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Undocumented and Unafraid: Understanding the Disclosure Management Process for Undocumented College Students and Graduates

Susana M. Muñoz

Previous qualitative studies on undocumented college students have primarily focused on their lived experiences; however, little research has been done to consider the disclosure process or identity management for undocumented students, particularly students who self-identify as “undocumented and unafraid.” Using research on legal consciousness and disclosure of hidden identities, I employed Latin@ critical race theory as an analytic lens to examine the many processes through which undocumented students “come out” within the context of higher education and beyond. Based on interviews with 7 Latin@ undocumented college students and graduates, in this article I explore 3 themes: biographical construction of legal status, the fluidity of fear, and empowered disclosure.*

While the majority of Americans agree that individuals living in the US without documentation need a pathway to citizenship (Pew Hispanic Center, 2015), the topic of immigration remains contentious. Undocumented students who decide to disclose their legal status often do so under an element of fear perpetuated by anti-immigration sentiments. In 2012, the Center for Labor and Research published the book *Undocumented and Unafraid*, which depicts the everyday struggles of student activists in the immigration youth movement. One activist noted, “We finally lost the fear of talking about our long-

kept secret: we are undocumented” (Wong et al., 2012, p. 66). Their personal narratives and disclosure have become educational tools to combat the “toxic anti-immigration rhetoric that has flooded our country” (p. 67). A recent national study conducted by the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015) reported that undocumented college students face mistreatment by faculty, staff, and students because of their legal status, in addition to their feelings of isolation and uncertainty about whom to trust with their legal status.

In order for undocumented students to navigate college resources, they must disclose their legal status to individuals who could potentially withhold information, knowledge, and access to college resources. Given this reality, college administrators need to further understand the experiences of students who face everyday life without legal status. One way to facilitate this understanding is to learn how undocumented students negotiate the fear of disclosing their legal status and to find ways to support them.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Currently, there are 11.9 million undocumented immigrants residing in the US and, as a result

* Scholars (Licona & Maldonado, 2013; Soto, 2010) use *Latin@* or *Chican@* as an attempt to disrupt the heteronormative gender divisions and “politicize the collective” (Soto, 2010, p. 2). I also intend to impose additional complexity within the understanding of Latin@ subjectivities.

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of the 1982 Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe*, undocumented children are legally entitled to free public K–12 education (Olivas, 2012). While an estimated 65,000 undocumented high school students graduate every year (Passel & Cohn, 2008), colleges and universities across the US vary in policies regarding admissions, tuition costs, and financial aid resources. These policies are often dictated by social sentiment, state political context, ideology, institutional commitment, or institutional type (Flores, 2010).

Perez (2012) points out the many risks and benefits associated with disclosing one's legal status. The students in his study "revealed their status when it worked in their favor and concealed it in situations where they felt it could be used against them" (p. 27). Prior research (Muñoz, 2008, 2013; Perez-Huber, 2010) demonstrates that undocumented college students experience challenges with identifying college administrators whom they can trust with their legal status, in addition to coping with stress and anxiety while navigating college resources; yet the nuances associated with legal status disclosure in terms of the strategies used to negotiate the decision-making process have not been examined. Fears about deportation and family separation also influence the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants, which impact how students disclose their legal status. The research question that guided this study was: In what ways do college students and graduates who self-identify as "undocumented and unafraid" manage the disclosure process of their legal status?

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT LEGAL STATUS AND LEGAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Legal consciousness, or the meaning-making of legal status, becomes more apparent when

individuals start to make future plans for college or employment (Gonzales, 2011). Gonzales's (2011) research on the transition of undocumented youth into adulthood unveiled multiple educational, economic, and social limitations, which can diminish the likelihood of those individuals fully participating in society. For instance, undocumented students may learn of the limitations of their legal status when attempting to obtain employment, acquire driver's licenses, or apply to college. The social structures, systems, and contexts of legality also influence how personhood is shaped. Conversely, *illegality* is the "erasure of legal personhood—a space of forced invisibility, exclusion, subjugation, and repression" (De Genova, 2002, p. 423), which significantly impacts how undocumented individuals live and manage disclosure of their legal status.

The concept of legal consciousness within the discourse of student identity development is impacted by the psychological internalization of the consequences of anti-immigration policies (Abrego, 2011). Legal consciousness is also an act of meaning-making and the intellectualization of legal status (Abrego, 2011); therefore, while *legal status* is somewhat fixed, *legal consciousness* is dynamic. As educators, we need to recognize the complexities surrounding how undocumented students develop their legal consciousness (Abrego, 2011) and what role consciousness of their legal status plays in their daily actions or inactions within educational, social, and political contexts.

Disclosure and Hidden Identities

To explain how undocumented students and graduates disclose their legal status, I gleaned from an interdisciplinary body of literature focused on the influences, motivations, and contexts of disclosure of "hidden identities." By understanding the complexities of the disclosure process and the array of negotiation strategies, educators

can make informed decisions about how to create resources, systems, and policies inclusive of these narratives and experiences. Orne's (2011) concept of "strategic outness," which is defined as "the continual contextual management of sexual identity" (p. 682), in its relative form is a description of how one publicly manages complex, private aspects of one's identity. The decision to demonstrate or disclose particularly sensitive or political identities, such as ethnicity, dis/abilities (including physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, and developmental), domestic violence experiences, spiritual expression, and sexual orientation is then a strategic act.

(In)Voluntary Disclosure Strategies

Orne's (2011) concept encompasses strategies of disclosure which include direct disclosure, clues, speculation, and active concealment. One strategy, direct disclosure, involves revealing one's identity, but cloaked in atypical terms. For example, participants in Orne's study explained their identities not by explicitly stating, "I'm gay"; instead, they would use descriptions such as "I like guys" as a way to disclose. Numerous studies (Montalvo-Liendo, Wardell, Engebretson, & Reininger, 2009; Poindexter & Shippy, 2010) have focused on the lack of control over disclosure.

It is important to note that an individual's experience in disclosure varies with context. Some contexts constrain the power and control one has over the strategy one uses to disclose, while other contexts are empowering by allowing for freedom in strategy selection. Participants in Poindexter and Shippy's (2010) study also displayed stigma resistance in their choice for open disclosure about their HIV diagnoses. These individuals were actively and consistently open about their identity. In addition, there was the gray area of partial disclosure—or what Orne (2011) terms as

"speculation"—whereby participants were assumed to be HIV positive due to their identity as gay individuals. Another identity management tool involves the concealment of identity by deliberately changing behaviors and actions, which is largely influenced by motivations for disclosure, social contexts, and relationships with others.

Motivational Factors for Disclosure

Another outness strategy is based on the motivational factors that prompt individuals to come out or stay in hiding about their sexual identity. Orne (2011) highlights contextual reasoning associated with this decision and suggests that coming out or "staying in" reaps both personal and societal benefits. Fear was a determining factor that influenced whether individuals hid or lied about their sexual identity.

Again, the decision to come out is a complex one that is motivated by possible negative reactions, which Orne (2011) calls "explosive knowledge" (p. 692) to describe the negative consequences the act of delivering "the news" could have on self and others. The elements of explosive knowledge originate from the social construction of identity. How others observe and receive the knowledge about individuals' hidden identities also impacts their "biographical reconstruction" (p. 693). In other words, future instances of coming out are based on prior instances of coming out or by learning how their identities are contextualized in various social settings. While disclosure and social context coexist in the decision-making process, Orne cautions scholars that positioning hiding and lying as "bad" and disclosure as "good" reproduces "disclosure imperative" (p. 695); that is, disclosure is not a goal, but rather a navigational journey contextualized by the realities of social context.

Relational Closeness

Disclosure is also interactional and relational. Orne (2011) contends that people who have valued relationships and personal connections are more likely to disclose than those who have a great degree of social distance. Relational closeness is determined by the quantity and quality of communication, and identity management coincides with the level of trust that is developed. Other studies validate this finding, but also conclude that the likelihood of disclosure increases when people engage in activities with those who share similar identities and they can disclose without judgment (Montalvo-Liendo et al., 2009; L. D. Patton, 2011; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004).

The art of disclosure is not an arbitrary choice; rather, it is an intentional and complex act based on interactions of varying social contexts while balancing relationships. I draw from the literature on legal consciousness and disclosure of hidden identities to understand how undocumented students and alumni disclose their legal status. The literature on legal consciousness frames how undocumented students and graduates gain knowledge about their legal status. The literature on disclosure outlines how they manage and negotiate their identity.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The tenets of critical race theory encourage scholars to centralize race, accept that racism is endemic to the US, critique concepts of neutrality and colorblindness, assert the lived experiences of marginalized individuals as central to knowledge production, utilize an interdisciplinary approach to examining race, and employ a commitment to social justice (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

In this article, I build upon the tenets

of critical race theory and engage specifically with Latin@ critical race theory (LatCrit), which aims to deconstruct power relationships and includes issues of language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, and phenotype, which are intersecting markers of identities and inequality (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Yosso, 2006). LatCrit challenges the discussion about race issues along the lines of a Black–White binary to include and consider the experiences of a racialized Latin@ population. I use LatCrit to examine and expand on how disclosure management is shaped by identity and social stigmas of legality. More specifically, my empirical goal is to challenge dominant notions of neutrality and colorblindness and explore how the dominant notion of legality from a historical and sociopolitical context has shaped contemporary discourse on immigration (Perez-Huber, 2010). By using a critical perspective on how participants navigate legal status disclosure, I examine the ways in which dominant notions of Latin@ undocumented immigrants may be perpetuated or resisted when disclosing their legal status.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological paradigm used in this study was constructivism (Crotty, 2003; M. Patton, 2002), which asserts the belief that identity is a socially constructed product that occurs over a period of time and is shaped by multiple contexts. Such epistemology suggests centering the voices of the participants in all aspects of the research. I employ a constructivist approach because it allows me to examine how students create meaning, or purpose, from their life experiences and how their individual contexts shape how they view themselves. A constructivist approach also acknowledges the process in which participants in this study actively engage with

society, making meaning of themselves and the world around them while living without legal status (Crotty, 2003).

Data Collection

This study consisted of 3 interviews with each of 7 undocumented college students and college graduates who self-identified as undocumented and unafraid. The first interview was an unstructured interview in which participants were asked to discuss their life histories. Many of the participants discussed their journey stories into the US, their schooling experiences, college access, and most of all, the struggles endured by their families.

The second interview focused on how participants made meaning of their legal identity within the contexts of higher education and social activism. I asked questions such as:

- How did you feel about yourself before you came out as undocumented to other people?
- What prompted you to come out about your legal status?
- Tell me about a critical moment during your college process in which you revealed your legal status to someone other than a family member.

The third interview provided an opportunity to revisit and add depth to the second interview, as well as more analysis of multiple identities, with questions such as:

- Can you say more about your multiple identities (gender, class, sexual orientation)?
- How has each of your identities formed or changed while in college and in your experiences with social activism?
- Have you encountered opposition from others? If so, how do you deal with opposition to any of your multiple identities?

The interview protocol was informed by the literature and through my previous research experiences with undocumented students. The protocol was reviewed and modified by two scholars with experience researching student development theory and identity development. Based on their recommendations, I added questions about the participants' prior knowledge of their legal status. Each individual interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted via Skype. The audio was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants selected their own pseudonyms. The interviews were spread out over a 10-month period (June 2012 until March 2013), which allowed participants time to review the transcripts and allowed for the unfolding of various immigration issues that arose during that time. For instance, the passage of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive order in August 2012 provided an opportunity for me to gain insights and opinions about this policy and how it may impact the identity development of participants during the second interview phase.

Participant Selection

The snowball sampling method (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; M. Patton, 2002) utilized to identify participants was twofold. First, I sent an e-mail to immigration research scholars, community activists, and higher education administrators requesting that they forward an invitation letter to undocumented individuals they knew. Then, I utilized 12 DREAM Act alliance organizations across the country, the DreamActivist.org website, and the DREAM Act Facebook page to also solicit participants for this study.

The criteria for participant selection required that students: (a) were publicly out and open about their legal status; (b) self-identified as Latin@; (c) attended, stopped out,

TABLE 1.
Participants

Name	Age	College Status	Institution Type	Major	Age Arrived in the US	Country of Origin	Residing State	Years of Activism
Marco	21	College Graduate	Private	BA Sociology	2	Mexico	New York	3
Angelica	25	Graduate Student	Private	BA Psychology	4	Mexico	North Carolina	4
Sarai	20	Sophomore	Private	Political Science	3	Mexico	California	3
Jorge	19	Junior	Public	Civil Engineering	14	Mexico	Wisconsin	2
Yahaira	26	College Graduate	Private	Spanish	4	Mexico	Missouri	6
Ariel	23	Graduate Student	Private	Social Work	6	Mexico	Washington	4
Juan	23	Senior	Public	Political Science	10	Venezuela	Florida	3

or graduated from college; (d) self-identified as “undocumented and unafraid”; and (e) self-identified as an immigration activist. These criteria yielded geographic diversity but not a full representation of the entire undocumented population, which includes others besides those of Latin@ national origin. The majority of the sample ($n = 5$) represented students who enrolled in private institutions of higher education and spent the majority of their educational experiences in the United States. Of the 7 participants, 3 were classified as undergraduates, 2 were graduate students, and 2 participants were college graduates working full time. All participants in this study elected to waive their anonymity by signing a consent form approved by an Institutional Review Board representative. I carefully reviewed the form with each of the participants. During one discussion, one participant, Yahaira, stated, “My narratives, my story is a political act. . . . Besides, I didn’t ask for your protection.” My decision to provide participants with the option to waive their anonymity is congruent

with the ethical principle of abiding by the participants’ rights and not simply following the rules (Jones et al., 2014). Table 1 displays additional participant demographics.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process, I used LatCrit as my analytic lens to examine the issue of disclosure of legal status. The audio recordings were professionally transcribed and uploaded to Dedoose® software. Designed for mixed methods usage, Dedoose® served as a useful analytic tool in this constructivist study. Each interview yielded approximately 25 pages of raw data. I also kept a journal for reflecting on the interviews and my emotions. For this article, I will focus solely on the themes that emerged from the code on coming out. Consistent with constructivism, I used initial and focused coding as my two coding phases (Charmaz, 2006; Jones et al., 2014). During the first round of coding, I asked myself, “What do the data suggest?” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). I then used focused coding to make

meaning of the coming out code and sought to explore relationships among categories within the codes.

Credibility and Trustworthiness. Aligned with the constructivist framework, I utilized several strategies for credibility of the study (Merriam, 1998). To establish trustworthiness, I asked the participants to review the transcribed interviews for accuracy and clarity. I also made notes on their transcripts prompting them to expand on their ideas during the second interview. In the final interview, I expressed my hunches or preliminary analysis to the participants—not looking for consent, but to add to the depth of the findings. As a research team, we coded all transcripts individually, and collectively provided interpretations to major themes and recurring patterns.

Limitations. Some potential limitations of this study should be noted. First, the findings presented in this article are derived from a small sample of students, gathered by snowball sampling based on participants who were engaged in social activism. Second, the analysis of the interview data may have been potentially limited by my own bias and experiences as a researcher who has never lived as an undocumented individual in the US. Finally, the participants were involved in social activism and all identified as undocumented and unafraid and are therefore more likely to understand their legal status in meaningful ways. As a result, these students were comfortable with detailing their disclosure experiences; while not all undocumented students have reached this point of self-understanding or the same level of comfort with their legal status.

FINDINGS

The findings in this study are reflective of the disclosure management process of the legal identity of undocumented students and

graduates who identified as undocumented and unafraid. The three major findings in this study are the biographical construction of legal status, the fluidity of fear, and empowered disclosure to reclaim self. Quotes from the participants are intertwined within each theme and are representative of the majority of the sample.

“I Wasn’t Supposed to Share”: Biographical Construction of Legal Status

While Orne’s (2011) biographical construction discusses how prior experiences of coming out influences future disclosure occurrences, in this case, biographical construction of legal status is formed through the normalization of lying or hiding. Legal consciousness is therefore characterized by silence and invisibility in order to build an illusionary shield from stigma. “Ghosts of the system” and “walking in the dark” were phrases that some participants used to describe their lived experiences. Invisibility can be a form of Orne’s active concealment strategy; however, in this case the power differentials are apparent for undocumented immigrants when considering the social contexts which constrain disclosure. Within these social contexts, there is an element of policing performed first by parents and families within cultural communities as a strategy for preservation of self and family. The notions of policing are normative responses to a society that does not look friendly upon undocumented persons in the US.

The ways in which individuals are socialized to perceive their legal status impacts how they approach their decision to disclose. For many of the participants, the first messages received about their legal identities came from families as a warning about the dangers of revealing legal status. While the parents’ main intention was to protect their families and children, for many students it further stigmatized being undocumented. Being

undocumented was something the participants were aware of at relatively young ages; yet none of the participants understood the magnitude of being undocumented until later in life. Yahaira, a college graduate from Missouri, recounted:

Yeah, I always knew, I just never really understood what it meant until I was older. . . . I was always told that [legal status] was information I wasn't supposed to share, because anything could happen. Somebody could come for them [parents], or for me, or take us away. So I knew, but more than anything it was like a fear-type thing. It was something you weren't supposed to talk about because my parents were afraid.

Parental messages to undocumented children were also informed by social perceptions and anti-immigrant sentiment in the US. Parents of undocumented youth were the first to introduce fear of living as undocumented, while also preparing their children for social and legal discrimination by exposing them to strategies for downplaying legal identity.

Jorge, a college junior from Wisconsin, recounted a message from his mother, couched within the same elements that aid in biographical construction: "My mom and aunt would say, 'Don't tell anybody about your situation. I don't know what they can do to you,' because there have been cases where people be hating." The "hating" that Jorge speaks of is further validated by an increase of hate crimes against the Latin@ and immigrant population as a result of anti-immigration propaganda (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2008). The tactic of employing invisibility is influenced by the degree of fear, which is central to the rationale used when deciding to (not) disclose legal status. This type of informal learning is what undergirds the building of a legal consciousness.

Often, undocumented individuals are

socialized to operate under the auspices of caution, strategically limiting behaviors and actions. For instance, Ariel, a graduate student, made limiting choices when socializing with friends. His home state of Washington placed him in close proximity to Canada, where many of his friends enjoyed the luxuries of visiting another country. He commented, "How do you tell your friends . . . when they say, 'Come on, let's go to Canada'? I would have to make up lies about why I couldn't do it. I felt bad about having to lie to people." In many cases, the participants in this study discussed the emotional struggle of claiming their undocumented identities and feeling guilty for lying about their status to close friends.

Prior experiences of disclosure also aided in the biographical construction of self-perception. Yahaira's formative experience of coming out to her high school principal influenced how she proceeded to disclose her legal status later in life:

Once I started being in situations where people had to know, it was very humiliating: humiliating in the sense that people were just very defeatist about it [legal status] and not supportive about it. . . . I was questioned once when I was 16 by a principal: he questioned why I was there. And my question was, "Why am I here in the country, or why am I here in school?" And he said, "Either one. It doesn't matter." That was my principal. Like those kind of things definitely set a precedent as to why I was not open with college administrators about my status.

Yahaira's early "defeatist" experiences kept her more guarded about her status with college administrators. More importantly, this story exemplifies how individual sentiments of administrators can create barriers to educational attainment for undocumented students.

Angelica, a graduate student from North Carolina, had a similar experience. She shared

one of her past experiences explaining how she navigated her legal status in the context of a college internship:

I felt very awkward, and I guess based on past experience of disclosing my status and saying, “This is my situation; this is my challenge,” and with my counselor not really actively helping me, but just sort of saying, “Okay, well, I’m sorry—I don’t know what to tell you,” I was reluctant to put myself in that same situation.

Angelica’s prior experiences with a counselor’s ambivalence and, at times, refusal to provide college resources hindered her willingness to place herself in situations (i.e., work environments) in which she would have to disclose her status. In a sense, the lack of knowledge and indifference on the counselor’s part further normalized Angelica’s invisibility and silence. Much like *colorblindness*, where one refuses to accept racism and race as a social construct in the US, *legality blindness* is the refusal to view undocumented immigrants as active citizens and participants within US society. This blindness further legitimizes ignorance and avoidance of immigration rights issues.

“I Feel Like a Bird in a Golden Cage”: The Fluidity of Fear

The second theme focuses on participants’ notion of fear and its fluidity. The “bird in a golden cage” metaphor that Yahaira described below illustrates the paradox of living in the US, a country which one considers home, but without legal status and therefore without the promise of liberty and privilege enjoyed by other residents. For most of the undocumented students in this study, this represented a paradox of fear. While fear deterred them from disclosing their identities, it also served as a major influence on the construction of their legal consciousness and identity. For Yahaira, the fluidity of fear was evident:

I feel like a bird in a golden cage here, and I don’t leave because I’m scared. I have now come to a point where I am unafraid in the sense that I move about the country without major concern. But I’m still very scared to leave [the US].

Though the fear of deportation continues to be an imminent factor when faced with family separation, most of the participants no longer feared deportation for themselves because of the level of trust and knowledge they had acquired through their activist work. Some expressed: “If anything happens, I know some dope-ass organizers”; or “There isn’t really much [Immigration and Customs Services] can do, because I haven’t committed any crimes.”

While these participants identified as undocumented and unafraid, their fears were contextualized based on their experiences as activists and by the risks they were willing to absorb. In other words, the degree of fear had decreased because of their newfound networks and knowledge of the immigration system, which can be viewed as an asset. Learning to live with decreased fear is a continual process and was dictated by their lived experiences. Yet, decreasing one’s fear requires contemplation about how one lives and the strategic selection of which risks to take. Juan, for example, described how he lived in fear prior to deciding to “chuck away that fear”:

I needed to be anonymous. I had the sense that ICE [Immigration and Customs Services] was going come over to my house all the time. I can’t drive; I’m a prisoner in my house, because if I drive they [ICE] may see that I don’t have a driver’s license and then they may take me away. People need to live. Like if you live in fear every single day of your life, are you happy?

Some participants were involved in acts of civil disobedience, which helped to whittle down the notion of fear. Sarai, a college junior from California, recalled facing her fears:

As an immigrant in our society, you're kind of taught to fear any police interaction because it could lead to your deportation. But once you do that [civil disobedience], you go to jail, you're released, and nothing happened. It's like, what is there to fear? You faced your biggest fear.

Another example is from Marco, who attended the National Immigration Youth Alliance (NIYA) training and had participated in acts of civil disobedience. His knowledge of the immigration system provided him with tools that helped to extinguish fear:

Having done civil disobedience, I know how the system works . . . and I feel a lot more comfortable with it and see it more of an organizing avenue than a fear. But it definitely was a lot of developing and working towards getting to that point. It's like the three-tier system of a campaign: the legal, and the petition [to] the public, and the advocacy side rallies folks to support it. It is exhausting to see how many cases there are and how there's almost like a formula to how you figure out if someone has more chances to stay or to be deported.

While these NIYA trainings often are designed to benefit youth and college students, the knowledge obtained by these individuals is disseminated back to their parents, communities, and peers, and further helps to diminish the level of perceived fear.

Ariel was the only participant who differed in how fear impacted his disclosure process. While residing in a politically conservative rural area of Washington, Ariel's legal status was positively received. His legal status was met with curiosity and members of his community wanted to understand and assist. Contrary to the experiences of other participants, Ariel never harbored fear as central to disclosure, but chose to use his narrative as a way to create opportunities:

I can't say I have been afraid of speaking out because I may be deported, because people might look at me differently, or because I wouldn't be allowed access [to] certain resources. That has not been my experience. It's been much more of how do I say it [legal status] correctly or in a way that I could get something from it, and that would be a positive change for either policy, resources, development, institutional work.

These examples depict how fear can dissipate or be used as leverage. The "golden cage" becomes the expansion of the space and scope of the cage. The participants felt empowered to push boundaries, take risks, and confront fear, yet remained constrained by their legality, living inside the confines of their legal status. The social realities for these individuals were that the US was the only home they had ever known, yet, this home did not afford them the rights or opportunities associated with full-fledged membership.

The literature on disclosure contends that negative behaviors and fears of isolation and being stereotyped are significant factors when deciding to disclose. Although fear is an apparent factor in disclosure, scholars have yet to address its fluidity. In this case, social activism or civil disobedience provided a way for undocumented individuals to make sense of their legal status and the immigration system in general. Living with fear can be fluid, but living without legal status can often prevent an individual from living life to its fullest potential. Those who relinquish the social control of fear are able to fully live and to get to the point reached by Jorge: "I am so unafraid that I just forget to be cautious sometimes." Social networks and knowledge empowered these participants to disclose and gain a heightened awareness of their legal status identity.

“There’s No Shame No More”: Empowered Disclosure

Participants’ activism in the undocumented youth movement has served as an important mechanism of empowerment used to reclaim the self. The process of disclosure cultivated change for themselves and others. Sarai disclosed her legal status in her high school:

No, there’s no shame no more. There were a lot of students at my high school who started coming up to me and saying “I’m in the same boat. I’m undocumented. What do I do?” I was able to connect them to the resources . . . a lot of people were looking up to me. I didn’t know everything, but I knew I had to find those resources for those students, because I did not want them to go through what I had to go through in my high school years. I don’t want anyone to go through that.

Sarai became an agent of knowledge for other undocumented students who were unaware of the resources. For some of these youth, gaining power through knowledge allowed them to empower others toward releasing fears surrounding disclosure. For example, Ariel capitalized on empowerment through knowledge by utilizing his narrative to empower others in his community and ignite change in others:

The [undocumented youth] movement is about the empowerment of others, of a community that embodies empowerment, but for a long time has been silent. It’s not really about getting literal acceptance, but it’s about much more. After you come out, you can see a glimmer of hope and you can see it reflected in the eyes of others.

Some participants also resisted stigma by dispelling the dominant narratives of immigrants as villains and criminals in order to regain their agency and power. The process of unpacking stigma and shame was also a source of empowerment. Marco, for example, stated:

Because I always knew that I couldn’t have done anything wrong when I crossed the border at the age of three—or how did my parents do anything wrong when they were displaced, and could therefore no longer have a viable living condition where they were, and therefore decided to come into the country without papers. I knew growing up in the US for 20 years that I shouldn’t be crying any shame, but had to wrestle with shame, and with all these other sentiments.

This is a testament of the force in which the controlling images of undocumented immigrants are often internalized. For some, disclosing their legal status is a way to reclaim their humanity; however, arrival at this juncture is challenging, as Angelica describes:

For me, it has been eye-opening to be able to hear others say that they are not criminals and their parents are not criminals. It’s beautiful because it’s true, but it’s difficult to say, and it’s difficult to truly live and proclaim it when there’s so much fear of detention.

For some, coming out of the shadows becomes less about the public forum of disclosure in the form of political action, but more about how one can incorporate self in everyday lived experiences. Yahaira described how she thought differently about her coming out process.

To some people, I also feel like coming out is a very planned, a very methodical type of thing. We have a whole month [“Coming Out of the Shadows” Month] about it and people get up [with] a megaphone and they do this whole shebang for a particular purpose. I’m like, yeah, that’s great. But then my comings out are just like, I crack a joke about it, right? You know, like something comes up and then I’m like—the woes of being undocumented.

In essence, acts of disclosure become part of common conversation, including using humor

as a way to incorporate self in everyday lived experiences. Other students try to push for more conversation about legal status and undocumented students when issues of social justice arise. Angelica finds herself feeling frustrated that issues pertaining to a salient part of her identity are often excluded from the conversations within classroom discourse:

I've been very open about it [legal status] and I always talk about it in class because not a lot of experiences about youth that are undocumented are talked about on campus. I mean, we talk about gender, race, class, privilege, but we never talk about status in terms of your legal status.

Empowering disclosure disrupts the traditional process of biographical construction of legal status by refusing to normalize silence and invisibility of undocumented immigrants. Although Angelica bears the responsibility of educating others about immigration issues, she uses her legal status as a platform to educate.

DISCUSSION

The voices in this study add to the multilayered meaning of disclosure within the public discourse of immigration for undocumented students and graduates who identify as undocumented and unafraid. The themes discussed in this article describe how undocumented individuals manage disclosure through their understanding of their fears in relation to their legal status. This study expands on Orne's (2011) definition of biographical construction by demonstrating how "controlling images" (Collins, 1990) of immigrants imposed by societal perceptions can shape immigrants' knowledge of their legal status and inform their decisions to disclose. The rationale to disclose legal status is not solely constructed based on how young people were socialized to perceive their legal status, but is also informed by the institutionalization of anti-

immigration sentiments that creates a climate of fear—a fear in which often had to be navigated at a young age.

Adopting fear as a way to manage disclosure is a choice largely influenced by the sociopolitical context of immigration in the US, which positions individuals without legal status as individuals without personhood or without rights to make claims. This notion parallels much of the literature on disclosure, in particular, how social contexts (Orne, 2011) play an influential role in how and when immigrants decide to disclose. Orne's notion of coming out and staying in is related to their level of fear and increased knowledge of their legality. This study provides a glimpse into how fear is manifested and cultivated by society and reproduced by undocumented immigrants. There is no structural or institutionalized protection from deportation for undocumented individuals in the US, which poses a different sociopolitical context and reality than for those who have a dis/ability or who want to express their ethnic/racial identity or religious beliefs. One participant in this study stated that he never feared disclosure because he never experienced any negativity towards his legal status within his social context. Ariel was an excellent student and members of his community were sympathetic about his circumstances, so his fear revolved around the inability to change policy and opinions. Fear can be revealed through feelings of powerlessness.

The metaphor of "living in a golden cage" exemplifies how undocumented individuals learn to live with minimized fear, which gleams from the fluidity of fear. The literature (L. D. Patton, 2011; Poindexter & Shippy, 2010) highlights reasons for identity concealment because of negative repercussions from others, fear of judgment, and stigma resistance. This study shows that while fear is a constant element in managing disclosure, the degree

to which undocumented immigrants fear is fluid: it may transform over a period of time and fluctuate based on individual experiences. Participants indicated that increased knowledge about their legal status and their participation in activism helped to diminish fear. This heightened awareness of their own legal consciousness aided in making the “golden cage” livable with some degree of liberty, but lack of legal status continued to confine their mobility. This paradox of coming out and staying in illustrates the complexities of managing disclosure; confinement and freedom can be operationalized concurrently.

Coming out or disclosure is not always a goal (Orne, 2011); thus, the empowerment gained by the participants in this study through their disclosure experiences is an important component. The literature states that coming out can be an educational tool for those individuals and others, but the impact of the self-awareness gained from the disclosure process can be transformational. For the participants in this study, learning how to exist without legal status enabled them to find purpose and meaning by viewing their legality as an asset. Where the other modes of disclosure position individuals as powerless, the empowered disclosure introduced in this article enables individuals to reclaim their agency—their control over how they envision their legal status. Abrego (2011) contends that legal consciousness is the act of making meaning of legal status. In this case, legal consciousness was facilitated by participants’ involvement in social activism, which was the catalyst for providing them with a sense of belonging, agency, and purpose. Disclosure became more than a political act, but rather it became a way for these undocumented students to humanize themselves and to accept their legal status as a powerful identity. Disclosure also involves a negotiation of how these immigrants insert their legal status in everyday conversations,

particularly around discussions of social justice issues such as race, class, and gender equality. The apparent lack of information and discussion about citizenship privilege reproduced notions of dominance over the undocumented immigrant population.

Finally, relational closeness did not seem to be a factor for these participants. Immediate family and friends seemed to already be knowledgeable about the legal status of the participants. Disclosure often occurred to those who potentially had viable information or knowledge about an opportunity or resource for them or for others. In any case, disclosure hinged more upon the greater degree of legal consciousness than on relational closeness.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The findings of this study have several implications for student affairs practitioners, university administrators, and researchers. By understanding that the coming out or disclosure process for undocumented students is influenced by social context, student affairs administrators can assess how policies and procedures can include supporting students who are grappling with this as a salient identity. The utilization of peer support groups in partnership with community immigration advocacy organizations can also be a way in which students seek advice and assistance with how to navigate their legal status in multiple contexts.

Another implication of this study is the need for more professional development for faculty and staff around issues impacting undocumented students. The lack of knowledge on behalf of campus representatives contributed to students’ hesitation to disclose their legal status. An example of how universities have successfully addressed this issue is by employing

programs such as the DREAMzone ally training at Arizona State University. DREAMzone's purpose "is to create inclusive and supportive campus environments conducive to the educational success of undocumented students" (DREAMzone Ally Training Program, 2013, para. 1). Much like LGBTQ Safe Zone programs, institutionalizing such initiatives promotes awareness and may encourage students to disclose more readily to those who have the awareness and knowledge of their needs and dilemmas. Colleges and universities should consider incorporating training about undocumented college students as part of new faculty and staff orientation.

Student affairs educators should broaden their understanding of social justice to be more inclusive of legal status in order to challenge others on privileges associated with citizenship. The inclusion of legal status as part of social identity development conversations provides a space for undocumented students to make sense of themselves. These discussions

also illuminate to the campus community the presence of undocumented students within the university context. Moreover, the research of student identity development theories centered on legal status is virtually nonexistent. It is imperative that student affairs practitioners critically examine the applicability of student development theories to undocumented students.

Future research should focus on the saliency of legal status for undocumented students within different institutional contexts and geographies. I only examined the disclosure experiences of those who had made meaning of their legal status. Understanding the experiences of disclosure for those who are not yet comfortable disclosing their legal status also warrants attention.

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