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Multilayered Analyses of the Experiences of Undocumented Latinx College Students

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Abstract

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Keywords

Undocumented, Students, Labels, Latinx, Narratives, Critical Incidents

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Multilayered Analyses of the Experiences of Undocumented Latinx College Students

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Being the target of constant discrimination and marginalization can often cause intense negative psychological reactions and shame for undocumented students. The following qualitative study describes past and current undocumented Latinx students' experiences of educational inequality in higher education influenced by labels associated with "being undocumented." In this study we used a constructivist theoretical perspective which enabled us to focus on undocumented participants' perspectives, experiences, meaning-making processes, values, and beliefs. Data was collected through hour-long, semi-structured interviews with five undocumented students. Student narratives were analyzed using a multi-layered analysis approach: (1) narrative, (2) thematic, and (3) critical incident analysis. Findings for this study provided insight on the narratives of carrying labels, themes associated with various labels, and critical incidents in the narratives and lives of undocumented students. Through our findings, we are able to contribute to existing literature and provide directions for future research. Keywords: Undocumented, Students, Labels, Latinx, Narratives, Critical Incidents

Unauthorized immigration has been a controversial topic in the United States (U.S.) for some time now. Over 11 million unauthorized (also called undocumented) people live in America (Passel & Cohn, 2015) and thousands of unauthorized youth cross the border each month (Dinan, 2015). Given their legal status, undocumented youth face multiple issues in terms of education, healthcare, and labor (Weerasinghe, Goździak, & Laufbahn, 2013). Aspiring to higher education, in particular, is a burdensome endeavor for unauthorized immigrants, given the existing political and social barriers for people lacking a legal immigration status—from higher tuition fees to discrimination and rejection. The existent political climate in the U.S. has brought the topic of undocumented immigration to the forefront. The current presidential administration has been working to make deportation a more streamlined and efficient process while raising disciplinary consequences for those that might aid illegal immigrants (Kulish et al., 2017). This study takes place in the aftermath of several contentious legal policies passed in Arizona regarding Chicano/Chicana and Latino/Latina education, which have had a significant impact in the ability of undocumented youth to have access to college.

Political and Social Context in Arizona

The college aspirations of undocumented youth have been influenced by harsh legislation nationwide, but Arizona has shown a unique political climate and a historical attitude toward undocumented students. Arizona has been a site of contention regarding its policies toward undocumented students, which have been described as discriminatory (Power, 2013), harsh, racist (Del Razo, 2012), and even xenophobic (Aguila, 2013). The state has implemented multiple policies that hinder the ability of undocumented students to pursue

college while promoting anti-immigrant sentiments among members of the society. For example, bills that deny these students in-state tuition have been proposed and passed, limiting their ability to pay for college. Due to other legal proposals, students suspected of being undocumented due to racial profiling have been subject to questioning and interrogation about their status as citizens. Furthermore, a bill that bans the instruction of ethnic studies in public schools in grades K-12 was signed by the Arizona government in 2010 (Aguila, 2013; Shepherd, 2011), promoting anti-immigrant agendas which also affect unauthorized students pursuing education. Despite major criticisms of Arizona's undocumented student policies, such policies are being considered legal (Arellano, 2012).

To understand the phenomenon of undocumented students in Arizona, scholars have been engaged in research with this population. A large-scale study with undocumented students was conducted in 2011 at the University of Arizona. After collecting and interpreting interview data, the researchers divided preliminary themes into two key areas: social disruption and institutional mistrust (University of Arizona, 2011, p. 7). Social disruption encompassed a number of sub-themes, including self-deportation, declines in academic performance, declines in physical health, and emotional upheaval/instability. Institutional mistrust referred to the ways that interviewees reported fear of law enforcement officials and suspicion of educational institutions; both "[raise] public safety concerns and [undermine] attempts to inculcate a sense of respect for public institutions and authorities" (University of Arizona, 2011, p. 19).

While several studies have explored the impact that such discriminatory laws had on undocumented Arizona students during their inception, (Aguila, 2013; University of Arizona, 2011; Vega Najera, 2010), few studies have looked at how students have begun to react to and navigate the political and educational climate in the aftermath of such policies (Morales et al., 2011; Spinney, 2015). Given that reactions leading to social change can inspire other undocumented youth to pursue and thrive in academic endeavors, this represents an important gap in the literature. As laws that were once contentious and were considered discriminatory and racist settle into the accepted standard for Arizona (Aguila, 2013; Del Razo, 2012; Power, 2013), we believe this topic deserves closer and continuous attention. Studying the experiences of undocumented higher education students in Arizona more deeply can allow the public to have a vision of bright and talented students' educational struggles in a state where illegal immigration and education have been markedly controversial.

Labels Associated with "Being Undocumented"

In this paper, the term undocumented immigrant youth refers to immigrant youth without legal documents who enter the U.S. with family members or with the intent to reunite with family members (Fong, 2007). Being undocumented in America leads subjects to be the target of multiple labels which typically hold derogatory connotations and allude to ethnicity or legal status. For instance, in a study of adulthood transitioning in undocumented youth, labels identified by the participants included deprecatory terms such as "illegal" or "wetback" (Gonzales, 2011). In this study, participants described shocking experiences when attempting to transition from high school to higher education or the job market; they were unable to carry out these goals because they lacked an ID or a social security number. Scholars described that these youths transitioning to adulthood felt that society denied them the right to actively participate civically and economically (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010).

The term "illegal" has been studied from personal perspectives of undocumented individuals. Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguinetti (2013) studied the associations with the term "illegal" and identity formation in undocumented youth and explored the negative implications on emotional health. Similarly, Abrego (2011) examined other implications of the term "illegal," such as dehumanization, given that immigrants may adopt self-conforming

notions about lacking human rights. Besides being perceived as “illegal,” undocumented individuals have reported that the social environment makes them feel that they are “inferior,” “cheating the system,” or “committing crimes all the time” (Abrego, 2011). These experiences of exclusion could have some impact on social connectedness and individual well-being (Gonzales et al., 2013).

From a societal perspective, the term “illegal” seems to bring consequences on the society’s perception of undocumented immigrants in terms of crime and violence. For instance, some authors have explored social perceptions of undocumented immigrants as individuals who are breaking the law and should not be part of the American society (Gonzales et al., 2013). In addition, in a study obtaining public opinion, participants associated undocumented immigrants with a “criminal threat,” which has exerted an important influence on immigration policies over the past decades (Wang, 2012). Further, Solis (2003) explained that illegality and violence are typically associated but explains that the violence is *against*, not *committed* by undocumented individuals. Hostility has led to racial/ethnic violence and racism.

Moreover, the term “illegal” is compounded and complicated by existing racism in the state of Arizona and at large (Garcia, 2017; Pérez Huber, 2009)—especially among Latinx individuals. Here, we use the term “Latinx” as a gender-neutral demographic category that includes any person of Latin American decent (Chang, Torrez, Ferguson, & Sagur, 2017). Childers and Garcia (2016) and Ngai (2004) have claimed that legal status and anti-immigration policies become means of making racism and racialization legal. Practical examples exist in labels such as “wetback” or “mojado,” which are related to the stigma that many undocumented individuals face. These terms allude to the way they used to cross the border, but these terms may be used generally as derogatory racial slurs as well. Garcia (2017) has suggested that Latinx individuals may be “perceived as undocumented regardless of their ‘legal’ status and being U.S.-born.” She refers to this as “racializing illegality” (p. 480). Drawing on 60 interviews with women of Mexican-origin, Garcia demonstrated how all Latinx individuals become generalized as one: those who are not welcome and who should be deported, regardless of actual legal status. Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagon, Velez, and Solórzano (2008) have suggested that any perceived difference in skin color creates a non-native otherness within the United States. Creating a designation of “illegal,” Pérez Huber (2009) argues, is simply an extension of extant racist sentiments, or “a racist nativist framing, and a symptom of white supremacy, used to construct racialized notions of who is and is not native to the United States” (p. 709).

Even so, this racialized othering has the potential to create a kind of unity among those subject to it. In an ethnographic study of young Chicana women, Bettie (2014) found that these women used claims to their racial and subcultural status as “a strategy to heal various injuries of inequality” (p. 167). Similarly, this status of racialized illegality has been used by undocumented individuals. As described by past studies, border crossing creates an identity for migrating individuals as well as a trans-border status (Sanchez, 2014). Others express that “Mojado symbolizes the distrust and dislike experienced in *gringolandia* as *la raza odiada* [the hated race] ... *extranjeros*, which literally means ‘outsiders’...” (Murillo, 1999, p. 19). As such, the “mojado” identity among immigrants may foster a sense of community to cope with feelings of alienation (Alvarez, 2013).

Finally, undocumented youths have explained the psychological consequences of enduring such labels on a daily basis as they attempt to overcome them (e.g., Gutiérrez, 2015; Jacobo & Ochoa, 2012). One described these experiences as, “A terrible and terrifying feeling, because I get nervous and don’t say too much about how they treat me” (Gutiérrez, 2015, p. 31). Others described feeling traumatized regularly, given that the criminalization, prejudice, and marginalization led to fear and uncertainty (Jacobo & Ochoa, 2012). It appears that labels

associated with being undocumented from previous literature not only shed a negative light on undocumented immigrants but also potentially bring them internalized fear and trauma.

How Undocumented Students Describe Their Experiences in Higher Education

Regardless of legal status, all youth in the U.S. have the right to access free public elementary and secondary education (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982; Stevenson, 2004). However, when undocumented youth come of age and attempt to transition into higher education, they face multiple barriers that may make this transition extremely difficult or impossible. These barriers include students' inability to obtain federal financial aid, in-state tuition, and some scholarships to fund their education (Dougherty, Nienhusser, & Vega, 2010), along with other psychosocial problems such as discrimination, racism, and violence (Pérez & Cortés, 2011; Stevenson, 2004; University of Arizona, 2011). Undocumented students trying to gain access to postsecondary education describe their efforts as an "arduous task" (Gonzales, 2011). The transition to adulthood brings feelings of frustration and despair in terms of their educational future. When undocumented students complete high school, they often find themselves unable to continue with their education. As they are unable to obtain financial aid or have access to in-state tuition or scholarships due to their legal status, many of them end up working with their parents in low-paid jobs such as house cleaning (Gonzales, 2011).

Feeling "different," "having a sign above the head," or "waking up to a nightmare" are other experiences reported by undocumented youth when they faced the burdens of illegality (Gonzales et al., 2013). Other psychological implications included resentment, anger, frustration, confusion, or "feeling out of place" (Gonzales, 2011). In addition to peer discrimination and frequent negative public opinion, some students have reported feeling the lack of support and discriminatory behavior from school personnel, making their educational pursuits even more challenging (Pérez & Cortés, 2011).

Some undocumented students have resorted to studying in community colleges and working simultaneously to save money in order to go to a university in the future. However, these students have explained how difficult it is to balance school and work obligations (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Some students have exceptional academic careers and have been offered important scholarships (e.g., presidential scholarships), but they have been unable to obtain them due to their legal status (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Furthermore, Ellis and Chen (2013) stated that finding out one is not eligible for funding or for a program or being the target of discrimination and marginalization can often cause intense negative psychological reactions and feelings of shame. Some of their participants even used their immigration status rather than their personal achievements or individual characteristics to define themselves. Due to the reasons stated above, undocumented study participants are often hard to find, and this culturally marginalized population remains largely overlooked.

In sum, undocumented youth, as part of the entire undocumented population in the U.S., face prejudice, discrimination, marginalization, and criminalization—both because of racially motivated perceptions of illegality and for actual undocumented status. Studies have described the multiple barriers that they face when they transition to adulthood, try to get access to college, and receive multiple negative labels (Abrego, 2011; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales et al., 2013; Sanchez, 2014). However, research has not examined how, through personal narratives, students can reflect on the connection between those labels and the challenges and inequalities in higher education, as well as the strategies they have used to overcome labels and challenges. Additionally, previous studies have not longitudinally examined specific incidents identified by undocumented students from elementary school to post-college that heavily impacted their lives. These areas represent gaps in the existing literature and an opportunity to explore this phenomenon in one of the most polemic states in terms of immigration: Arizona. The study of

such phenomena in this border state with a complex political agenda, in terms of education for undocumented students, will undoubtedly contribute to the understanding of the current situation and the implications for undocumented students in higher education.

The Present Study

The current study with undocumented students in Arizona offers a progressive view of undocumented Latinx students' experiences in American education through thorough examinations of critical incidents. More specifically, the study is guided by a constructivist theoretical perspective, which describes individuals' perspectives, experiences, meaning-making processes, values, and beliefs (Guba, 1990). The study addresses the following two research questions: (1) How do undocumented Latinx students describe their educational trajectories and critical events related to schooling? (2) How do labels create educational inequalities as described in students' narratives?

Participants

After obtaining IRB approval, a total of five participants were recruited through snowball sampling: first by contacting the Arizona Dream Act Coalition in a large Southwest university. A preliminary discussion group with leaders of this organization was held in order to get familiar with the specific phenomenon of undocumented students in Arizona and to exchange views about our study. Members of the coalition were subsequently contacted and invited to disseminate the invitation to other undocumented students in higher education. The following are profiles with pseudonyms used for each participant which contain information regarding age, country of origin, and educational status:

- Valentina – Female, 30 years old, immigrated from Mexico at age 11, graduated with a bachelor's degree.
- Santiago – Male, 22 years old, immigrated from Mexico at age 8, currently working on his bachelor's degree, obtained an associate's degree from a community college.
- Juan – Male, in his 30's, immigrated from Mexico at age 5, graduated with a bachelor's degree, currently working on his master's degree.
- Karen – Female, 25 years old, immigrated from Columbia at age 10, completed an undergraduate degree and is currently working on her Ph.D.
- Jose – Male, undisclosed age, immigrated from Mexico, graduated with a bachelor's degree.

Participants were sent copies of our study's recruitment script and the list of interview questions prior to participating. They were also asked to bring five visual representations or examples of their personal experiences as undocumented students. Visual representations in qualitative research can be used to elicit in-depth and contextual narrative expressions by utilizing the personal and culture-specific meanings associated with objects and using memory as a reflective tool in data collection (Banks, 2001). For example, participants brought items such as an English-Spanish dictionary, representing not only the struggle but also the determination to learn a new language, or a driver's license, depicting the culmination of a long-desired goal to have a legal ID in the country.

Method

Narrative Inquiry and Marginalized Populations

One participant in our study, Jose, described the need for undocumented students to develop and create critical voices of advocacy as a way to claim perspectives and promote solidarity among others with similar stories: “There’s those people who are speaking in third person about you, but there’s the first-person point of view. And by speaking your truth and when you have gone through and been what you strive to be people can relate to it.” It could be argued that narrative inquiry is particularly well suited for producing critical and reflective voices of advocacy especially among those who have been placed in marginalized positions (see e.g., Kim, 2006; Kim, 2016; Villanueva, 2004). Villanueva further suggested that often perspectives of individuals can be lost as dominant forces write and rewrite history. These forces create the “third person” stories that Jose referred to. By telling their own stories, Villanueva argued that marginalized populations are able to write, claim, and remember their own history, which would otherwise be forgotten as dominant stories may erase other perspectives. Kim (2016) echoed this sentiment, referring to narrative inquiry as kaleidoscopic; different perspectives reside in every individual, and as new stories are told, it is akin to turning the kaleidoscope, allowing us to see new patterns and complexities emerge. Often, the most telling stories are counter-narratives that describe “lived forms of oppression” (Kim, 2016, p. 41). When stories from marginalized populations are treated as valid, “voices of the marginalized or silenced are promoted and respected” (Kim, 2006, p. 6). Through narrative (both collective and individual), readers can then better understand how such storytellers position themselves in relation to the rest of the world (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004).

Additionally, such narratives allow for connection to occur among those whose voices are traditionally underrepresented, marginalized, or subjugated (Villanueva, 2004). Villanueva proposed that narratives of those marginalized help to “jog our memories as a collective” (2004, p. 16), and individuals who have been discriminated against for various reasons may find some kind of recognition, identification, or validation in the stories of others who have undergone traumatic and negative experiences. Andrews (2007), in studying individuals who had lived in East Berlin during the time of the Berlin wall, found that the stories and memories of her participants helped them to form cultural identities. The collective memory and shared identities that are generated by these stories acts as “an expression of belonging to a community that experiences itself as under threat” (p. 502). Grant, Biley, Leigh-Phippard, and Walker (2012) in turn argued that researchers have a moral imperative to collect and expose these stories to create dialogue among both the research community and participants—this they refer to as narrative ethics. Narratives can also act as a form of outreach to build solidarity among populations that may have difficulty communicating with one another.

In our study, individual narratives and semi-structured interviews were conducted, and they lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were audio recorded, and they took place at a large Southwest research-intensive university. Interviewers were mindful of the sensitivity of the topic and aimed to establish rapport, allowing participants to feel comfortable to share their own personal stories. Although the participants’ words were the primary source of the data, an interchange of views between the participants and the interviewers broadened and enhanced the dataset, as human interaction is an important source of knowledge production (Kvale, 2008).

Even though there were many shared questions, interviewers also allowed participants to focus in on unique aspects of their experiences, enriching the data collection process. For example, we asked: (1) Tell me about your journey as an undocumented student. Feel free to incorporate your visual representations as a part of the discussion as you feel appropriate. (2)

Tell me about the visual materials that represent your experiences with labels associated with being undocumented in a higher education context. How do these materials represent and reflect your experiences of labels and categories associated with being undocumented? (3) Tell me about labels that you find distressing or harmful. (4) Tell me about labels that you find beneficial. (5) How have these labels influenced your college experiences? (6) What advice would you give to individuals who could potentially help you?

Furthermore, this study utilized notions of communicative validity to refer to “rigor” of our research process. According to Habermas (1990), validity is based on shared communication and reflection of experiences. Thus, to increase the validity of our interview data, we (researchers) were actively engaged during the interview process, and often shared personal sentiments throughout the interview. Additionally, we requested for clarification and elaboration when participants mentioned insightful and experiential content that contributed to the meaning making processes.

Findings

The findings in this article reflect three concurring and overlapping yet individually focused layers of analysis. At first, we share findings and themes from narrative analysis. Then we focus more specifically on themes presenting labels students and their networks associated themselves with being undocumented. Finally, we discuss the timing and content of critical incidents and turning points in these students’ narratives. Though participants may have had different experiences with and described different perspectives around these themes, these themes still emerged as salient factors in the development and trajectory of participant narratives.

Further, we would like to address the matter of interpretation and representation of events. Although our participants produced vivid accounts of their experiences, this research is limited to incidents that we interpreted as being critical to student development and themes that we developed as a team. It cannot present fully the stories of participants as they experienced them. This need to reduce storied data to manageable accounts is common when dealing with large narratives and is referred to as narrative smoothing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). Here, we present descriptive accounts of those experiences that we thought most salient to our participants’ stories. While aspects of their stories are thus subjugated, smoothing also allows narrative data to become more accessible and reach a wider audience. We feel that our presentation of our participants’ experiences draws attention to particularly salient issues in their own lives and follows Grant et al.’s (2012) code of narrative ethics in that it creates the basis for a discussion about the treatment of undocumented students in the college environment.

Narratives of Carrying Labels

Labeling was arguably the most prominent aspect of participants’ experience that emerged in participant narratives; each had a story about being made less human, particularly by the term “illegal.” Jose asked: “What does it mean that the other people are legal human beings or legal aliens?” and reflected “It’s just - and that’s the play on words that people used to stigmatize them, stereotype people, put you in a box and in a way... it’s psychological warfare to basically bring you down so you feel less about yourself...” The idea of labels as boxing functions occurred in Karen’s narrative as well: “I just want to be a person; I just want to be first and foremost a scientist or a physicist, many other things before I really want to [be] boxed in with that.” Participants saw labels as limiting or restricting (boxed in) and felt that labels took precedence over their overall personhood. As participants were labeled as “illegal”

or “undocumented,” they felt that they were diminished in terms of their capabilities and humanity. Such feelings led to intense self-consciousness and alienation from others.

The fact that labels, and particularly the term “illegal,” appeared in participant narratives should not be surprising. Indeed, Abrego (2011) and Gonzales (2011) noted that undocumented individuals often internalize such labels and begin to develop feelings of limitation or inferiority as a result. Perhaps more surprisingly, however, is that labels in our data were sometimes regarded positively, occasionally productively, or they might have served as a strong source of motivation for participants. One participant, Juan, noted that the “undocumented” or “illegal” label was beginning to act as a marker of community for undocumented youth: “I kinda have to applaud the younger kids now nowadays, the ones in high school or even middle school... They actually take it... proud, very proud of having that label.” This was consistent with Ellis and Chen’s (2013) suggestion that some undocumented individuals might define themselves based on their undocumented status over other personal characteristics. For example, Juan’s statement could imply that such identification is not always based on inferiority or self-loathing and may, in fact, be a marker of confidence or sense of belonging.

Narratives of Empowerment

Participants described various ways that they maintained personal empowerment even when feeling dehumanized. Many took on the labels as a challenge, feeling the need to disprove those labels that others ascribed to them, although some participants such as Karen simply opted to ignore the labels altogether, noting that they are an inevitable part of life: “we all have labels we don’t like about ourselves, and we all want other people to see a part of ourselves that may not necessarily be obvious.” While labels may be inevitable, Santiago attempted to distance himself from disempowering labels by surrounding himself with objects that he felt proved his worth, including a high school graduation cap and a diploma from a community college. In these cases, participants found ways to rationalize or rebut negative labels and stereotypes.

Additionally, Valentina and Jose overcame negative labels by developing a voice or renewed abilities to speak critically through advocacy groups and political organizations devoted to helping undocumented students. Involvement in such groups was important for these participants for two reasons. First, it allowed them to invalidate the labels that had been ascribed to them; they saw their activism as productive and meaningful. Second, their activism allowed them to feel connected to like-minded individuals. Not only were these participants acting on beliefs important to themselves, but they found validation and empowerment by interacting with others that had similar values. Thus, while labels were largely interpreted as negative and disempowering by participants, these labels also enabled empowering reactive behavior that directly confronted and diminished the labels’ negative effects. By accepting their undocumented identity, participants were able to work through and find productive avenues that reaffirmed their identities and produce work that was valuable to them.

Narratives of Tenacity and Motivation

Disproving others. In all cases, participants had to reconcile and come to accept their undocumented identities. This required a strong level of tenacity and perseverance, as many felt inferior to their peers. As mentioned earlier, sometimes this tenacity manifest as a desire to prove others wrong. Santiago recounted his desire to learn English in elementary school because other students teased him for not knowing English. He continued his story to the present day, describing his motivation for earning a master’s degree: “it’s kind of like pushing

me to break through labels, and you know like just do something better than what people would normally expect somebody with those labels to do.” Juan, in turn, described his acquisition of a bachelor’s degree as a result of similar motivations: “[being undocumented] in a way kind of motivates me... I wanna guess, like, disprove that. In way getting my bachelor’s has helped me in that process.” Finally, Jose expressed the joy that he received in being stereotyped as ignorant or dumb, and then receiving the highest grade on an exam or classroom project to spite those that had initially labeled him. He enjoyed shocking, besting, and disproving those around him. For these individuals, some motivation to succeed was found by showing others that stereotypes against undocumented students were ill-founded.

Teachers and mentors. While undermining the power of labels and proving others wrong was a major motivation for participants, most participants also received positive encouragement from an authority figure in their lives, whether it was teachers or parents. For instance, after learning English in the fourth grade, Santiago described winning a “crowning achievement award” for his fast English language learning. Valentina told a similar story, wherein she felt the need to learn English to work more closely with her teachers in sixth grade; in turn, those teachers helped her develop her English skills. She continued to receive support through her high school career and expressed how she was “groomed” for college throughout her junior high and high school experiences. Both Valentina and Santiago found mentors early in their academic careers. These mentors motivated and helped them to develop skills that were important to their future success in academia, such as learning and language. While success cannot be attributed entirely to these individuals, it is possible to see how early mentorship may sooner direct undocumented students toward successful practices.

Jose and Juan also described their high school careers and noted that teachers and guidance counselors encouraged them to apply to college, despite being undocumented students. Jose even implied that he felt as though he would be letting his high school teachers down if he did not go to a postsecondary institution. Though mentorship occurred later in their academic careers than Santiago and Valentina, Jose’s and Juan’s experiences were similar; a particular person or group “nudged” Jose and Juan toward successful academic lives, even when other factors (stereotypes, legislation) deterred them from doing so. Karen noted that she often did not give teachers enough credit and described a high school teacher “who was great to me who is a great mentor, and I just said, ‘I am an illegal immigrant,’ and I realized I had never spoken those words ever before to anyone.” She trusted her teacher enough to disclose sensitive personal information to him, which helped her come to terms with her own identity. Overall, we see undocumented student success exists, at least in part, due to high expectations from those that served advisory or mentoring roles. These figures helped to challenge participants, empower them, and in one instance, help them come to terms with their own identities.

Additionally, parental expectations and support served a major role in motivating participants. Parental support manifested in a way similar to teacher/mentor support. However, parental support was sustained and potentially more intimate. Santiago, for instance, described his parents taking him to a bookstore and buying him a Spanish/English dictionary, which he used to translate his homework daily. He noted that he always felt supported by his parents and claimed that he was directly motivated by a result of their support. He especially felt motivated by his mother, who not only supported him, but modeled academic behavior for him as she attained an associate’s degree while raising him. Juan described how his parents, despite modest income, did not want him to get a job to help support the family, but to focus on schoolwork and graduating. Juan knew that money was important to his family, and when they encouraged him to focus on school, he was able to infer how important his education was to his family. Similarly, Jose decided that if it made his parents happy, he should apply for college,

despite feeling discouraged by his undocumented status. In general, parental expectations and support appeared to have motivated our participants academically in a more intimate and practical manner in comparison to support received from academic mentors.

Narratives of Finances

A final concern of all participants was funding college and incidental expenses. Because of their undocumented status in the state of Arizona, participants had to rely on funding from sources other than the federal government for their college tuition. For instance, Juan opted to spend his first three years of postsecondary studies at a community college as a way to alleviate expenses. He eventually took out a loan to support himself and was ultimately forced to ask a friend to cosign the loan for him. Both Valentina and Jose secured private scholarships, although Valentina still had to work to support herself and her family throughout her college experience. Santiago also had to work to support himself and his family, but similar to Juan, could only attend a community college due to lack of scholarship, a common experience among undocumented students attending places of higher education (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). All participants, even those that had secured scholarships, expressed feeling anxious about funding, never knowing exactly where money would come from or if they would be allowed into higher education for future semesters. Financial matters were a major source of worry for participants because finances represented a lack of security for them. Even when finances were presently secure, participants could not predict what financial burdens would be placed on them in the future, how they would be able to resolve those financial burdens, or what laws would be in place that would limit their financial solutions.

Themes Associated with Various Labels

Based on our thematic analysis, labels described by participants were significantly diverse. In order to analyze them, we grouped the labels based on two characteristics. The first characteristic was *Manifestation*, denoting if a label was *explicitly* disclosed by the participants, or *implicitly* suggested (e.g., "...they feel like that I am lower than them..."). Brown and Gilligan (1992) recommended examining the latent content immersed in the discourse, and this approach was instrumental to identifying implicit labels. Given the personal significance of being undocumented and the socially charged topic, this data was rich in latent, implicit labels. For example, a participant repeatedly mentioned experiencing a sense of "living in the shadows" before the establishment of the DREAM Act Coalition, and how she "came out of the shadows" when multiple undocumented students participated in pro-immigration activism. As such, an implicit label of being "clandestine" in the country was implied in the discourse.

The second characteristic was *Time and Events*, linking labels to a temporal and situational context. Situating the label at a specific point in time helped to understand its personal and social significance, such as the establishment of the concept of DREAMer after the DREAM Act movement. Table 1 summarizes the labels based on the aforementioned groupings.

Table 1. *Summary of Labels by Category*

Label	Manifestation	Time and Events
<i>Illegal</i>	Explicit	After Prop 300/ HS
<i>Criminal</i>	Explicit	After Prop 300/ College
<i>Villain</i>	Explicit	No time identified
<i>Gangster</i>	Explicit	No time related
<i>Dumb</i>	Explicit	University
<i>Second-rate person</i>	Explicit	No time identified
<i>Student</i>	Explicit	Throughout schooling
<i>DREAMer</i>	Explicit	After DREAM Act movement
<i>Male</i> (better position than females)	Explicit	Not time related
<i>Legal resident</i>	Explicit	After college
<i>Undocumented</i>	Explicit	From elementary to college
<i>Mexican</i>	Explicit	Not time related
<i>Mexican-American</i>	Explicit	High school
<i>Clandestine</i> (Living in the “shadows”)	Implicit	Before DREAM Act movement End of HS No background check
<i>Oppressed</i> (“You’re not going to be anybody alive... ”)	Implicit	While attending high school
<i>Ignorant</i> (“He doesn’t know our history”)	Implicit	Throughout high school and college
<i>Unequal</i> (“I can argue that we should be fully equal”)	Implicit	College
<i>Stealer</i> (We were using scholarships that “legal” students should have and taking other’s jobs)	Implicit	After Prop 300
<i>Unwelcomed</i> (“Go back to your country”)	Implicit	During DREAM act activism
<i>Unskilled/ unprepared</i> (“You just don’t try in school, you just won’t try to learn the language”)	Implicit	Upon graduating from community college
<i>Opportunist</i> (“You come here to just obtain benefits and not give back”)	Implicit	Upon graduating from community college
<i>Inactive</i> (“Not being involved”)	Implicit	Upon graduating from community college
<i>Inferior</i> (“They feel like that I am lower than them”)	Implicit	Throughout high school and college
<i>Outsider</i> (“You’re out of the picture”)	Implicit	Throughout high school and college
<i>Foreigner</i> (“You’re not from this country”)	Implicit	Throughout high school and college
<i>Uncultured</i> (“You don’t know the language”)	Implicit	Throughout high school and college
<i>Unequal</i> (“You are not on the same level”)	Implicit	Throughout high school and college
<i>Burden</i> (“People think that you’re going to be a drag to the group”)	Implicit	Throughout high school and college
<i>Achiever</i> (First person in the family to graduate from HS)	Implicit	High School through college
<i>Involved</i> (“We started organizing and we formed the movement”)	Implicit	Upon graduating from community college

This layer of analysis allowed us to focus on certain characteristics, and subsequently, to include additional characteristics, obtaining a more complex picture of the uses of the label. For instance, many *explicit* labels are used to intentionally deprecate people based on a legal perspective (e.g., criminal, illegal, villain) or a social perspective (e.g., dumb, second-rate person). When adding time of occurrence, we noticed other elements influencing the strength of those labels. For example, anti-immigration initiatives, such as the establishment of Proposition 300 in Arizona, heightened a discriminatory sentiment and promoted the use of such labels (“...Prop 300 passed and that really changed a lot not just for me but for a lot of undocumented students...”).

As one can observe from the table, a great number of labels were implicitly described. This suggests that undocumented students perceived judgment and oppression not only by specific qualifiers (“gangster”), but also by ideas and social conceptions (“... [they think that] you come here to just obtain benefits and not give back...”). Implicit attitudes toward undocumented individuals that tend to discriminate and marginalize were embedded in the data, and they included latent labels such as “inferior,” “unequal,” “stealer,” or “uncultured.” These messages, occurring in high school and college, exemplify the stereotypes towards immigrants and undocumented people. Even though many of the participants in this study completed college or were attending graduate school, which contradicts the judgmental attitude of others (e.g., uncultured), strong stereotypes seem to overshadow individual efforts and character.

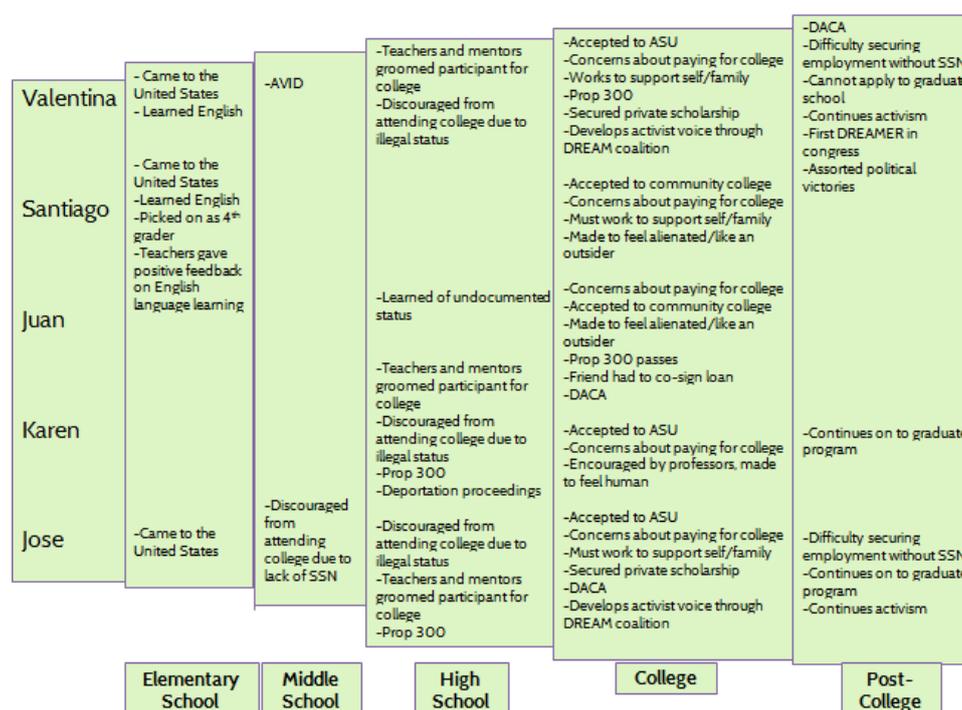
In their discourse, participants also used labels in a positive context. One example is the label “DREAMer,” which was used from an empowering perspective (“...we created a national organization of ‘DREAMers’ and right now we are in the process of becoming a non-profit under the law...”). The label “DREAMer” was associated to the DREAM Act, an initiative that was intended to bring hope to thousands of immigrant youth. Being identified as a DREAMer was considered for many as a first step in the process of acquiring a positive identity.

An interesting case was the “undocumented” label as it was used in both positive and negative contexts. Some participants reported that “undocumented” is a preferred label compared to “illegal” (“...the ‘undocumented’ label is more accepted... very proud of having that label, but doing something about it in a positive way... look at the news talking about undocumented people, you see images of dreamers rallying, I think it was a huge change that has happened...”). However, other participants acknowledged that the stigma of being undocumented is a permanent burden (“...you are undocumented, you are not from here...ties in with being just low income...you are two steps below... ‘undocumented’ really puts that restriction where you always have to go around the system to really just live your life...”). Similarly, “Mexican” and “Mexican-American” had a positive connotation in terms of the rich cultural heritage (“...I have my identity as a Mexican...”) but were also seen as negative labels when society uses them in a deprecatory manner (“...you are ‘a Mexican’...”). Finally, some participants disclosed positive perceptions from family and friends. Many of them were first-generation high school or college students. Therefore, implicit positive labels such as “achiever” were seen in the data to show the participant’s accomplishment in higher education (“...they see my position as like, you’re breaking through these doors...I was the first one to go to college ever from my family, I was the first one to graduate from high school...”). Various of these polarizing attitudes on identical labels described by our participants very much reflect the duality nature of labels described by Bettie (2014). Although some labels can be interpreted as negative for some, labels can also be proudly built into one’s identity and help individuals cope with existing discriminative attitudes against them.

Critical Incidents in the Narratives of Undocumented Students

Due to the nature of our study, examining the experiences of undocumented students in higher education, we wanted to contribute to the existing literature on undocumented students by generating a visual depiction of the critical incidents our participants identified throughout their educational trajectories. By doing so, we are able to visualize students' critical incidents within the time frame in which our participants identified specific incidents they believed to be important. Specifically, critical incidents were categorized longitudinally through schooling phases, starting from elementary school continuing through post-college, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Critical Incidents Parted through Schooling Phases



At the early adjustment phase starting from elementary school, three of our participants vividly remember when they moved from their home countries to the U.S. This was also the period when they first started to learn English. Upon reaching middle school and high school, three of our participants received support from their teachers and mentors but felt discouraged to pursue a college degree due to knowing their undocumented status. In Valentina's case specifically, her teacher in high school had a difficult time encompassing her into the general curriculum because she does not qualify for financial aid due to her undocumented status:

I feel that that class is when I started really getting challenged and I think that's the first time that I met a teacher who had no idea how to go about me [participant laughs]. She was really struggling trying to get me through the entire class and having sort of like the same experience as the other students who were applying to FAFSA and they couldn't... I started to get really discouraged but I think at some point because it was part of the assignments I was just applying for scholarships.

Because Valentina's high school teacher gave an assignment to all her students to apply for college financial aid, Valentina appeared to feel excluded and discouraged, knowing that her undocumented status would prevent her from obtaining financial aid. Nevertheless, all of our participants were ultimately able to overcome their individual barriers and attended college.

College proved to be a fruitful period of activism for many of our participants, but also a period of struggle, as many were concerned with the high financial demands of tuition cost. Few of our participants worked to support their families while attending college, adding an additional layer of financial burden. Most participants were knowledgeable of the previously pronounced Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy, which granted renewable work permits and exemption from deportation to selected undocumented immigrants. However, due to the recent cancellation of the policy in 2017, the ability for undocumented immigrants to legally obtain work in the US has become unclear. While obtaining legal work for financial support may no longer be likely, some participants were able to secure private scholarships that funded for a portion of their tuition. In addition to financial struggles, some participants expressed feeling alienated from their classmates due to their undocumented status. At the same time, other participants were able to find emotional and psychological support from their instructors. For example, Karen appreciated the support she received from one of her professors:

I think I sometimes don't give enough people the credit for lifting me up when I'm down too so actually there's a great professor here... and just by being a teacher, just by caring about his students ah it's just...it's just been wonderful

For our three participants who were able to already graduate college, two continued on to other graduate programs. During this period, participants expressed the practical inconvenience of their undocumented status, as one participant struggled to pursue further education due to her undocumented status, and two participants found difficulty in obtaining employment. Despite these struggles, two of our three college graduates continued to be active in their respective communities, as they advanced their efforts in activism and fighting for the rights of undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

Conclusion

Our analysis and findings illustrate that our participants underwent a series of experiences that varied according to the phases of schooling they were in. Some of our participants underwent language and cultural adaptation in elementary school, and feedback from others regarding their undocumented status arose at middle and high school. College was a critical period for most of our participants where they took active roles in advocating for undocumented students, and this role continued post-college for some as well. In the same time, participants faced common struggles stated in existing literature. For example, some participants had trouble supporting their own education, as well as having to support their family members, and others expressed frustration when they do not qualify to apply for private scholarships (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Some other participants expressed feeling "out of place" in college due to their undocumented status and the feedback they receive from their peers (Gonzales, 2011). Additionally, after college, many participants expressed difficulties in obtaining jobs due to their undocumented status.

Labels our participants experienced also played a crucial role in creating educational inequalities. In addition to negative labels such as "illegal" and "inferior" identified in prior literature (Abrego, 2011), our participants identified a series of other negative labels they heard from others or thought to themselves implicitly. These labels, both implicit and explicit, often

sent negative messages that made our participants second guess their own capabilities, as well as qualifications in pursuing higher education. It is also important to take into account, however, that not all labels identified by our participants were negative. Some were able to find support within their social circle, through friends, family and educators that helped their pursuits in higher education. Labels should also be interpreted in combination with specific contexts, as perceptions of undocumented immigrants change in response to immigration policy changes.

Our participants also felt empowered to break free from the negative labels they experience in their lives. Some were able to do this through positive self-talk, motivation, proving their competency to others through hard work, while others were able to empower themselves and others through means of activism. Surprisingly, contrary to previous literature, the majority of our participants were able to find support for their academic endeavors through peers, family and educators. For example, Karen felt supported, not discriminated against, when she disclosed her undocumented status to one of her college professors and Jose was validated and encouraged by his high school teachers to continue his pursuit in higher education. Validation and encouragement even started at elementary school for one of our participants, as Santiago received an award for the improvement in English that his teacher was able to witness.

To conclude, we found that undocumented Latinx students, like any other student who is interested in pursuing higher education, would like the fair opportunity to pursue higher education. Following through these potential opportunities can be limited by the finances. Our participants advocated for an equal financial platform, being able to receive in-state tuition and qualify for financial aid. In the future, qualitative and quantitative studies could examine more closely variety of funding models and ways to reduce financial difficulties for these students, experiences of students not living in border communities and states, and the role of labels across educational and professional careers. It may also be insightful for researchers to study undocumented students' critical incidents in more detail. For example, longitudinal studies of meaningful events in students' lives, narrative interviews with family members and kin as well as critical ethnography studies of school contexts and living spaces of these students might bring forward important knowledge about students' adjustment and acculturation to American culture. Furthermore, the experiences of these students should not only be described but also used as tools for advocacy and the improvement of their educational experiences.

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