Resiliency, Bajo Que Costó? How Young Undocumented Mexicans Navigate Trauma and Survival

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

RESILIENCY, BAJO QUE COSTÓ?
HOW YOUNG UNDOCUMENTED MEXICANS
NAVIGATE TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY
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Dedicated to my participants. Without you, this work would not exist.
When you see yourself in the written word, you are born.
Your reality is named. Your existence is confirmed.

—Dra. Aurora Chang
ABSTRACT

Under the Trump administration, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) has become a “hot topic” in political discourse and in the media. Amidst this discourse, however, the stories of DACA recipients whose lives are drastically affected by this political drama are often overlooked. Furthermore, a problematic narrative has emerged labeling the “dreamers” as “good immigrants” who need to be saved at the expense of their families, relatives, and other undocumented immigrants who do not fit into the “dreamer” category. Another problematic aspect of current research is celebrating this aspect of “resiliency” that undocumented youth portray and ignoring the consequences this mindset has on mental health and overall quality of life. Using semi-structured interviews, I document the narratives of 20 undocumented Mexican immigrants from 14 states across the country. I challenge the notion of resiliency with the powerful narratives of trauma and survival that emerged from the data. In doing so, I question the role of the researcher and step way from traditional sociological methods to emphasize the importance of participants’ lived experiences.
Introduction

On the morning of September 5th, 2017 I turned on the news, brewed coffee, and fixed myself a bowl of cereal. The “Breaking News” banner on the television forewarned that Attorney General Jeff Sessions was about to make an announcement regarding the program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). I sat down in front of the television, mug of coffee and bowl of cereal teetering on my lap. Jeff Sessions appeared on the television, walked up to the podium, and announced that DACA would be rescinded. As if that were not enough, Sessions “justified” the decision by suggesting DACA recipients were criminals who came to the country “illegally” and were taking advantage of American resources. My coffee turned cold and my cereal became soggy. I sat in horror and shock, wondering what kind of country the United States had become.

Over the next few days, I reached out to six DACA recipients who had been part of my undergraduate research project on DACA recipients’ college experiences: Kay, Gia, Ella, Rob, Stephanie, and Alex. I asked how they were feeling, and how long they had until their DACA protections expired. They were devastated. I decided I wanted to tell their stories. I wanted to capture their emotions during such a time of crisis. At the time, I had also just started my first semester of graduate school, and I’ll admit I was eager to impress faculty members with my research skills. I designed a qualitative research study centered on DACA recipients and their responses to the Trump administration and the Attorney General’s announcement to end the program. I re-interviewed Kay, Gia, Ella, Rob, Stephanie, and Alex
and recruited 14 others for a total sample of 20 participants. I anticipated my research would focus predominantly on the political climate.

With each interview I conducted, however, I began to realize that for these young undocumented immigrants, the political climate was only part of their story. Their stories were so much more than that. I heard deeply personal narratives of people’s childhoods and families, about their journeys crossing the border, their journey to higher education, and their most traumatic experiences. By the time Trump and his campaign came around, my participants had already lived and survived through traumas some people could not even fathom. So I changed my approach, stepped back from my “researcher” role, and gave space for these beautiful, heartbreaking, triumphant, and raw stories. Instead of focusing on the political climate alone, I explored the lived experiences my participants, from childhood to adulthood.

I ask a single research question: what do the stories of young undocumented (Mexican) immigrants teach us about resilience and survival? I focus on trauma and survival, and the problematic notion of resiliency, using the words of my participants to frame my work. After all, these are their stories.

A Brief Overview of DACA.

DACA was created via executive action by former President Barack Obama. DACA protects undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States under the age of sixteen from deportation. It also allows them to legally work and study in the United States. Recipients must renew their DACA every two years, undergo background checks and
Previous research has shown that DACA recipients report the program has had a positive impact on their lives (Teranishi et. al, 2015). Due to the program, they have been able to attend college, open bank accounts, have jobs, and purchase cars and homes. The program still holds many limitations, however. It was always temporary, costly to renew, and does not grant any form of legal status (or any pathway to citizenship). Thus, recipients are still considered undocumented and ineligible for any sort of government aid, such as financial aid, Medicaid, food stamps, etc.

DACA was rescinded by the Trump administration on September 5th, 2017. A deadline was set for March 5th, 2018: those whose DACA status expired before March 5th had one month to acquire the $500 to renew for another two years. Those whose benefits expired after March 5th would lose their DACA status at the time of expiration. Months later, in January of 2018, due to federal court orders USCIS allowed for DACA recipients to apply for renewals once again, removing the March 5th deadline. However, since the September 5th announcement, no new DACA applications have been accepted (USCIS, 2018).

**Literature Review**

The “Dreamers.”

The media has created a misleading framework when talking about the lives of undocumented youth, calling them “dreamers”. The typical “dreamer” narrative can be harmful as it creates a good immigrant/bad immigrant hierarchy, and attempts to justify policy reform for
the “dreamers” by placing the blame on their parents. This is especially harmful because using individualistic blame ignores the problem with the larger system in place; and in this way, an exploitative system can thrive while placing burden and blame on the individuals caught within it (Mills, 1959).

Another problem with the typical “dreamer” narrative is that it is framed with the argument that they should “stay” because they are good students and display “good citizenship” (Chang, 2016) despite being non-citizens in America. Additionally, DACA recipients able to obtain jobs have contributed to the economy and as the argument goes, deporting DACA recipients would mean that the U.S. economy would suffer. While yes, DACA recipients are both good (theoretical) citizens and perform extremely well academically, and that yes, the economy would suffer because they provide a lot of capital with their labor and fees paid to the government, this should not be the end to the argument. Doctora Aurora Chang (2016) exquisitely states:

It is time that the educational community recognizes that undocumented immigrants bring much more to our classrooms and communities than a disposition that conveys so-called good, albeit, unauthorized citizenship. (p. 1166)

This notion of “good citizenship” is extremely problematic and harmful because it teaches young immigrants that the only way to be accepted in American society is to be obedient, agreeable, and deferential to authority (Chang, 2016). The “Dreamers” do more than just dream and are more than just assets; they and their families are part of society, part of our communities, and part of our networks. Losing them would mean much more than just losing an asset; viewing them as such is extremely dehumanizing (Del Razo, 2012) and objectifying.
Here it is essential to note that while it is important to share the stories of undocumented immigrants, it can be risky to do so because this is an extremely vulnerable population (A. Chang, personal communication, October 20, 2017). Undocumented immigrants in general run the risk of discovery and deportation. While DACA recipients are protected from deportation, with the recent announcement to rescind the program this population is now quickly becoming vulnerable for deportation, too. While deportation is the most pronounced risk this population faces, they are also at risk for discrimination and hate crimes with exposure. “Being undocumented is an experience that can only be safely written about after the fact” (Chang, 2016, p.1168), and this has significant implications in research for two reasons: 1) Researchers need to be mindful and respectful of the kind of information their subjects may feel comfortable or not comfortable sharing and 2) there will be gaps in research from information that is too sensitive to share and from people who are not participating in studies from fear of exposure or lack of trust in the researcher.

Educational Experiences of Undocumented Students.

One of the most fascinating paradoxes in the experiences of undocumented immigrants is the exceptional educational achievement of undocumented students. Teranishi et. al (2015) reported that over 80% of undocumented undergraduates have a grade point average of 3.0 or above (on a 4.0 scale) and overall, they tend to outperform their documented peers. Educational achievement is a means for many undocumented students to not only show resilience, but to also cope with their situation (Chang, 2011; Del Razo, 2012; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzalez & Chavez, 2012; Teranishi et al., 2015). Chang (2011) adds that not only is this a coping mechanism, but
also a way for undocumented students to compensate for their lack of legal documentation by accruing as many academic “documents” as possible. She coined this phenomenon hyperdocumentation, “the effort to accrue awards, accolades, and academic degrees to compensate for undocumented status” (p. 508). Once an undocumented immigrant herself, Dra. Chang writes about her own experiences with hyperdocumentation:

Hyperdocumentation was critical to my survival, legal or not. I continued to accumulate my documents in the form of degrees, theses, awards, and the like in order to further build my case. I wanted people to know that I was qualified and deserving of my place in this country. In my mind, such documents would deem my qualifications—and me—unimpeachable. (p. 515)

Despite their habits to “hyperdocument”, it should not be ignored that undocumented students face many challenges in the American culture of academia. The transition into higher education, for example, can be very rough as these students encounter a lack of emotional and financial resources that documented students usually have access to when transitioning into colleges and universities (Enriquez, 2011). To navigate the system amidst discrimination and lack of social capital, Erriquez (2011) found that the undocumented Latino students in his interview study would piece together various resources such as advice from peers, small scholarships, and relationships with a few trusted mentors. Thus, undocumented students learn to be very resourceful, despite the lack thereof.

DACA recipients are a group that came to the United States as minors, some as young as just a few weeks old, often brought by their parents. So for them, the process to hyperdocument (Chang, 2011) starts at a very early age, before they even realize the implications of their actions.
Furthermore, the American culture being one to aggressively push for assimilation, many DACA recipients and undocumented immigrants who grew up in the United States felt the need to show patriotism and Americanism. By doing so, they might also have felt that such dedication to America could protect them from the consequences and stigma of being undocumented (Chang, 2016). Dra. Chang, speaking from her own experiences, writes: “My schooling process taught me, intentionally or not, that academic achievement would protect me from unwanted inquiries about my ‘illegal’ status” (2016, p. 1164).

In elementary school, Dra. Chang was also awarded for demonstrating good “citizenship” qualities at her school, another way in which she hyperdocumented. But she recognized the paradox in the situation: “It was like I had beaten the system—I was not a U.S. citizen but I was being recognized for being an exemplary one…there was a naughty satisfaction in that irony (2016, p.1165).

This paradox of attempting to be a good citizen despite being undocumented is very complex. It makes for a strenuously complicated and internally conflicting identity formation that young undocumented immigrants carry for the rest of their lives, even if they do someday accrue legal status. Thus, being undocumented is not just a status; it becomes a way of living through daily experiences.

The Undocumented Life.

Gonzales and Chavez (2012) discuss the undocumented way of living as a “condition of illegality” (p. 257) in which even the smallest of daily actions are affected to some degree by undocumented status. There is an ingrained fear and hyper-awareness of one’s undocumented
state, as one interviewee from Gonzales and Chavez (2012) noted: “everything you do is illegal because you are illegal” (p. 255). The theme of undocumented immigrants feeling vulnerable has been previously researched; they are often not only living in fear for themselves, but also for their families being discovered, deported (Corrunker, 2012; Teranishi et. al, 2015; Joseph, 2015), stigmatized, and discriminated against (Del Razo, 2012).

The “condition of illegality” (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012) does not necessarily have to carry such a negative connotation, however. The condition of being undocumented also results in a set of “knowledge, skills and intuition” coined by Chang (2016, p. 1164) as “undocumented intelligence”. Undocumented intelligence is powerful in the ways in which undocumented immigrants navigate their daily routines, encounters, successes, and hardships. This does not affect all undocumented immigrants the same way, however, because it involves intersecting identities (Chang, 2016) and is experienced both uniquely and in patterns among the undocumented community. When undocumented status changes, however, so does undocumented intelligence and the ways it is exercised when one no longer faces the lack of papers. Despite having documentation, those who were once undocumented will always carry undocumented intelligence with them (Chang, 2016).

Another way in which undocumented intelligence is manifested is through interaction with authority figures (Chang, 2016). This includes any person in a position of power, which may be law enforcement or government workers, but also include teachers and professors. Teachers specifically are often the first form of authority undocumented children are exposed to (A. Chang, personal communication, October 20, 2017). Chang (2016) in relating to her own
experiences stated she felt she had to be “painfully polite” with people such as police officers, teachers, doctors, and government workers, and adds that undocumented immigrants often feel they have to be very aware to project themselves as safe and non-threatening. Conflict with authority figures, she added, is the “ultimate trigger” (p. 1171) in exposing undocumented status.

One of the most prevalent themes in existing research is using some variation of the metaphor “living in the shadows” to refer to undocumented immigrants who are not open about their immigration status (Corrunker, 2012; Del Razo, 2012; Orozco et. al, 2011; Teranishi et, al, 2015). Many undocumented activists have turned this shadow metaphor into a positive experience, organizing “Coming Out of the Shadows” events to publicly speak out and share their immigration stories (Corrunker, 2012). Corrunker (2012) conducted an ethnographic study of undocumented activism and viewed Coming Out of the Shadows events as positive experiences, because they allowed for many undocumented youth to take ownership of their stories and connect with others who had had similar experiences and create networks. Such networks will be really important in times of political tension as undocumented immigrants seek support and understanding form one another. However, those who are not ready to share their stories should not be forgotten, because their stories are just as valuable, even when left untold.

**Implications of Undocumented Status for Young People.**

While the implication of undocumented intelligence (Chang, 2016) and the “condition of illegality” (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012) are both persistent and abstract in the lives of undocumented immigrants from an early age, many are unaware of more physical and defining obstacles of undocumented status until they face them (Corrunker, 2012; Gonzales, 2011). This
might include financial obstacles and the inability to travel abroad. In my own study, many informants were unaware they could not have financial aid for college until they attempted to apply for it. Some did not know they were undocumented until their families told them, and found out by attempting to get a job or a driver’s license.

The biggest obstacles most undocumented immigrants report, and the biggest obstacle my own informants reported as well, are in regards to financial difficulties (Del Razo, 2012; Enriquez, 2011; Navarro, 2013; Teranishi et al., 2015). As stated before, undocumented students are ineligible for financial aid, and they are also ineligible for most scholarships. This makes obtaining a higher education significantly more difficult than it should be, as undocumented students do not have equal access to education or equal access to educational opportunities. Additionally, undocumented students are disproportionately more likely to have grown up in poverty (Teranishi et al., 2015). 61.3% of the undocumented students surveyed by Teranishi et al. (2015) lived in a household with a cumulative annual income of less than $30,000 and 72.4% of them worked in addition to attending college full-time. Undocumented students work not only to support themselves through school, but also to contribute to their family incomes and help their parents, siblings, or other relatives that may be living at home (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012).

The different dynamics and obstacles undocumented immigrants face create a lot of stress, which has significant implications on their mental health (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014; Gonzales and Chavez, 2012; Teranishi et. al, 2015). Teranishi et. al (2015) looked at mental health issues of undocumented undergraduates from 55 different countries of origin. They
experienced significantly higher levels of anxiety than the general population. 28.7% of male participants and 36.7% of female participants tested above the clinical cut off level for anxiety, when just 4% of males and 9% of females in the general population typically test above the cut off level. Teranishi et. al (2015) speculate undocumented students’ isolation in their college campuses contributes to the detriment in their mental health. The study also reported undocumented students’ unfair and negative treatment received from faculty and peers who knew of their immigration status, which also contributed to their feelings of isolation and stress. The mental health issues of undocumented immigrants are only worsened by the fact that they experience a lack of adequate access to health care in general, because they are ineligible for most health insurance coverage, and even DACA recipients are ineligible for benefits through the Affordable Care Act (Raymon-Flesch et. al, 2014; Gonzales and Chavez, 2012). Research done by Raymon-Flesch et. al (2014) and Gonzales and Chavez (2012) looked at health care access and implications for undocumented youth. Raymon-Flesch et. al (2014) focused on DACA recipients specifically and Gonzales and Chaves (2012) focused on 1.5 generation Latinos, those born in a different country but raised and educated in the United States. Gonzales and Chavez (2012) found that undocumented youth are much less likely to have accessed health care in the past 12 months than their documented peers and are also less likely to have healthy eating and exercising habits. Raymond-Flesch et. al (2014) added that DACA recipients, despite being protected from deportation, would avoid the health care system whenever possible due to experiences of discrimination and barriers in cost, since they were most often uninsured as well. This study also found there were a lack of mental health care resources for undocumented
immigrants, specifically to treat depression, anxiety, and trauma. Furthermore, it cited stress as extremely damaging to both mental and physical health, as it also affected the eating and exercise habits of the subjects studied. Many undocumented youth admitted to contemplating suicide (Raymon-Flesch et. al, 2014). Being undocumented can be extremely harmful and dangerous to the body (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012) and to one’s sense of overall well-being.

**Studying and Analyzing Trauma**

**Trauma and Sociology.**

Trauma was not originally a phenomenon I sought to analyze in my research. Interestingly, this theme emerged unprompted. As I learned about the experiences of undocumented youth through my interviews, the theme of trauma and the survival of traumatic experiences became distinctly apparent. Thus, before divulging the narratives of my participants, it is important to take a moment to address trauma as a concept and its situatedness within sociological literature.

The American Psychiatric Association defines trauma, or more accurately, *traumatic events*, as “events that involve direct and indirect exposure to actual or threatened death and injury and that are subjectively appraised as frightening, inducing helplessness or horror” (Newman et al., 2006, p. 30). This is a useful medical definition, and certainly many undocumented immigrants may experience traumatic events that involve a perception of threatened death. However, such specific medical definitions do not take other types of emotional and mental trauma and their socio-emotional implications into consideration. Thus, for the purposes of this paper I will refer to trauma or as defined by Larrabee et al. (2003): “An
extremely distressing or emotionally disturbing event” (p. 353). A broader definition of trauma allows for a more inclusive dialogue when discussing trauma and its meanings on both individual and collective levels.

In regards to trauma, sociologists are concerned with addressing oppression and inequalities, especially in relation to vulnerable populations (Thompson, 1995). However, sociological research on trauma and its social implications has generally been inconsistent and sparse (Patten et al., 1989). Trauma is exceptionally difficult to measure empirically, because different groups experience and perceive trauma differently (Degloma, 2009), and thus trauma is most often told through stories and narratives. At times, sociologists do not take such “subjective” accounts seriously. Some sociologists tend to render stories as unstable, unreliable, and “deceptive” (Polletta et al., 2011, p. 110). As a consequence, valuable narratives of trauma are lost to empirical scrutiny.

Quantitative approaches to trauma have not been able to provide a substantial account of the implications of traumatic events. For example, a 1995 study on stress published in the *American Sociological Review* (Turner et al., 1995) addresses a possible relationship between childhood trauma and depressive symptoms, but is unable to further examine how depressive symptoms manifested or what kind of trauma was experienced. Fortunately, the field has evolved and current research (also published in the *American Sociological Review*) shows a strong relationship not only between childhood trauma and adulthood depression, but further associates both childhood and adolescent trauma with general adulthood health disadvantages—in physical and mental health symptoms (Ferraro et al., 2016).
While sociological research on trauma is not sufficiently extensive or comprehensive, it is understood that at the very least, trauma deeply influences people’s perceptions of their social realities (Thompson, 1995). Further research has also expanded beyond examining only the individual to how social groups collectively experience and transmit traumas (Degloma, 2009). Current frameworks are more adept at linking individual traumas to social problems, and though they still need continued development (Degloma, 2009), they correlate nicely with Mill’s (1959) ideologies of the relationship between personal troubles and structural issues.

**Consequences of Trauma.**

Trauma is not only “extremely distressing” (Larrabee et al., 2003) to those who experience it, but also has drastic consequences on daily life:

[Trama] undercuts the usual, slashes unspoken assumptions to shreds, and attacks the very meaning of one’s life, even as the trauma experiences sometimes continues the motions of everyday existence. (p. 354)

Current research indicates certain measurable consequences of trauma such as a higher likelihood to drop out of high school (Porsche et al., 2011), impact on socioeconomic status, higher likelihood to divorce, increased mental and physical health problems, and a higher likelihood to engage in risky lifestyle behaviors such as smoking and heavy drinking (Ferraro et al., 2016). In regards to mental health, childhood trauma (including childhood abuse) is an indicator for diagnosed depression in adulthood. Additionally, experiencing trauma during any life stage increases the likelihood of depression symptoms (Ferraro et al., 2016).

Certain groups are more vulnerable to traumatic experiences than others. However, Endreß & Pabst (2013) emphasize that researchers need to reject the idea that “traumatized
people [were] already mentally unstable before the traumatizing experience” (p. 97). Latinos
tend to be the group most susceptible to trauma and its life consequences when compared to
other racial and ethnic categories (Porche et al., 2011). In Porche et al.’s (2011) study, Latinos
were the group most likely to drop out of high school not only in response to trauma, but because
of familial and economic obligations as well. Undocumented status played a significant role in
those most likely to have been exposed to childhood trauma, further making it the most
indicative variable in relation to dropping out of high school.

Many of the consequences trauma evokes are not so easily measured, however. Patten et
al.’s (1989) research in the field of social work attempted to map the traumatic effects of sexual
abuse in four categories: 1) Traumatic sexualization, 2) Stigmatization, 3) Betrayal, and 4) Powerlessness. While this research is not recent, I found many of my participants (especially those who experienced sexual abuse) exhibiting responses to trauma that fit into these four
categories. More recently, Endreß & Pabst (2013) identified five categories of symptoms in
relation to victims of violence: 1) Alteration of spatial experience, 2) Alteration of experience of
time, 3) Alteration of self-awareness and perception of others, 4) Altered form of memory (in the
sense of a traumatic memory), and 5) Inability to communicate the experience (speechlessness).
Such broad categories are useful in identifying behavior and symptoms of trauma while
minimizing unnecessary scrutiny or disregard. Trauma also carries substantial social
implications: It involves a loss of social community, disrupts socialization, and does not stop at
the individual but transgresses through time and generations (Degloma, 2009).
Patten et al. (1989) also identified six stages of trauma recovery: 1) Denial, 2) Catharsis, 3) Guilt, 4) Loss of control, 5) Anger and rage, and 6) Integration and acceptance. The researchers emphasized that these stages were not mutually exclusive, nor chronological, and that trauma victims in their recovery process often experienced stages simultaneously and would move in and out of certain stages (like denial) multiple times. I observed my participants demonstrate various combinations of these recovery stages as well.

Contemporary research on trauma calls for a more holistic approach that is not solely focused on the individual (Endreß & Pabst, 2013; Degloma, 2009). Trauma is not exclusively experienced at the individual level: “Psychological consequences of traumatic events are shared by members of established communities and spread through social relationships” (Degloma, 2009, p. 105). While individuals do react to trauma, reactions to trauma correlate with the social groups they belong in, because trauma is transmitted through social interaction and shared events and experiences (Degloma, 2009). There is much research that could be done on how certain cultural groups experience and respond to trauma. For example, as touched upon in Porche et al.’s (2011) study, certain groups may not recognize or prioritize the significance of a traumatic event because they must prioritize familial or economic needs first.

**Studying Trauma: Ethics and Methodology.**

The aforementioned characteristics, complexities, and consequences of trauma make it a complicated subject matter to research, and pose ethical and methodological dilemmas. Newman et al. (2006) argue that research in trauma should produce an advancement in knowledge like any research, but it should be an advancement in knowledge that benefits survivors, too. Thompson
Thompson (1995) pushed back against traditional “empirical” and “objective” approaches at a time when trauma research was predominantly quantitative. Pulling from a feminist methodological approach, she argues that participants, not researcher, should be rendered as the experts, especially when the research involves such personal experiences.

Thompson (1995) further addresses how research on trauma should be concerned with power dynamics, because in any participant-researcher relationship, the researcher will always hold more power. She adds that the researcher should work at establishing trust and understanding with their participants, as this approach is beneficial in collecting quality and ethical data. Thompson advocated for researchers to be vulnerable with their participants, too:

The use of self-disclosure in research on trauma is appropriate methodologically because it is an effective way to find participants. It is also sound ethically because people willing to talk about private, painful, and power-laden issues deserve the right to scrutinize both the research design and the researcher. (p. 57)

Current qualitative methods used in researching trauma include conversation analysis, ethnography, comparative historical research, and discourse analysis (Polletta et al., 2011), but even qualitative methods can be dismissive of the importance of the participant-researcher relationship conveyed by Thompson (1995). As addressed previously, sociologists can be skeptical of stories and the “liberatory claims” they convey (Polletta et al., 2011, p. 111). Some researchers are now pushing for a less traditional approach that values participants and the stories they tell. Larrabee et al. (2003) and Degloma (2009) do this utilizing narrative data and storytelling methodologies. Larrabee et al. (2003) argue that not only is storytelling a valid mythological approach, but it also is a “powerful element for healing” (p. 353). An important
ethical component Larrabee et al. (2003) allude to is that it is important to consider participants and where they are in the recovery stages of trauma (Patten et al., 1989), if they have reached a recovery stage at all. Even within an ethical narrative approach that allows the storyteller control over the content they produce, Larrabee et al. (2003) add that there is no one right way to do storytelling. The telling of trauma will vary from person to person and across groups, which requires the researcher to be open-minded and methodologically flexible.

Methodology

Sample.

My sample consisted of 20 individuals ages 19 through 32 who lived in 14 states across the United States. Both the median and the average age of participants were 24. The median and average age of arrival to the United States was 5 and 6, respectively. Participants self-identified as undocumented and as DACA recipients. When referring to my participants, I will use “undocumented” and “DACA recipient” interchangeably in response to the language used by participants. All 20 participants were born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States during childhood. Mexican participants were not specifically targeted or recruited; this was a coincidental outcome. 19 out of 20 physically crossed the Mexico-United States border during migration and one participant migrated via airplane; this too was a coincidental outcome.

Seven participants were full-time undergraduate students at the time of their interview. Three were graduate students pursuing Master’s Degrees and one was an advanced PhD student. The remaining nine were in the work force full-time; two of which were working full-time and taking undergraduate courses part-time.
Recruitment.

6 participants were interviewed a year prior for a similar project, and volunteered to be re-interviewed for this project. The remaining 14 participants were recruited from immigrant support organizations across different institutions and social media platforms. These organizations and platforms were specifically selected because I either had 1) already established a personal contact with them or 2) had a connection within the organization to help me advertise and recruit. I also utilized snowball sampling by asking participants to pass on my contact information if they knew someone who would be eligible to participate in this study. To be eligible, participants had to be eighteen years or older and self-identify as a DACA recipient. There was a drawback in representativeness because I was recruiting predominantly from platforms with which I have some sort of contact/rapport, but given the vulnerability of my population, it would not be feasible or ethical to attempt a random sample (Schutt, 2015).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
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**Data Collection.**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 45 to 90 minutes, both in-person and over the phone, depending on preference and location of the participant. Data collection occurred between November 2017 and May 2018. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility to modify and add questions during the interview, and allowed
interviewees to elaborate on their answers and provide additional information where they saw necessary. This style of interviewing gives the informants greater control of the data they are providing, and allows them to share experiences important and valuable to them, and not just what may be important or valuable to the researcher (Schutt, 2015). All participants provided verbal consent agreeing to participate in an interview and to be audio recorded for transcription purposes. The IRB approval from Loyola University included a Waiver of Documentation of Consent, so participants did not have to sign their names on any document. This eliminates the risk of breach of confidentiality via a paper trail. Each participant was also assigned a pseudonym to further protect any identifiable information from being linked to this study.

Data Analysis.

I formulated various strategies with which to analyze data, predominantly through coding. While conducting interviews, I actively took notes on what my informants said and on themes that came up, anticipating future codes. Then, while transcribing interviews, I took additional process notes and added them directly to the transcripts. Process notes were very helpful in analyzing data in interviews where participants not only responded to my questions, but also created new themes through their own stories, experiences, and concerns raised.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I used various levels of coding to analyze the data in depth. From my interview and process notes, I had listed preliminary themes and codes. From there, I began with In-Vivo coding (Schutt, 2015), manually pulling aside direct quotations from my informants. I then analyzed the same data with open-coding, noting patterns and inferences that emerged from the data. From the open-coding process I developed broader meta-codes to
finalize the themes. One example of a finalized theme was trauma/traumatic experiences. The broad theme of trauma was broken down into subthemes, and in this case the subthemes were different types of traumatic experiences (e.g. crossing the border, domestic violence, sexual abuse, etc.) The finalized themes and subthemes were used to lead my results section and to propose a theoretical framework and epistemological approach I found useful and beneficial in this type of research.

Limitations.

The coding process to investigate emerging themes might pose some generalizability issues because such themes may over-simplify and generalize the experiences of undocumented youth and overlook the individuality of their stories. To mitigate this issue I use ample direct quotations and identify specific examples from participants’ stories. I often stepped back as a researcher and used an ethnographic and storytelling approach (Polletta et al., 2011). This allowed me to both address themes in my findings as well as to shed light on the uniqueness of each story.

The biggest limitation I experienced with this project was recruitment. Recruiting during such a tense political climate proved to be difficult because some people were afraid to speak out and uneasy of whom to trust. As a consequence, the recruitment process lasted about five months. The total duration of this project, from recruitment to completion of this thesis, was one year.

One of the most notable limitations in pursuing this kind of research that seeks to understand the lives of vulnerable populations is that unfortunately, we will miss the stories of
those who are too afraid or too concerned to share their experiences, even in a confidential setting. I strive to present my work in a way that powerfully conveys the stories of those who chose to share, but also the silence of those who didn’t.

**Statement on Research Ethics.**

This study does raise concerns in research ethics because it involves a vulnerable population. Loyola University does not consider undocumented immigrants a vulnerable population under their Institutional Review Board standard, but I do consider this a vulnerable population and am treating them as such for the purpose of this project.

The biggest ethical concern in my study is the issue of confidentiality. DACA recipients are typically protected from deportation, but with the rescinding of the program, some of my subjects may lose their protections in the future. To minimize any risk of leak of identifiable information, I obtained a Waiver of Documentation of Consent through the IRB, which means that my participants did not sign their names on any document. Instead, I sent them an informed consent form over e-mail and allowed them to ask any questions or raise any concerns about the study. When starting the interview I obtained verbal consent stating the participant agreed to participate in the study as described in the informed consent form and to be audio recorded for transcription purposes. There was no paper trail with identifiable or confidential information. To further protect confidentiality, I removed all traces of identifiable information from transcripts, such as names and locations. All participants were assigned pseudonyms unrelated to their real names, and real names will never appear on any research materials.
Results

“I didn’t know it was going to mean such an oppressive lifestyle”: Growing Up Undocumented.

All of my participants immigrated to the United States as children, usually (but not always) with family members or relatives. 19 out of the 20 physically crossed the border, sometimes under gruesome conditions. Upon crossing the border they would then travel to their final destination in the United States; sometimes this would be an extra few hours in a vehicle, other times this would entail a cross-country trip, from the border to states like Illinois, Pennsylvania, or New York (see Table 1). Only one person migrated from Mexico via airplane. Specific ages of arrival are listed in Table 1. Those who immigrated as toddlers naturally did not have memory of their life in Mexico or of their move to the United States. However, those who remember parts of their childhood in Mexico still did most of their growing up in the United States, with the exception of Lemkin. She migrated at age thirteen and spent most of her childhood in Mexico. The United States was often portrayed to them as a place of dreams and opportunities. It was “el otro lado,” or “the other side,” as referred to by Kay and Rosa.

Eleven participants reported always knowing that they were undocumented, while the other nine found out in their late teens. Usually this moment came when they tried to get a driver’s license, apply for a job, or apply to college or for financial aid. Those who were “shielded” (Antonia) from their undocumented status as children tended to display more resentment toward their situation--after all, finding out about being undocumented was quite a shock. These participants described the moment as heartbreaki ng, shocking, and disappointing. Some discussed this moment feeling like having their dreams crushed, after growing up to
believe they would be able to drive and go to college like their peers. Lupe and Leila did not even know they were Mexican; they were too young to remember moving so their families told them they were born in the United States. For these two women, not only did they have to confront their immigration status as teens, but they also had to come to terms with the fact that they were born in a different country than they were told.

The eleven who knew about their status from the start discussed that while carrying this knowledge as a child was a burden, they were grateful for not having to deal with the shock of finding out later in life. As Kay stated, “In a way [knowing about my status] was good because it was reality. I’m happy that I did know and that I wasn’t surprised. I think that would’ve hurt more, to be surprised.”

Knowing about their undocumented status as children took its toll, however. Most remembered being told “don’t tell anyone” by their parents and the feeling of having to always keep a secret. This meant having to grow up quickly and take on adult responsibilities as young children. Lemkin, Stephanie, Belinda, Cristal, and Rosa all discussed vividly the adult-like responsibilities they had as children in taking on caretaker roles (which is a very gendered role as well; none of my male participants discussed having caregiving roles as children). Taking care of younger siblings was a given for those who had them. Furthermore, everyone (with the exception of Antonia) discussed living in financially stringent circumstances. These circumstances negatively impacted their living conditions, nutrition, clothing, health care, and the educational opportunities available to them. Additionally, undocumented immigrants often have few family members in the United States with them. Most leave behind relatives like grandparents, aunts,
uncles, cousins, and sometimes even siblings. Simply put, growing up undocumented came with serious hardships.

Whether they knew about their undocumented status from the start or not, all participants agreed that their undocumented status, and the implications thereof, became inevitable and overwhelming during their late teens. “That’s when it really hits you,” Belinda commented. This is when people realized all of the things they could not do simply for being undocumented: get a job, a driver’s license, apply for financial aid, etc. For some, this even meant having to pay out-of-state tuition in states where undocumented students are barred from receiving in-state tuition at public universities. Lemkin, who always knew she was undocumented, added: “I did not know how I was going to be excluded completely from universities, from jobs, and that I was going to have to encounter labor laws being violated.”

The towns and cities where people lived made a difference in how supported or isolated they felt in navigating their undocumented life. Rob, for example, grew up in a conservative, predominantly white, town where he and his family were outsiders. Thus, he learned to be private and cautious of whom to trust, and this mentality followed him as an adult. Olivia, on the other hand, had the opposite experience. She grew up in a large city, in a neighborhood full of other Mexican immigrant families just like hers. She felt supported and was “oblivious” about her undocumented status (until reaching high school) because she never felt any different from her community. These communities became vital when the political climate intensified as a result of the 2016 presidential elections. People like Olivia were able to rally with their communities and feel “empowered” while those in towns like Rob’s were driven into a deeper sense of fear and panic.
The process of identity formation for young undocumented Mexicans is complex, and rather difficult. For most, they don’t feel “Mexican enough” after having spent nearly all of their lives in the United States. But they also do not feel “American” because their status prevents them from legally becoming Americans. In Clara’s words, “I’m not from here but I’m not from there. I’m stuck between two countries. Because legally, I’m from Mexico, but emotionally I’m not. I’m in a country that doesn’t even want me.”

This sentiment of feeling “stuck” complicates identity development. Being undocumented added a layer of shame, and to compensate for that, some people would attempt to conceal their “Mexicaness” as a way to also conceal their undocumented status. Lupe in middle school would wear green contact lenses and dye her hair to better pass as white or American. Ella described her younger self as an “All-American girl.” Kay’s friends would tell her she was “like a white girl.” But simply playing the role of American (Chang, 2016) is not enough for undocumented immigrants so achieve a sense of belonging and inclusiveness. Antonia explained that she was “too white” to other Mexicans, but “too Mexican” for her white peers. “I felt like I needed to search for an identity, but I didn’t know where to start,” she stated.

The transition into adulthood was valuable for some to more firmly form their Mexican identities, especially once they no longer felt the need to conceal their ethnicity as they did as children/teens. For Stephanie, it was important to identify as Mexican even when she was not “proud” of the conditions in her country. After being the “All-American girl,” Ella claimed she is “just now learning how to be an immigrant.” Most people rejected the idea of being considered Mexican-American, because they felt that took away from their Mexicaness; “I’m Mexican. I’m
not Mexican-American. I’m Mexican. From the motherland,” Kay firmly stated. Lemkin, considering the hardships she experienced in the United States, had a similar viewpoint:

“Americans denied me access to everything so I feel a grudge that makes me say I am not American.” Lupe, on the other hand, felt differently:

I think to call myself a Mexican would be inaccurate because I have friends who were born and spent their youth and teenage years and adulthood in Mexico. And we're very different people culturally, you know. So I don't feel it's accurate for me to represent myself as a Mexican, but I am like a Mexican who has been in the US for most of my life, and has really responded to that kind of culture. So for that reason I would consider myself like Chicana or even Mexican-American.

Despite feeling conflicted on their identities, and even for those who most valued their Mexicanness, most participants claimed their “home” was the United States. Knowing where “home” was gave them a greater sense of determination in fighting for their rights to remain in the country. “I’ve been here since the age of two,” Alex passionately conveyed. “I’ve never been to Mexico, I didn’t grow up in Mexico. This is my home and I couldn’t see myself anywhere else.” Alex was more tied to an “American” identity and held more conservative views than any other participant, though this may also have been a subconscious effort to display “good citizenship” (Chang, 2016) to prove himself worthy of the American identity. Alex also added “I respect this country’s processes and laws and I try to abide by them because I am here and I am not trying to cause any sort of problems.”

For Alex, making the case that America is his true home was grounded in a sense of pride. For most others however, calling the United States home in such a time of political turmoil was conflicting and often saddening. “I’ve been here my whole life. There’s no other place I can really call home,” said Leila. From Gia: “When I think of home, I do not think of Mexico. I think
of [Arizona city]. The same house I lived in for almost ten years. That's where I think of home.”

Lupe again seemed conflicted: “I don't really have a strong idea of what home is,” she said.

The last two components of identity formation I observed in my participants were how public or private they were about their status and how they felt about being undocumented in general. Generally, feeling proud or confident despite their status correlated with being public, or more open about sharing their status with others. On the other hand, those who had a harder time accepting their status and were less confident in their immigrant identity tended to be those who were more private and resistant in sharing their situation with others. Those who were more private typically came from harsher backgrounds and had more limited opportunities, especially in education. These were my observations in regards to how participants viewed their own situations and not an insinuation that being either public or private is better or that one is more or less courageous than the other.

Being an immigrant and being an undocumented immigrant constitute different meanings. Gia eloquently pointed this out early on in her interview:

There are differences between being an immigrant and being an undocumented immigrant. People can understand what it’s like to be an immigrant but they can’t understand what it’s like to be undocumented, because those are two completely different things.

Many people pointed out that being undocumented made them feel “different” than everyone else, including other immigrants and other Mexicans. Many times this was a consequence of socioeconomic status. Clara and Isabel recalled being bullied by other Mexican kids because of the clothes they wore and the way they spoke English. “They bullied me because I wore clothes from la segundita,” Isabel said. Therefore, even for those who were exposed to
other Mexican immigrants, the identity formation process was complicated by undocumented status and the implications thereof (like lack of money, for example).

Some participants were proud of including their undocumented status in how they identified, as many claimed it is a symbol of their resilience and accomplishments despite their immigration status being a constant obstacle. However, as I will discuss at length later on, resiliency often bears a harmful weight that leads to feelings of despair and hopelessness when one’s immigration situation does not change or worsens (the latter becoming more likely in the current political climate). “Sometimes I hate it, being undocumented,” said Rosa. “Why do I have to deal with this? None of my friends have to deal with this.”

The cost of working incredibly hard to change a situation that is out of one’s control can become unbearable. As the researcher, it was heartbreaking to witness this, and to hear statements such as Antonia’s: “I’ve dedicated my whole life to this country. I’ve done everything by the books… where do I fit in?”

“I had to figure it out myself”: The (Undocumented) Path to Higher Education

The Supreme Court case *Plyer v. Doe* ruled in 1982 that all children have the right to public elementary and secondary education regardless of immigration status. While this was a landmark case for the rights of undocumented children, it “fell short of addressing access to higher education” (Corrunker, 2012, p.153). In reaching high school, undocumented status becomes a more visible burden as I previously discussed. Furthermore, my participants felt unsupported in high school because no one, not even their guidance counselors, had the knowledge or information to help undocumented students transition to college. Stephanie’s high school counselor told her to go back to Mexico, for example. For countless others, they were simply told there was no information available to help them. “I felt like they didn’t try hard
enough to help me,” said Olivia. In some cases, guidance counselors would even give them false information, like that they should file a FAFSA or that they could not apply to college at all. It is clear from this research that high school counselors need to receive more training and education, and such training should be mandatory to ensure that undocumented students are not being mistreated or receiving false or prejudiced information.

As a consequence of misinformed counselors, undocumented high school students have to “figure it out” for themselves if they want to pursue a higher education. The phrase “I had to figure it out for myself” or a variation of it, appeared in nearly every interview. Valeria expressed “I had to take it upon myself,” and for Daniel, “it was up to me.” While other students received personalized college advice, undocumented students have to research colleges and apply for them most often completely on their own. Those that did receive help from mentors in high school, like Alex, are rare exceptions. Seeing the success stories of many of my participants may give the illusion that “figuring it out” for themselves was not so bad after all. However, I do not want to convey a false sense of glorified resiliency, because the consequences of receiving little to no support from counselors, mentors, and teachers can be severe.

Clara, for example, dropped out of high school for three months when she found out she was undocumented. She found “no point” in continuing on when there were no job opportunities for her and no chance of making it to college. Her opportunities were further compromised by the socioeconomic conditions of her city:

Growing up in a [Pennsylvania city] school is hard because our education here really sucks. Even when we get to college, it's not the same as somebody who lives in the suburbs because our education is really poor.
Clara did return to high school and was still able to graduate on time by taking extra classes. “I wanted to get somewhere in life but I didn't know how,” she told me. After graduating she enrolled in community college, dropped out again to save money, and then re-enrolled. She currently takes classes in paralegal studies. Lemkin also had to repeatedly drop out to save money and re-enroll. Olivia, due to a lack of resources and information, attempted to attend a private four-year institution straight out of high school. She had every academic credential to do so, but did not realize the extra costs she would incur because she was undocumented. She had to drop out of the private four-year university and attend a community college instead. After finishing her Associate’s Degree and becoming more informed on the opportunities available to her, she then transferred to another private institution to finish her Bachelor’s Degree. Teresa lived in Georgia when she started her undergraduate studies, where state laws prohibited her from receiving in-state tuition. She too had to drop out due to financial circumstances. A couple of years later she moved to Illinois, a state that does allow undocumented student to receive in-state tuition, and was able to continue her studies at a community college there.

Community college, as my interviewees pointed out, tends to have a negative reputation as being less rigorous and less prestigious than four-year colleges. However, participants were able to find quality and supportive educational experiences at their community colleges that helped them succeed in the future. Some people even pointed out that their community college classes were more challenging than the classes they took at their four-year institutions. In addition to receiving a quality education, they also felt economic relief. “The community college experience is fascinating,” said Belinda, who (like the others) truly enjoyed the experience and opportunities community college gave her.
Once they make it to college, undocumented students face an entirely new set of obstacles. As discussed in the Literature Review, undocumented students are under significant financial constraints (Teranishi et al., 2015) in addition to the social and emotional components of being an undocumented college student. To be able to support themselves financially, all of my participants held jobs while attending college (the acquisition of work was facilitated with the implementation of DACA). Some even held full-time jobs. Lemkin pursued a college education even while living at a homeless shelter. Nicolás recalled his overwhelming work schedule while he was an undergraduate student:

I was working essentially from 4:00 AM to 12:00 PM everyday and then going to school from 1:00 PM all the way to 8:00 PM. And getting home everyday around 9:00 PM and then doing homework. That was my routine pretty much all of my undergrad years.

It is truly amazing that Nicolás managed to survive such an intense schedule. While his resilience is admirable, the systematic issues around immigration policy and low-paid work that forced him to take on such a schedule are unacceptable. With such extensive work obligations, in addition to other family responsibilities, these students could never fully dedicate themselves to their academic life. Astonishingly, they still managed to exceed academically, following the trend of undocumented students demonstrating exceptional educational achievement (Chang, 2011; Del Razo, 2012; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzalez & Chavez, 2012; Teranishi et al., 2015). Furthermore, a college education became more attainable and more appealing with the implementation of DACA, as beneficiaries would be able to be legally employed and search for employment related to their degrees.

For undocumented students, the college experience can be isolating (Teranishi et al., 2015). Many participants discussed feeling social isolation at college and isolation from the
college culture in general. This was often because they were removed from the social-cultural expectations of college students and the process of entering college. This quote from Ella (on her experience moving into the dorms for the first time) strongly demonstrates what this isolation can look like:

I had two suitcases and I was watching everybody else moving in with their parents, with their mini-fridges, with all this cutesy shit that goes on the wall… and I was like wow, I’m here by myself.

Ella’s account illustrates that the “college experience” known to American students is not the same college experience undocumented students have. Not only are they removed from the traditional American expectations of college, but they are also so busy working and studying that they simply do not have the time to assimilate into this culture. Perhaps that is why undocumented students are able to excel so highly in academia; they focus exclusively on their studies and do not make time for distractions. Again, this is simply an observation and not an endorsement of this behavior. After all, as I will discuss in the next section, such business and lack of time for leisure can have severe consequences on mental health and overall well being.

In addition to undocumented status, these students are nearly always first-generation college students as well. Rather than seeing this as a deficit, however, my participants embraced being first-generation students and what that meant for the opportunities they would be able to pursue. Rosa claimed she was “proud” of being a first-generation students because it meant the sacrifices her family made had been worth it. Many participants shared this sentiment, of valuing the sacrifices their families made so that they could receive a college education. Kay described participating in her community college’s graduation ceremony just for her parents, “so they know they didn’t do this for nothing.” The “this” Kay referred to was her parents crossing the
border with her so that she could have access to better educational and occupational opportunities. “I’m grateful and fortunate that I graduated,” she added.

Isabel, a graduate student, acknowledged that while her parents did not fully understand why she wanted to pursue a graduate degree, they were still proud of her accomplishments: “They don't really tell me that they're proud, but they tell other people that they're proud (laughs). They say, mi hija está haciendo su maestría. I know that they're proud.” Sometimes, just the sense of pride that their parents felt was enough to motivate participants to not give up on their educational pursuits. “There is always that awareness of what a college degree means,” Daniel stated. They knew that a college degree, more than anything, was the ultimate symbol of a sacrifice paying off.

I asked my participants how they were able to navigate higher education (and succeed) given the lack of resources available to them and the constant hurdles they had to overcome due to undocumented status. The answer was the same nearly every time: supportive mentors. From this research, I have gathered that having safe and supportive mentors is crucial to success in higher education. These are mentors who are safe to come out to, and supportive in simply being present to hear the student’s concerns, triumphs, and overall experiences. Even those who were private about their status, at times not even telling their best friends, still found that telling at least one mentor about their situation was extremely helpful and beneficial. Mentors were most often professors, but they could also be advisors or other staff members that held significant knowledge about navigating higher education. Gia, for example, found mentors that not only listened to her story, but constantly checked in with her to make sure she was alright, especially as the political climate intensified. Having mentors helped participants figure out their own paths
within higher education and whether to pursue graduate school or employment after graduating. Furthermore, having these mentors was significantly beneficial for students’ mental health, and being able to find a space where they did not feel like they had to hide their identity.

**Hyperdocumentation.** Hyperdocumentation (Chang, 2011) is an important phenomenon to consider when analyzing the (extensive) credentials of undocumented students. Instead of speculating whether or not my participants hyperdocumented, I decided to ask them directly if they felt they used academic achievement as a way to compensate for their undocumented status. A few of the participants were already familiar with the concept of hyperdocumentation from their own research, while others were introduced to it at the time of their interview. Regardless of whether or not they had heard of hyperdocumentation, however, most people (especially if they were current students) strongly resonated with it.

Learning about hyperdocumentation involved a lot of mental processing, especially because it also meant coming to terms with a significant aspect of their (undocumented) identity. Ella, for example, participated in a previous research project of mine a year before I started this study. It was during her previous interview that she learned about hyperdocumentation. She reflected on this experience during her current interview:

> [Learning about hyperdocumentation] definitely left in me in shock because it was so obvious and at the same time very jarring because I thought of the other DACA recipients that I knew and I was like, huh, that kid did start his own non-profit and this person started his own publication, and another built his own business... wow, okay that’s really inspiring, but to pull out that thread and then discover that the root is hyperdocumentation... I mean, it was a really overwhelming fact to accept.

As Ella noted, *accepting* the fact that she hyperdocumented, and that many other undocumented immigrants she knew hyperdocumented too was incredibly difficult. People
began to consider their own achievements and wondered if they would have been trying that hard if they had not been undocumented. Alex resisted the notion that he might be hyperdocumenting at first, but eventually came around to accepting it:

> There’s a part of me that is doing this because I want to, regardless of undocumented status. But I also know that if I have one more thing, it’s gonna help. If I have one more degree, that’s gonna look better.

This idea that “having one more thing” may help them out in some way aligns with Chang’s (2011) account in believing that hyperdocumenting might make her “unimpeachable” (p. 515). As Lemkin put it, hyperdocumentation is a “survival tactic.” Other sentiments participants echoed were that they needed to prove their worth with their academic achievement, that they needed to work harder than their peers to prove that they deserved to stay in the United States, and that hyperdocumenting was a way in which they sought and received approval (usually from teachers). “I don’t know why I feel that way,” said Teresa, “but I feel that the more certificates I have, the better for me.”

The intensified political climate also intensified the need participants felt to hyperdocument. Being aware that they were hyperdocumenting did not in any way discourage them from continuing to do so. “It’s true that I [hyperdocument],” Isabel reflected, “whether I do it on purpose or not, it feels good to get all these things.” Olivia, who had previously heard of the concept, told me that she wasn’t hyperdocumenting enough because she was so busy trying to finish her degree, though I would argue that being “busy” because of academic obligations is very much still hyperdocumenting.

Research is increasingly recognizing the exceptional achievement undocumented students demonstrate, which is important. However, there is still a need for researchers to address the
consequences of glorifying undocumented student achievement and hyperdocumenta-

Hyperdocumenting may become an obsession that turns into a severe problem. “I try so hard, I
have no limit,” Cristal said, explaining that she did not know when (or how) to stop
hyperdocumenting. Ella reached a point where she was so buried in her drive to achieve, that she
had to seek therapy. Hyperdocumenting took a toll on her mental and emotional state, and
damaged relationships in her life. She admitted that she still hyperdocuments extensively, but is
continuing treatment in therapy to help find healthier means of navigating her busy lifestyle.

Dra. Chang’s (2011) concept of hyperdocumentation is not merely theoretical; it
resonates deeply in the lives of many undocumented students. It becomes intertwined with nearly
everything they do. “We’re always compensating,” Nicolás pointed out. Therefore, research
needs to continue on the many aspects of hyperdocumentation and the impacts such perseverance
to succeed has on mental health, personal relationships, and overall quality of life. Research
should also address resources for undocumented students so that they are better able to recognize
unhealthy mechanisms of over-achieving. Finally, higher education institutions should, perhaps,
not expect so much from their undocumented students. They are resilient, yes, but their
resiliency should not be tokenized or exploited.

“It feels like my life is falling apart”: Mental Health Concerns.

Undocumented status carries heavy implications for mental health and overall well being.
Undocumented youth grow up in a constant state of fear, uncertainty, and stress. They are unable
to trust the world around them in fear they might be judged or punished because of their status.
The more my participants learned about the implications of their undocumented status, the worse
their mental health became. Earlier I discussed Clara’s experience in dropping out of high school
after finding out she was undocumented. Clara’s story was not simply about giving up, though. Her decision to dropout of high school was deeply rooted in the mental illnesses that her undocumented status evoked: “I was really depressed. I felt scared and alone. I became self-destructive after a while,” she said.

While Clara did recover the motivation to finish high school, the mental health consequences remained, and she still struggles with them today. Lemkin addressed a similar sentiment: “My status as an immigrant has made me have a lot of anxiety and depression that I didn’t recognize until a couple of years ago.” Lemkin’s testimony demonstrates an important issue: some undocumented immigrants develop mental illnesses in childhood that are not treated or recognized until they are adults. Even as adults, it may still take time for them to come to terms with the seriousness of their mental condition (similar to how undocumented students take time to come to terms with their hyperdocumentation). Lemkin also addressed this concern: “I had functioning depression that was hidden under the hours of work and the hours of studying...the depression is real.” Belinda became so stressed that she developed gallstones, and it was not until then that she realized her undocumented life had taken a severe toll on her mental (and physical) health.

Another barrier to addressing the mental health issues in undocumented communities are family and cultural values. Several participants reported that they would not go to their families with mental health concerns due to cultural values. Belinda emphasized that there is a stigma against mental illness in Mexican culture. “It’s not something that we talk about,” Lupe added. Kay also echoed that she was unable to talk to her family about these concerns, and Teresa became emotional in admitting she felt resentment toward her family at times. This resentment
came from the hardships she experienced due to undocumented status and from the mental health concerns left untreated for many years. Ella also experienced this disconnect with her family.

She recalled trying to approach her mother for consolation after the 2016 elections:

The day after the election I was weeping... I went to my mom...I was like mom, *como te sientes? Que está pasando?* Just slightly tearing up again. And she was like “[Ella], yo tengo muchas cosas que hacer. Tengo que lavar la ropa, limpiar los platos, hacer la comida... yo tengo una casa que cuidar. Y tu? Que tu tienes que hacer?” And I was like, "What? What, mom? I'm serious. I'm crying right now. This is serious." And she's like, "I'm serious, too. I have dishes to do. I have shit to do. What do you have to do?" And I was like, "I have a lot of work...” She's like, "Great. Go do it. We don't weep in this family."

There is a lot to unpack from Ella’s account here. First, she attempted to seek support from her mother and was immediately turned down. Ella’s mother seemed to view Ella’s sadness as a waste of time, and by listing all the chores she had to do, Ella’s mother also established that those who have household responsibilities do not have time for sadness. The statement “we don’t weep in this family” is also striking. Antonia similarly stated “we don’t cry in my family.” This is a testament to the incredible resiliency of undocumented families, who even in the most difficult times (in this case, being undocumented during the 2016 elections), will not abandon their responsibilities. However, striving for resiliency at the expense of emotional health is not a solution and can have detrimental consequences.

**An intensifying political climate.** As alluded to in Ella’s statement above, the political climate has had significant impacts on the mental health of undocumented immigrants. Increasing anti-immigrant sentiment and the election of Donald Trump were traumatic for some. Isabel and Olivia discussed the reactions they had to the 2016 presidential elections:
With the election, I started getting panic attacks. And just mentally, I was drained, and te digo, I couldn't focus in school and it was really hard to finish my final papers. It was really, really hard. And I just wanted to be home because that was also my first semester of grad school. So I just wanted to be home with my parents and I was being homesick. I was very homesick. (Isabel)

From the very beginning with the elections, I was in disbelief. I remember waking up in the middle of the night and not being able to go back to sleep… I thought I was dreaming because I just couldn't believe it. I was very upset. I was upset for a long time. I was really angry and confused as to how all these things were happening. (Olivia)

The election of Donald Trump brought upon tremendous fear to my participants, especially because Trump campaigned on the promise to end DACA. As a consequence, participants described living with constant feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Those in mixed-status families also feared being separated, as Clara felt at the time: “What if I get separated from my family? What’s gonna happen to me?” Rob added, “you see all these families being separated and you know that could be you one day.” Rob, who is very private about his status, talked about how after the elections he felt a sense of mistrust walking around his campus, not knowing who had supported Trump and his anti-immigrant campaign. The uncertainty of the situation was unbearable for many. Nearly every person I interviewed was struggling with insomnia, not being able to go to sleep at night because of the stress, and constantly waking up in the middle of the night, wondering what would happen the next day.

The fears undocumented immigrants had with the 2016 elections were not without reason. Rumors that DACA would be ending were prominent in the media. Ella commented:

The worst part of it is the waiting. This weird, lingering anxiety that’s always quietly building, like, is it today? Oh no, it's not today. Is it next week? Oh, I don’t know. Is it next year? I don’t know. Because time’s running out, but you’re not holding the clock.
Time did run out. On September 5th, 2017, attorney Jeff Sessions announced that DACA would be rescinded starting on March 5th, 2018. The rescinding of DACA sent many of my participants into a panic mode. They did not know what would happen to them when their DACA expired; they might lose their jobs, have to drop out of school, or be deported. September 5th was an unfortunately memorable day for participants, as they all could recall exactly what they were doing when they found out about the Attorney General’s announcement. Clara, for example, was at an airport, traveling for work. She broke down in the middle of the airport:

I just couldn't stop crying. I felt like all the hard work we did prior to DACA was for nothing. They lied to us. They gave us a peace of mind for a second but that was it. Because they knew they were gonna take it away.

Clara’s sentiments were shared by many others. Gia described watching the announcement as a “very frustrating and very emotional” experience. Nicolás described it as a “roller coaster ride.” “It was a dagger to the heart,” said Kay. “It felt like a punch to the stomach,” Stephanie added. These are just a few examples of the way participants experienced the rescinding of DACA. There was an overwhelming theme of stressed, anxious and depressed thoughts and feelings. These young undocumented immigrants experienced one of their worst fears becoming reality, in a situation they had absolutely no control over. Teresa said it felt like she was “going back into the dark, in to the shadows.” Belinda, who also experienced severe depression and anxiety, said she felt “hopeless.”

The depression, anxiety, and overall stress induced by the Attorney General’s announcement took a toll on people’s productivity. Many reported a loss of motivation, concentration, and focus. Others became frequently sick (with stomach issues, hives, migraines, muscle pains, among others). By the time federal courts overruled the March 5th deadline and
allowed current DACA recipients to continue to renew their benefits, the damage had already been done. Though renewing their DACA status was a major relief and assured protection from deportation once again, many participants were never able to truly recover from the shock and panic they felt when they thought they would never have DACA again.

**Coping mechanisms.** Given the evidence of the extensive mental health complications undocumented immigrants experience, I was curious to find out how my participants utilized coping mechanisms, especially with the intensifying political atmosphere. The most common coping mechanism my participants identified was to keep busy. The phrase “I try to keep myself busy” or a similar variation came up in most interviews. Stephanie stated:

“For me, I just have to keep myself busy. As soon as I wake up, I do a podcast, listen to the news, listen to the radio, and all day is like go, go, go. And then by the end of the day I’m so tired that I don’t even want to think.”

Coping through business, as Stephanie suggested, meant participants occupied their minds to the point of exhaustion. People also tried to cope by avoiding the media and any thoughts of the political situation. This avoidance was easier when they kept themselves so busy they did not even have the time to think about the situation. Clearly, coping through business and avoidal is not a healthy mechanism. But for most, this was the most accessible coping mechanism and the most feasible given the political climate was out of their control. Ella added that keeping herself busy also meant hyperdocumenting more, and hyperdocumenting gave her hope she was minimizing her chances of deportation.

Knowing that business was not the healthiest means of coping, participants did try to find other mechanisms. Many talked about exercising, running, and playing sports. Keeping active helped them distract their minds while also physically taking care of their bodies. Others talked
about crafting, art, music, reading, and writing. Such activities helped them engage their mind productively with something that did not make them think about their undocumented status.

Those who were more open with friends reported having a more secure support network, which was extremely beneficial for their emotional health. Finding undocumented peers in a similar situation seemed to be one of the most supportive experiences for people. Many who had once felt alone in their situations found a safe haven in meeting others who shared their situation.

Teresa and Nicolás had fellow undocumented romantic partners and for both of them, that level of intimate support was priceless. Nicolás, as well as Daniel, Rosa, and Leila, stressed that their families were their biggest support networks. Nicolás and Leila were also parents, and their children gave them their biggest source of motivation and purpose in their lives. When times got rough, Leila said “I just look at him,” referring to her two-year-old son.

Gia, Isabel, Clara, Nicolás, Teresa, and Antonia found coping mechanisms through activism in their communities. Activism made them feel empowered, and gave them a chance to help their communities. Clara stated:

I've decided that, you know, it's time to really go back in the streets and fight this out like how we did it in the beginning. So I'm not scared anymore because I know I have power to speak for those who are still scared.

Clara’s point in remembering “those who are still scared” is extremely important, because not everyone is in a safe situation to become public with their statuses. Rob, for example, lived in a conservative town where his family was one of the only families of color. Leila repeatedly had racist slurs thrown at her at her job, which pushed her into becoming more cautious about revealing her status and her identity. Therefore, the decision to become public and/or to become an activist requires a complex process.
Another helpful mental health resource for participants was therapy. Several people sought out therapists to help them talk through their hardships. Alex, Stephanie, and Ella especially enjoyed finding Latino therapists because they felt a therapist who shared their ethnic identity was the most helpful, as opposed to having a white therapist. However, finding a Latina/o therapist is not easy in a predominantly white field. Those who had white therapists had a harder time forming bonds and trusting relationships with them. As a consequence, despite being in therapy, people still felt they could not be truly honest or open, fearful that their (white) therapist would judge them and not be able to empathize.

The biggest issue with seeking therapy, however, was the cost. Those who saw therapists regularly had to make a significant financial sacrifice to do so. Lemkin had both a therapist and medication for her depression and anxiety, but when she lost her job (and in turn, her insurance), she could no longer afford her therapy and medication. As a consequence, her mental health only worsened. Several participants were able to receive free counseling services at their universities, but sometimes these services were limited to a few sessions, only allowing for short-term treatment unsuccessful in treating long-term mental illnesses. Additionally, free counseling services at colleges and universities are only available to current students. Valeria relied on these services for her mental health needs, and was immediately cut off from them when she graduated. When I spoke to her she had been graduated for a few weeks: “That’s been hard, because this is when I’ve felt the most stressed..and just not great overall.”

My participants tell various stories of coping through the most adverse of times. However, there are still overwhelming disparities and an overall lack of resources for undocumented immigrants and their mental health concerns. And while some are able to find
successful coping mechanisms, there tends to be a focus on individual treatment over large systemic changes. As I will delve deeper into the next section, undocumented immigrants have suffered through significant hardships and trauma, and their mental health should receive special attention.

**Trauma.**

Trauma emerged as a prevalent theme in the interviews without much prompting. I did not at any point directly ask participants if they had experienced trauma, nor did they know trauma had become an “accidental” theme in my research—with the exception of Teresa, Belinda, and Valeria. These three attended conferences where I presented preliminary findings in Spring 2018. Teresa and Belinda self-recruited themselves after seeing my presentation. Valeria was recruited prior to seeing my presentation, and coincidentally happened to attend the same conference I was presenting at. While being recruited before seeing my presentation, she did her interview after seeing my presentation and the preliminary themes.

Seeing the presentation before their interview did not seem to discourage Belinda and Teresa from reflecting on their own traumatic experiences with me (Valeria did not report any trauma). Both initiated the conversation on trauma on their own, and were exceptionally vulnerable and thorough in their accounts. I reflected on my interview with Teresa just minutes after hanging up the phone:

Coming in to the interview, Teresa was already aware of themes I would address and of other people’s stories from my research, which was a knowledge previous participants did not come in with. Yet knowing what she might have to discuss did not make the interview easier. Having finally come to terms with a lot of the trauma she experienced, it was hard for her to talk about it for the first time. She broke down multiple times, which made me get emotional, too. (Journal entry 05/10/2018)
When I realized how trauma had significantly impacted the lives of my participants, I decided to dedicate an entire section to trauma in the Literature Review to introduce the concept of trauma and its complexities. Having already established the definition and consequences of trauma, as well as existing research, methodology, and ethical implications, I do not engage in a theoretical analysis of trauma in this section. Instead, I use a storytelling approach to give space for the stories of my participants without interrupting with abstract research concepts and analyses.

**Childhood trauma.** Participants’ stories of trauma began early in childhood. Coming from low-income families, many lived in poverty and experienced harsh living conditions. These harsh conditions only intensified after migrating to the United States because their families often exhausted most of their monetary resources to do so. “We had to sleep in a closet,” Isabel recalled. Cristal’s family of five all had to sleep in one bed. Nicolás lived in a one-room trailer with eight others: “It was a very stressful and difficult situation.” There was little money for clothing and food. “I usually didn’t have anything for school,” said Lemkin. As previously mentioned, Clara and Isabel were bullied for the clothes they wore. Isabel also stated that the hunger made her constantly “uncomfortable.” Lemkin added, “some days we didn’t have anything to eat.” Lemkin had to live in a homeless shelter during her teen years.

Living in such conditions also meant these families had to live in “difficult” neighborhoods. Clara described an atmosphere of “violence and poverty” due to “living in the projects.” And despite misconceptions of Mexico being violent and dangerous, people like Nicolás, Lemkin, and Teresa who spent a significant portion of their childhoods in Mexico countered that narrative. They all described being in “shock” when they realized how harsh their
living conditions were in the United States, when they had been under the impression life in the United States would be better, with more opportunities.

Nicolás recalled a happy childhood in Mexico, where he was able to run around and play outside without fear. When his family moved to America however, not only did he have to live in those crowded conditions, but he was unable to play outside and had to be “locked up” inside because he lived in a dangerous California neighborhood. “That was a very difficult place growing up, curbed with much violence and much gang and drug issues going on in that neighborhood.” The situation escalated when Nicolás began exhibiting suicidal-like behaviors (as a child). He recalled:

[My parents] had to remove all of the dangerous items in the house such as knives and scissors and anything of that sort because I would tell my parents that if they didn't take me back home to Mexico, I was going to cut myself or I was going to commit suicide.

Nicolás’s account provides a striking example of how young children are deeply affected by the migration process. In relation to migration, another trauma entrenched deep in many people’s childhoods is family separation. While most migrated to the United States with their immediate families, some still had to be separated from these family members at some point. Rosa, Stephanie, and Lemkin, for example, were separated from at least one parent for several years. Furthermore, the separation from extended family members and close friends was also a traumatic experience. Upon being separated from family members in Mexico, most never saw them again, because their undocumented status prohibited them from leaving the country again. Isabel’s account powerfully illustrates how traumatic these separations can be:
I was extracted from Mexico from my little town, and I remember just saying bye to my grandmother who I was really close to. She's now passed away, but I remember saying goodbye to her and thinking, "Okay, it's fine. I don't really need to say goodbye because I'll be back soon," I never imagined that it would take 14 years.

Isabel’s grandmother passed away before they got a chance to see each other again. Teresa and Clara also talked at length about the excruciating experience of being “torn apart” from their families and friends. Antonia remembers her cousins chasing after the bus when she left Mexico: “I still dream about it today.” Unfortunately, family members left behind in Mexico sometimes develop resentment due to a lack of understanding about the implications of migrating to the United States without “papers.” Teresa especially struggled in talking to her grandmother, who would tell her, “you won’t be able to see me alive again.” Lemkin’s parents separated when she was a young child, and her father did not understand her mother’s wishes to live in the United States. Her father took her away from her mother which shaped a traumatizing childhood for Lemkin:

My father decided to take me away and live in Mexico City because he didn’t want me to be exposed to “other fathers”. When in reality it was a very misogynistic move, to take me away and hurt my mom. So for a while, [my mom] didn’t know where I was. For about five years, she didn’t know where I was.

Lemkin was only able to see her mother again when her father became sick, and sent her across the border to move in with her mother in Nevada. Consequently, Lemkin experienced separation from both parents, each who exposed her to different traumas, in addition to having to cross the border as an unaccompanied minor.

**Crossing the border.** As I mentioned in a previous section, 19 out of 20 participants physically crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, as children. Crossing the border is “not exactly a pleasant experience,” as Daniel described. It is physically gruesome, as well as “traumatic
psychologically” (Teresa). Crossing the border entailed enduring exhaustion, hunger, and the desert heat. “We had to cross a river. We had to do a lot of walking and running,” Stephanie recalled. “It was a long journey,” said Kay, who after crossing the border in Texas, had to travel by bus to Illinois.

Lemkin and Rosa crossed as unaccompanied minors. After being separated from her parents for years, Rosa (at age 10) crossed with her younger brother (age 7) to join their parents in Illinois. She vividly described the “house full of kids” they stayed in, all unaccompanied, waiting for their turn to cross. Rosa was separated from her brother in the process, for an entire month. After being reunited, they had to adapt to living with younger siblings they had never met, because their parents had had more children since leaving Rosa and her brother in Mexico.

Crossing the border creates extraordinarily traumatic memories. Clara was seven years old when she crossed, and remembers some details vividly, while at other times she “blacked out.” In fact, multiple people reported experiencing memory lapses in response to traumatic events, and especially in regards to crossing the border. Stephanie remembers her childhood in Mexico, remembers crossing the border, but after arriving in the United States she has a memory lapse that lasts for an entire year. She does not recall anything she did during that year, not even going to school, though she knows she did enroll and complete that school year due to her records and parents’ recollections. Kay and Teresa also exhibited memory lapses at some point during childhood. While it is often difficult to pinpoint exactly what moment or moments trigger trauma and in turn a memory lapse, Clara knows exactly why she “blacked out.” The group she was crossing with, including her pregnant mother, were stopped by guards who wanted to search their belongings. Here are Clara’s words:
They made everybody go naked. And this guy...he got shot right in front of us. And we had to leave him there...After that, that’s when I blacked out… Everything the way they did it was just horrible. Took me years of therapy to get over that.

**Sexual assault.** Experiences of sexual harassment, violence, and assault were unfortunately common with the women I interviewed. These are clearly gendered experiences, as men are not put into such positions of risk and vulnerability to the same extent. In this section, I will focus on two survivors’ stories of sexual assaults. Though I use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality throughout this paper, for this section I will not reveal these women’s pseudonyms to add an additional layer of protection and safety for them.

Both women were assaulted as young children, as early as the age of five. One woman was assaulted when she was five years old, by her uncle. The assault was reported and taken to court, and the judge encouraged the child’s mother to leave the country to protect her. Unfortunately, not all family members believed what had happened, and some were angry that the assault was taken to court. At five years old, this child was told by her grandmother: “you broke the family.”

The second woman did not report her experiences of assault in the first interview; she kept alluding to memory lapses that signified instances of trauma, but did not elaborate. About a week later, she contacted me and asked for a follow-up interview (which is unusual). I captured her account in my interview journal:

[She] asked to speak to me again because she wanted to add something to her story. I could not have been prepared for what she had to tell me. She talked about trauma and her memory lapses. As a child she was assaulted repeatedly by an older neighbor and spent her whole life thinking it hadn’t actually happened, but she would dream in vivid detail of the occurrences. Then as a teenager she was assaulted again, and similar memory lapses happened. She told me she has been working on remembering her traumas and working to heal from them. I was really shaken. But she wanted me to
include this in her story and I absolutely will. My heart breaks for [her] and I wish there was something I could do to help her. I feel bad listening to her (and others’) traumas and only being able to sit there and not help, barely in the capacity to even offer some words of care and encouragement. I did tell [her] I would be here for her if she ever needed, that it didn’t all have to be for research. (Journal entry, 12/03/17)

Traumatic experiences of sexual assault left deep scars for these women. One stated, “I’ve never really trusted men after that.” Furthermore, as I alluded to in the above journal entry, when dealing with such intimate and delicate stories, it is important to step back from traditional researcher roles and validate the rawness of such powerful narratives.

**Domestic abuse.** Domestic abuse was another notable gendered experience of trauma that came up in interviews. Cristal witnessed domestic violence at an early age. In Mexico, her father was so abusive that her mother fled to the United States to get away from him. She recounted:

I don’t remember a lot, but I do remember the last time my dad hit my mom. My mom grabbed us, and that’s when we left. My mom didn’t want us to keep living in that situation, she wanted us to have a better future.

Domestic abuse is both verbal and physical, and did not always occur with romantic partners; many participants suffered domestic abuse from immediate family members as well. Lemkin, for example, left home at the age of sixteen because of an “abusive situation” with her mother. She also did not have a good relationship with her father. Similarly, Belinda referred to a “broken family,” with a father that was involved with drugs and would ask her for money. Belinda also dealt with an abusive situation from her mother’s boyfriend. To exude his control over her mother, the boyfriend stole her passport, and her passport was her only form of identification at the time. Clara had a partner who also used her situation in the United States to
his advantage, and repeatedly threatened to call ICE on her and her family. As a result of this experience, Clara avoids romantic relationships altogether now.

**Validating trauma.** With the stories of my participants, I hope to convey how trauma encompasses an everyday lived reality for young undocumented immigrants. “We are constantly battling trauma,” Teresa said. Addressing mental health is crucial, but we cannot stop at the surface. Coping mechanisms are important, and long-term treatment to heal from trauma is absolutely essential. Undocumented immigrants often suffer through trauma that is left “untreated,” as Teresa pointed out, because undocumented immigrants are expected to demonstrate infallible resiliency. “Latinas are expected to be like the dancing emoji all the time,” Belinda said, “but we’ve had very traumatic lives.” These expectations of resiliency at any cost need to be dismantled. It is time to ask, at what cost do we allow these misguided assumptions to continue?

**Conclusion: Reframing the Narrative**

The compelling stories my participants told of their childhoods, identities, educational paths, mental health, trauma (and survival), show that their lives are much more complex and dynamic than the typical “Dreamer” narrative suggests. In fact, most participants do not identify with the label “Dreamer” and strongly reject that narrative. “To say that I’m a Dreamer, that’s a label, and that’s like saying that I am better. That’s not right,” Rob stated. The “Dreamer” narrative creates a good-immigrant/bad-immigrant binary, and suggests that some are worth “saving” more than others. Ella eloquently addressed this issue head-on:

> It's only beneficial for those who fall into that narrative right? It protects people like me in terms of portraying us like vulnerable children, innocent, and at the same time, it just draws a sword where we throw other immigrants under the bus. There's a horrible part of U.S. politics that wants immigrants to bleed and show their blood. They want us to be
like, ‘yeah, I work three jobs and I had a 4.5 GPA and I got into Columbia and now I’m a lawyer.’ Of course, that's inspiring. However, not all of us are going to do that because we didn't all have the same opportunity. Some people have accents, some have disabilities, some of us are female or queer and more marginalized and it’s harder to move through that perfect American Dream...because yes, of course, immigrants can do everything, but again, at what cost?

Ella addressed multiple issues with the current narrative around young immigrants. Other immigrants who do not fit the trope are “thrown under the bus” because they are not viewed as innocently as DACA recipients who were brought to the United States as opposed to making the decision to migrate themselves. She astutely brings attention to intersectionality, and that being undocumented may come with other marginalized identities around gender, ability, and sexuality. Ella also touched on hyperdocumentation with this statement, naming the achievements of her undocumented peers. But then she questioned, “immigrants can do everything...but at what cost?”

Research around undocumented immigrants, and other marginalized groups, should tell the stories of participants and allow space to address the implications of their real lived experiences. Too much attention is focused on the resiliency of undocumented youth, and their achievements are glorified to the point of exploitation. We cannot ignore that resiliency, admirable as it may be, often becomes an unhealthy coping mechanism in response to stress, depression, anxiety, and trauma.

I respect the individuality of each participant’s story and in telling their stories through themes, am not suggesting that all undocumented experiences can fit into these themes. Immigration policy, however, as well as the labeling of undocumented youth as “Dreamers,” is a systemic and structural issue in the United States. We cannot treat undocumented immigrants as
if they are at fault for their individual problems. Again I ask, at what cost will we continue to glorify resiliency? How many more stories of trauma and survival will need to be told until the narrative shifts?

As researchers, we need to check our obsession with methodology and theoretical frameworks and listen to the stories people tell us. I am humbled that my participants shared such personal narratives, and to them I will always be grateful. To my participants, thank you. I hear you. I see you.
REFERENCES


VITA

Júlia Mendes was born in Curitiba, Brazil. She is receiving her Master’s in Sociology in December of 2018 at Loyola University Chicago, where she is continuing her studies as a doctoral student. She received her Bachelor’s Degree from Illinois State University. Her research focuses on the experiences of young undocumented immigrants and their processes of identity formation, mental health concerns, trauma, and survival.

At Loyola, Júlia has held research and teaching assistantships and received the Outstanding Graduate Student Award from the Sociology Department. She served as a member of the Graduate Student Association and was the Student Director on the board of the Midwest Sociological Society.