectations, it is harder for men to perform and see themselves as “good” fathers but it can also emerge as an issue for women in certain instances if their ability to care for their child is tied to financial limitations. In addition, these gendered expectations affect eligible parent’s decisions and methods of applying for legal status through their citizen partners. This suggests that undocumented immigration status indirectly affects undocumented young adults’ feelings about parenting through gendered societal expectations. Thus, the legal violence imposed by immigration policies not only creates feelings of fear and insecurity but also infects their psyche and disrupts their ability to positively view themselves as “good” parents.

CONCLUSION

Given the intimate and interpersonal decisions involved in bearing and raising children, we might presume that these experiences are immune to the more structural limitations presented by undocumented immigration status. However, I have shown that undocumented immigration status both directly and indirectly affects parenthood experiences. Specifically, immigration
status directly affects parenting experiences in this historical moment of heightened deportation, increased police enforcement of immigration policy, and heightened anti-immigrant sentiment (Armenta 2012; Chavez 2008; Donato and Armenta 2011; Dreby 2012; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Yoshikawa 2012). This forces parents to develop distinct parenting strategies that attempt to limit their risk of deportation and can lead to the intergenerational punishment of their citizen children. Additionally, immigration status indirectly affects their experiences by limiting economic opportunities and financial security. This threatens their feelings of stability, which directly impacts childbearing decisions and also limits their ability to meet gendered expectations of parenthood and perceive themselves as “good” parents. Thus, the blocked opportunities and feelings of uncertainty experienced by these undocumented young adults have clear implications for their decisions and feelings about parenthood.

These findings demonstrate the utility of Menjívar and Abrego’s (2012) concept of legal violence. I confirm that deportation threats have direct implications for their family experiences and expand on this to explain its effects on how undocumented young adults raise their children. Taking their concept one step further, I demonstrate that this legal violence can also have indirect effects on the lives of targeted individuals and that it can also affect those who do not have the specific ascribed status. Future studies need to examine this secondary layer of indirect and intergenerational legal violence in order to assess the full scope of this legal violence and the exclusion it creates.

I also suggest that future work on undocumented immigrants needs to address these indirect effects of immigration status. For instance, I demonstrate that gender plays an integral role in structuring the childbearing and childrearing roles of undocumented young adults. Without paying attention to the indirect effects of such social locations, we could come out
believing that undocumented immigration status solely affects the experiences of parents through risks of detention and deportation. However, conducting a comparison across gender reveals, not only that gender is affecting the lives of undocumented young adults, but also that it serves as a platform for undocumented immigration status to shape their lives in additional ways.

Finally, my findings regarding the indirect effects of immigration status have implications for segmented assimilation theory. Segmented assimilation theory has established that the acculturation of Mexican-origin immigrants can lead to downward assimilation pathways when individuals acculturate into the culture of their highly stigmatized native-born counterparts (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). Specifically, 1.5 and 2nd generation youth face three challenges—racial discrimination, bifurcated labor markets, and inner-city countercultures. In addition to facing these challenges, my respondents’ undocumented immigration status raises barriers to incorporation. Aside from these previously theorized challenges and structural barriers to incorporation, I find that my respondents also absorb dominant narratives about their parenting which are not directly related to their national origin or their immigration status, nor are these narratives countercultural. Yet, I demonstrate that their acculturation to these seemingly harmless narratives increases feelings of exclusion and their inability to engage in full incorporation into the social institution of family. For example, despite Yoshikawa’s (2012) finding the undocumented parents do not have different values or commitment to their children’s educational development, my respondents believe that they are worse parents than their citizen counterparts. This directly leads to feelings of difference based on immigration status and contributes to their overall feelings of exclusion.

In addition, given the interconnected nature of social institutions, exclusion from family institutions is both fed by and feeds feelings of exclusion from the educational and economic
institutions discussed in previous chapters. This means that it contributes to further feelings of exclusion from U.S. society overall. Furthermore, the intergenerational punishment I explore suggests that this exclusion will have consequences for this next generation as they seek to navigate their place in U.S. society as the children of undocumented parents. All together, this suggests that seemingly innocuous narratives that are absorbed during the acculturation process can contribute to downward assimilation patterns. I reason that segmented assimilation theory, and future studies of immigrant incorporation, need to consider and account for the indirect effects of social locations as well as the various cultural narratives available in the host society, not just countercultural ones, in order to fully assess the upward, downward, or selective incorporation pathways of immigrants.

My respondents frame their experiences in terms of exclusion and blocked opportunities because these were the most salient and greatly affected their parenting decisions. Yet, their decisions to form families and have children suggest that they are heavily embedded in the social fabric of the U.S. Their determination to raise their children in the U.S. demonstrates that these undocumented young adults feel as if this is their home and they belong here. In addition to these taken for granted feelings of belonging, the opportunity to build a family in the U.S. rests on their social inclusion – the existence of social ties that will allow them to find potential partners and the adoption of U.S. cultural norms and gendered parenting roles. This suggests that their parenting experiences are the product of simultaneous experiences of exclusion and inclusion.
CONCLUSION

*I’m able to do a lot here [in the U.S.]. I’m going to school, working. But I had to struggle for that. Laws always get in the way.*

–Mauricio Ortega

Although Mauricio actively participates in U.S. society, he recognizes that laws and barriers related to his immigration status have always made this participation more difficult. Instead of going straight through a four-year college he wound his way through community college. Rather than pursuing a job as a high school teacher directly after receiving his bachelor’s degree he spent three years working for an after-school tutoring program before returning for his teaching credential and crossing his fingers that he would be able to find employment afterwards. These experiences make it clear that his participation in various aspects of U.S. society has been constrained by his immigration status and immigration laws. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to highlight how structural barriers limit the participation and feelings of belonging of undocumented young adults like Mauricio. Their experiences show the power of immigration laws and policies which produce “illegality” and promote the exclusion of undocumented young adults in various parts of their daily lives.

Previous research on undocumented young adults focuses on the limitations that their immigration status puts on their educational experiences (Abrego 2006, 2008; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Chavez et al. 2007; Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Enriquez 2011, 2014; Flores 2010; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Gonzales 2010; Greenman and Hall 2013; Huber and Malagon 2007; Perez 2012; Perez et al. 2009). Building on this, the preceding chapters have explored how undocumented young adults experience young adulthood outside of educational institutions. This is a critical step forward as the population of undocumented young adults ages and given that the majority of undocumented young adults do not attend higher education.
In the following sections I summarize the answers to each of my three research questions:

1. How does undocumented immigration status affect levels of participation and feelings of belonging in educational, economic, and familial institutions?
2. How do educational status and gender affect levels of participation and feelings of belonging in educational, economic, and familial institutions?
3. How do participation and feelings of belonging within these various institutional contexts come together to produce and shape the overall incorporation levels of undocumented young adults?

Ultimately, I argue that undocumented immigration status, at some points mediated by educational status and gender, limits the participation of undocumented young adults and contributes to feelings of exclusion when they are unable to participate in the ways they desire and expect. Ultimately, this limits their overall incorporation.

“ILLEGALITY,” EXCLUDABILITY, AND LEGAL VIOLENCE:
THE IMPACT OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION STATUS

The first research question assesses how undocumented immigration status impacts levels of participation and feelings of belonging in educational, economic, and familial institutions. I argue that the impact of undocumented immigration status is largely produced through immigration laws and policies which generate a state of “illegality,” create a sense of “excludability,” and produce “legal violence.” These theoretical concepts capture the various ways in which laws produce the structural inequalities that shape the lives of undocumented young adults.

A number of theoretical concepts have been developed to explain the structural limitations created by undocumented immigration status. The concept of “illegality” captures
how undocumented immigrants’ state of legal non-existence is socially, culturally, and politically constructed (Chavez 2007; Coutin 2007). At its core, “illegality” is produced and sustained through immigration laws and policies which (re)produce structural vulnerabilities for those who find themselves without legal status (Chavez 2007; Menjívar 2006b; Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014; Ngai 2004; Willen 2007). “Illegality” is experienced on the ground as these laws dictate the way and extent that individuals participate in society. Given the threat of deportation the accompanies undocumented status, the lived experience of “illegality” is often discussed in terms of one’s “deportability” or the threat of deportation that increases the marginalizing effects of deportation policies by promoting a constant state of hypervigilance and fear in everyday life (De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Dreby 2012). Expanding on this concept, I suggest that we think about the “excludability” of undocumented immigrants. Like “deportability,” this concept highlights the threat of exclusion, rather than the actual experience of exclusion, to explore how structural limitations may teach undocumented immigrants to limit themselves in their everyday lives. This broader concept allows us to address the impact of various immigration laws and policies – limited access to higher education institutions, not having access to a social security number, E-Verify, employer sanctions, unenforced labor rights, not having access to a state-issued ID or driver’s license, police policies that impound the cars of unlicensed drivers. Further, Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy Abrego (2012) conceptualize the consequences of living in a state of “illegality” as “legal violence” or the substantial emotional toll that results from negotiating legal barriers on a consistent, and sometimes even a daily, basis. These various theoretical concepts capture the phenomenon of exclusion that undocumented young adults face.
The experiences of undocumented young adults that I have detailed in this dissertation suggest that their state of “illegality” leads them to constantly experience “excludability” in various aspects of their day-to-day lives, which ultimately constitutes a form of “legal violence” as they struggle with feeling excluded in the place they call home. Examining educational experiences reveals that education-based laws, particularly those that grant access to K-12 education but limit access to higher education, are key for teaching undocumented young adults about the state of “illegality” they live in and the marginal social position that results. Specifically, they learn that laws dictate that they be treated differently than their citizen peers which leads them to internalize their ambiguous legal status and develop feelings of exclusion. Additionally, employment-related immigration policies teach undocumented young adults about their “excludability,” which curtails their participation in the labor market as they resign themselves to underemployment, employer abuse, and labor rights violations. Further, these laws and experiences limit their feelings of belonging as they believe that their jobs are significantly worse than their U.S.-born peers. Finally, family formation experiences suggest that laws related to driving, working, and legalization limit their participation in dating and structure their decisions to get married and have children. As with education and work, these limitations produce feelings of exclusion as they are not able to participate in the ways they desire and expect.

Overall, my findings suggest that undocumented immigration status manifests itself as a state of “illegality” which produces a sense of “excludability” that limits undocumented young adults’ participation in these institutions and produces “legal violence” as they develop feelings of exclusion. This highlights the significant role that immigration status plays in the everyday lives of undocumented young adults via laws that structure their exclusion. Further, these
theoretical concepts and substantive findings suggest that undocumented immigration status limits both structural and emotional consequences which provides support for conceptualizing participation and feelings of belonging as distinct aspects of incorporation.

**MEDIATING SOCIAL LOCATIONS: THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL STATUS AND GENDER**

The second research question addresses how educational status and gender affect levels of participation and feelings of belonging in educational, economic, and familial institutions. I argue that educational status and gender operate as mediating social locations that can magnify or minimize the impact that immigration status has on the day-to-day lives of undocumented young adults. Essentially, these social locations intersect with undocumented immigration status to differentiate the experiences of undocumented young adults.

Educational status differentiates the experiences of undocumented young adults who have none or limited experience in higher education (e.g. did not complete high school, completed high school, attended but did not complete a 2-year college degree) from those undocumented young adults who are currently in higher education (either a 2-year or 4-year college) or who hold a bachelor’s degree. I find that educational mobility, particularly participation in higher education, increases one’s exposure to a more diverse peer group, including U.S.-born citizens and members of different races. This opens up an opportunity for social-emotional exclusion in friendships and romantic relationships as these interactions can highlight immigration status differences and increase feelings of marginality and exclusion. Further, participation in higher education raises explicit immigration status-based roadblocks which encourage this segment of the undocumented young adult population to develop a stronger desire to legalize their immigration status. This subsequently affects their participation in family formation as college-
educated respondents have stronger preferences for citizen partners and are more likely to have a citizen, rather than an undocumented, partner because they have access to citizen-dominated social spaces through their educational institutions. Finally, educational status also mediates employment experiences as a portion of undocumented young adults leverage their higher education attendance and credentials to obtain access to self-proclaimed “good” jobs where they conduct less labor-intensive work and receive higher pay as managers or salaried employees.

Gender also differentiates the experiences of undocumented young adult men and women. First, gender intersects with undocumented status to impact the ways in which undocumented young adults are pushed out of school. I find that undocumented status discourages undocumented young men from resisting being pushed out of school through disengagement and criminalization and dissuades undocumented young women from resisting being pulled off their educational paths by pregnancy. Essentially, stereotypes of Latinos as criminals and Latinas as hypersexual contribute to their divergent and gendered paths out of educational institutions (see Lopez 2003). Further, gender mediates the effect of undocumented status on family formation by differentiating the dating experiences of men and women. Specifically, undocumented immigration status affects individuals, regardless of gender, by preventing them from having a universally acceptable form of identification, dissuading some from purchasing a car or driving without a license, and limiting their ability to obtain a well-paying job. While these shared vulnerabilities could affect both undocumented men’s and women’s dating experiences, gendered schemas and dating expectations that the man invite the woman on a pre-planned date, pick her up in a car, and pay for the date limit undocumented men’s participation in the dating context more than women’s. Similar patterns emerge in the experiences of undocumented young adult parents as fathers struggle to meet the broad
expectations that they provide for their children while mothers are largely able to fulfill their emotional caretaker role.

The educational and gendered differences in undocumented young adults’ participation in educational, economic, and family institutions suggest that these social locations mediate the impact of undocumented status on the lives of these young adults. These findings highlight that undocumented young adults’ lives are not only structured by the limitations of their undocumented status but that they are also structured by other social inequalities. While I have shed light on how educational status and gender may operate in various institutional contexts, future work should continue to examine the mediating effects of these and other social locations.

PARTICIPATION AND FEELINGS OF BELONGING: CONCEPTUALIZING THE OVERALL INCORPORATION OF UNDOCUMENTED YOUNG ADULTS

The final research question asks how participation and feelings of belonging within these various institutional contexts come together to produce and shape the overall incorporation levels of undocumented young adults. I argue that undocumented young adults are incompletely incorporated because they are not able to participate in the ways that they desire and expect. This suggests that assimilation theory needs to be re-conceptualized as the product of both participation and feelings of belonging.

Assimilation theory develops a structural analysis of incorporation patterns and focuses on how participation is constrained or enabled in various social institutions. Essentially, the incorporation and eventual assimilation of an immigrant group can be explained by the context of reception – governmental policies, co-ethnic community structures, and societal reception – that they encounter (Portes and Zhou 1993). These various structural mechanisms affect how immigrant individuals carve out space to participate in society (Menjívar 2000; Portes and Shafer...
This structural understanding of incorporation leads scholars to focus on specific participatory outcomes – educational attainment, employment status, wealth, voting patterns, naturalization rates, intermarriage rates – when assessing incorporation patterns in educational, economic, political, and social institutions (Bloemraad 2006; Feliciano et al. 2011; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008).

For undocumented young adults, these structural mechanisms of exclusion often result from governmental laws and policies which explicitly bar their participation in various aspects of U.S. society. However, I find that most undocumented young adults find ways to negotiate these limitations so that they can participate to some extent. For example, they find jobs and work even though laws explicitly bar them from formal employment. Thus, when assessed based on current assimilation theory, the incorporation patterns of undocumented young adults remain unclear as they participate to an extent but not fully because of the structural limitations created by their immigration status.

My findings suggest that emotions, specifically feelings of belonging and exclusion, are a critical means of clarifying the incorporation levels of undocumented young adults. I argue that their limited incorporation levels are the product of both the structural barriers that limit their participation and the feelings of exclusion that arise when their participation is not in line with what they desired and expected. Growing up in the U.S., undocumented young adults develop expectations and compare themselves to their U.S.-born citizen peers. When they are not able to perform in the ways they expect, they develop feelings of exclusion rather than belonging, which then impacts their incorporation levels.
This leads me to re-conceptualize immigrant incorporation as the process through which an immigrant becomes a full member of society, not only by participating in social institutions but also by developing feelings of belonging. This re-conceptualization highlights the understudied dimension of emotional exclusion, and demonstrates how it intersects with structural exclusion to limit incorporation. Thus, as Figure 2 suggests, incorporation is the product of participation and feelings of belonging as these two aspects reciprocally affect one another and work together to determine an individual’s level of incorporation. This model can be used to account for each type of institutional level incorporation but also overall incorporation levels. For example, we could look at participation levels in dating, marriage, and parenting as well as feelings of belonging in these contexts to assess social incorporation levels. Similar assessments could be conducted for educational, economic, or political incorporation. Further, looking at overall levels or participation and feelings of belonging in all of these institutional contexts would allow us to address overall incorporation levels.

Overall this dissertation has detailed how undocumented immigration status is impacting the lives and incorporation patterns of undocumented young adults. These findings suggest that legal mechanisms are limiting undocumented young adults’ participation and feeding their feelings of exclusion, which is leading to their incomplete incorporation. Thus, immigration
policy reforms that limit the risk of deportation, allow legal employment, protect workplace rights, enable educational access, allow access to driver’s licenses and IDs, or open pathways to legalization are key to promoting the fuller incorporation of this population. President Barack Obama took a step in this direction in August 2012, soon after this data collection was completed, by instituting a Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program which allowed a segment of this undocumented young adult population to apply for a renewable 2-year protection from deportation, access to a work permit, and, in some states including California, access to state-issued IDs and driver’s licenses. This and future immigration-related laws may eliminate, transform, and/or raise the barriers that undocumented young adults face which will then directly impact their ability to participate in U.S. society. However, given the significance of feelings of belonging and exclusion, it is unclear if these positive policy changes will lead to full incorporation. Rather, the experiences of recently legalized young adults suggest that memories of past exclusion may contribute to lasting feelings of exclusion, effectively preventing full incorporation.
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