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Achieving the Dream, Uncertain Futures: The Postbaccalaureate Decision-Making Process of Latinx Undocumented Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the decision-making process of undocumented college students pursuing graduate degrees, and how their commitment to matriculate in higher education programs is shaped by a myriad of social, familial, financial, and institutional factors. This study drew on 2 years of ethnographic data from a sample of 20 undocumented graduate students. The authors used critical race theory and LatCrit in education as guiding frameworks. The findings revealed that family marginalization, guided pathways, and social activism inform student decisions to pursue graduate school. The article concluded with a discussion of implications and areas of future research on undocumented students pursuing a graduate education in a DACA context.

Resumen

Usando entrevistas profundas, este estudio cualitativo a través de dos instituciones en California examinó el proceso de decisión que lleva a estudiantes indocumentados a programas de post-grado. Hallazgos revelaron que las decisiones de estos estudiantes las influenciaron el permanecer como indocumentados, un compromiso a la justicia social, mementos críticos de la vida y la familia, así como un sistema de apoyo y mentoría. Usando la Teoría Crítica Racial, este estudio reveló que los procesos de decisión latina/o son formados por la forma particular que estos estudiantes son racializados como indocumentados.

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A warm and cheerful Yajaira welcomed the researchers at the entrance of the science building where she was employed as a graduate student research assistant. Yajaira's enthusiasm for her important research focused on the development of cancer cells among farm-working women was palpable as she proudly led a brief tour of the building and laboratory where she worked. However, Yajaira's disposition toward her work and her experience as an undocumented graduate student had not always been positive. Throughout her undergraduate program, Yajaira struggled with funding to pay for school, experienced extremely high levels of stress, worked long hours despite her full course load, and dealt with well-meaning but ill-informed faculty advisors—leaving her in a state of uncertainty and disillusionment.

When Yajaira graduated after completing her undergraduate degree, there were no clear pathways for her to attain employment in a professional capacity. Like many undocumented students and workers, she resorted to working in entry-level occupations where she was overqualified and would have obtained without a college degree. At times, when her frustration got the best of her, she even questioned whether the degree in biology, she worked so hard to attain, was even worth it. Yajaira expressed her sentiment in this way as follows:

> Well the one reason in the first place why I took that little break [after graduating] was because I was just overwhelmed. I was emotionally overwhelmed and I didn't want to do anything with school anymore. I was just sick and tired and it would have been nice to say, "I got my bachelor's and it's worth something." "I'm going to go and look for a job as a teacher; I'm going to go look for a job in a lab," and there was nothing for me. I just became really depressed and I took some time off. I was not going to come back to school. I was really comfortable with a job that I had and it was just a little job, it didn't even require a high school diploma. It was just a good comfort zone and I always wanted to come back but there was never that drive. I didn't really want to come back because it really is tough to be in school and be in this situation.

Upon graduating, Yajaira took an extended break from school to recover and heal from a physically and mentally grueling schedule and worked as an office assistant at a dairy near her hometown. Needing clarity on her next steps, she remained employed at the dairy until a traumatic event would shape her decision to return to school in pursuit of a graduate degree in biology. Following the challenges Yajaira had to overcome to complete her Bachelor of Science, including the fact that there were few job options where she could use her degree owing to her undocumented status, her decision to matriculate to a post-secondary program in biology was indeed risky.

Yajaira and the other students in the study attended college in a political context prior to former President Barack Obama establishing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012, under tremendous pressure from the undocumented student movement. DACA provided a window of opportunity where those who were fortunate enough to qualify under its narrow criteria for eligibility and benefit from the program were shielded from deportation and able to obtain a social security number and work permit on a 2-year renewable basis. DACA was rescinded by the Trump administration in September 2017 only to be reinstated by the federal courts where its ultimate fate is likely to soon be determined.

This article seeks to illuminate the social and educational context that leads undocumented college graduates to pursue graduate education in the face of the existing limited pathways toward employment and significant barriers toward graduate education. Although first-generation immigrant Latinx students face adverse challenges as they pursue graduate education (Ramirez, 2011), this study highlights how immigration status complicates the pursuit of graduate degree attainment for undocumented college students.

This article draws on over 2 years of ethnographic data from a sample of 20 undocumented graduate students. The purpose of this study is to analyze the multifaceted nature of the decision-making process of undocumented college students to pursue graduate degrees, and how their commitment to matriculate in higher education programs is shaped by a myriad of social, familial, financial, and institutional factors. This study illuminates the complex nature and context of undocumented students and their struggles to access higher education in California and across the nation. After a review of relevant literature and an overview of the methods, the decision-making processes of study participants are analyzed through a critical race and LatCrit theory lens. The article concludes with a discussion of the significance and implications of undocumented students pursuing a graduate education in a post-DACA context.

Undocumented Students' Decision-Making Process

To understand what influences undocumented Latinx students to pursue graduate education, it is important to first examine how all students are generally influenced to attend graduate school. Several studies have documented the initial decision of students to attend graduate school (Baird, 1976; Ethington & Smart, 1986; Goldberg & Koenigsknecht, 1985; Malaney & Isaac, 1988). These studies have generally found that students with high academic achievement, from higher socioeconomic status, and with high levels of academic and social integration at their undergraduate institution were more likely to pursue graduate studies. Malaney (1987) investigated the common reasons why students pursued graduate studies and found that students desired to learn more about a specialization, sought personal satisfaction, had interest in improving their job prospects, or needed an advanced degree for progression within their chosen field. Studies on graduate college choice have found that similar factors such as the

academic reputation of the institution, size and quality of program, price and cost, financial aid, geographic location, contact with faculty, and students' individual characteristics have influenced the selection of an undergraduate college and also graduate school selection decisions (Kallio, 1995). The decision-making process best fits the early stage or predisposition of the college choice process when a student decides whether or not to attend graduate school.

College Choice of Latinx Graduate Students

The factors that lead to a decision to purse graduate school for Latinx students are distinct from non-Latinx students. Research by P. A. Perez and McDonough (2008) examined the experiences of Latinx students deciding to attend and then select a college. They found first-generation Latinx students relied heavily on support from siblings, peers, and relatives to make a final decision. Other work (Gandara, 1995) has found that parents play a critical role in encouraging their children to pursue a postsecondary education. More recent research documenting the application and college choice process of graduate students has uncovered serious barriers that students encountered consisting of lack of knowledge and guidance about how to apply to graduate school, a lack of support, and students also experienced forms of institutional abuse (Ramirez, 2011). Ramirez (2011) also identified critical sources of support in her study consisting of participating in research programs and receiving guidance from institutional agents. In another study, Ramirez (2013) examined the graduate school choice process for Latinx students. She found that Latinx students identified five major factors for enrolling in a doctoral program, ranging from a desire to stay close to home, or studying with specific faculty, financial considerations, campus climate concerns, and circumscribed choice.

Furthermore, although a limited number of studies have examined the college choice process for Latinx graduate students, even fewer studies have explored the college choice process for undocumented Latinx students. However, one study in particular highlighted the college choice process for undocumented Latinx high school students (P.A. Perez, 2010). Perez found that students decided to attend certain institutions of higher education due to the location and distance from home, the affordability of the institution, and encouragement from supportive relationships. As a result of barriers associated with tuition and living expenses that undocumented students encountered, they were more likely to enroll in community college as their first postsecondary experience (Gonzales, 2007). Additional research is needed to clearly document the graduate school choices of undocumented college students. This study attempts to make a contribution to the literature by examining the following research question:

Research Question 1: What influences Latinx undocumented college students to pursue a graduate education?

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a critical race theory (CRT) and LatCrit in education framework and examines the experiences of Latinx undocumented college graduates. CRT, with deep roots in the work of legal scholars, seeks to eliminate subordination by examining how dominant ideologies of race and racism shape theory, policy, and practice (Solórzano, 1998). Race, immigration, and class status play a pivotal role in the college and career trajectories, including issues around stress and well-being (Muñoz, 2013), employment (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010), and outlook (Gonzales, 2007). The work of critical race scholars on immigration and higher education has revealed the pivotal role citizenship status and race play in regard to issues of access (Olivas, 2009), navigation (Huber, 2009; Lara, 2014), college choice (P.A. Perez, 2010), and degree attainment (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014) of Latinx undocumented students. The application of CRT and LatCrit, here, concerns how the educational trajectories of Latinx college graduates are mediated by discriminatory policies based on their immigration status and, in turn, their resistance to those policies by entering graduate school (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). CRT and LatCrit frameworks include five central tenets that are described below.

The Centrality of Race and Racism

CRT in education holds that race and racism are endemic, permanent, and central in explaining characteristics of American society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). There is also recognition that "race and racism are imbedded in the structures, practices and discourses that guide the daily practices of universities" (Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005, p. 274). LatCrit builds on CRT by centering in this discussion the "intersection of race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype and sexuality" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472) to illuminate the theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical questions related to the educational experiences of Latinx undocumented college graduates.

The Challenge to Dominant Ideology

CRT in education offers a challenge to the dominant ideologies of meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Yosso, 2006) regarding higher education. LatCrit, in particular, highlights the marginalizing effects that undocumented Latinx students experience due to racially exclusionary federal and higher educational policy. More specifically, these frameworks challenge specific forms of racism, such as racist nativism (Huber, Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008), and many of the pervasive misconceptions and stereotypes about immigrants that lay blame on them for the social and economic problems of society.

The Commitment to Social Justice

CRT in education commits to social justice by working toward the elimination of racial, gender, linguistic, and class subordination (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Through CRT, the current study highlights the importance of access to graduate education and, more importantly, how students organized and developed diverse strategies with the help of peers and institutional agents to broaden graduate access. The authors hold the expectation that institutions and individuals should strive to achieve educational equality for all students (Villalpando, 2004).

Valuing Experiential Knowledge

CRT in education values the narratives of People of Color. This work acknowledges the importance of lived experiences and the knowledge derived from these experiences as significant and valid in the use research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). For Latinxs, the application of a CRT and LatCrit framework centralizes student and familial experiences and views on them and their collective stories of migration and survival as a familial assets (Yosso, 2005). The authors draw from these lived experiences of undocumented college students resisting racist nativism (Huber, 2009), colorblind racism (Alcalde, 2016), and isolation in higher education (Lara, 2014) revealing how these experiences shape their decisions to attend graduate school.

An Interdisciplinary Perspective

CRT in education takes an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach examining forms of marginalization in historical and contemporary contexts (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Situating the experiences of undocumented college students in a historical perspective reveals that citizenship and other societal markers confer the privilege for some at the expense of those who are otherized. In this study, the authors examine access to higher education historically, accounting for an array of formative individual and familial racial- and immigration-related experiences that shape student and career goals in their decision making.

Research Methods

CRT also informed the design of the study including the use of qualitative data collection methods. This provided a way to draw on the experiential knowledge of undocumented students through their powerful narratives and honoring the telling of their own truths (Ledesman & Calderón, 2015). The article draws from data collected from a larger qualitative ethnographic life history focused on decision-making and navigational strategies of undocumented college graduates in California. Student voices were captured through life history and in-depth semistructured interviews with 20 undocumented students who were graduates of two large public universities in Southern and Central California.

Participants were Latinx-identified college graduates who had earned a bachelor's degree from two public universities in California. Given the disproportionate numbers of Mexican-origin Latinx students in California, most of the participants were of Mexican descent. Students were recruited through support services programs for undocumented students. Emails were sent to potential participants by the directors of each program asking for their voluntary participation in this study. Students who showed interest in participating were informed to contact the lead researcher and an initial interview was set up. A snowball sampling method (Babbie, 1998) aided in locating additional participants. Of the 20 participants in the study, 10 were women and 10 were men, with students enrolled in graduate programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (7); education (4); humanities (4); social sciences (3); and law (2). At the time of the interviews, few undocumented students were in graduate programs, and most students maintained a low profile. For these reasons, participants assisted in the recruitment of others by recommending their friends and colleagues who shared similar experiences and social networks.

The first interview included oral histories of participants that focused on their educational and migratory histories. These semistructured interviews ranged from 60 to 140 minutes and were conducted by the first author. The second set of interviews focused on the students' postbaccalaureate aspirations, challenges encountered, and navigational strategies used by the participants. Both of the interviews were conducted in Spanish or English depending on the degree of comfort of the interviewee and were recorded with an Olympus digital audio recorder. Afterward, the interviews were transcribed and analysis of the data was conducted from the written transcripts.

The experiences of undocumented college graduates provide an understanding of the opportunity structures that undocumented students manage in navigating their postbaccalaureate educational and career options.

Findings

The narratives provided by participants reveal a context of oscillating emotions brought about by the adversity and uncertainty they experienced as undergraduates. As they completed their undergraduate studies and began to think about possible and eventual enrollment in graduate studies, a sense of optimism and hopefulness emerged often brought about through peer or mentor support along with increased pressure to act on the Obama administration and congress. The telling of these narratives happened in a political climate where the Federal Dream Act had come up for a vote in December 2010 failing by small margin in Congress (Abrego, 2018). Less than a year after conclusion of the data collection, the enactment of DACA "temporarily counteracted some of the punitive consequences of the immigration regime" (Abrego, 2018, p. 2) providing pathways for higher education and employment.

In the following section, three themes are presented that reveal how undocumented students responded to a restricted context toward graduate education prior to DACA's enactment. The first theme consists of the *Context of Family Marginalization*, which emerged from the familial consideration that informed participants' decisions to apply to graduate school. A second theme, *Guided Pathways*, revealed how undocumented

Latinx college graduates relied on the guidance of peers and mentors for encouragement and support when information know-how about the peculiarities of graduate school for undocumented students was inaccessible or nonexistent at the institutional level. Finally, students were motivated by *Social Activism* and pursued graduate studies as a means toward fulfilling a desire to bring about personal and social change through a more humanizing immigrant rights context.

Blocked Paths Toward Employment

Interview data revealed that one of the key factors shaping student decisions to apply to graduate school was blocked pathways encountered toward employability. As college graduates, all were unable to find employment in their field of study. Most students continued to work in the same service sector jobs that they held as undergraduates—positions often not requiring a college degree. The context awaiting these students after completing their undergraduate studies is best captured by Eduardo's dilemma:

> The first summer after graduating, I applied to a lot of jobs. I don't know what I was thinking. I was really hoping that they would say, "Oh it's okay that you don't have documentation." I was applying to jobs related to my field and I would get interviews and they were like, "Great, great, great" and they would call me back. Then when they would ask me, "Oh bring your ID or your social security." That's when I would be "Okay I'll call you back" and after a couple of times I was like, "What are you waiting for? What are you expecting?" They're just gonna be like, "It's okay?" So that's when I stopped applying to those types of jobs, it's kind of pointless.

After numerous attempts to find employment where he could apply his degree in psychology, Eduardo became disillusioned after not being able to obtain a job. As a result of the blocked path to work authorization, Eduardo concluded that a better alternative was to return to school and pursue a graduate education. For students attending graduate school in more immigrant-friendly states, their experiences of "constrained inclusion" (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017) in higher education left them in a precarious position once they bumped up against the reality of the limits imposed by citizenship status. In essence, although progress has been made in creating greater access for undocumented students within higher education, the student narratives were instrumental in illuminating their reasons why graduate school was a logical next step.

The research findings were consistent with the literature on undocumented undergraduate students, and revealed that factors like the anxiety (W. Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009) and uncertainty (Contreras, 2009; Perez, 2010) that students experienced as they reached milestones, such as graduating from high school, community college, or the university, also persisted in graduate school. As undocumented students came closer to completing their high school and baccalaureate degrees, they often began to worry about the uncertainty that awaited them and the possibility of not being able to obtain employment or utilize their degrees in their areas

of study (Contreras, 2009; Perez, 2010). This study reveals that undocumented students in graduate school also experienced similar concerns, such as financing their studies, transportation issues such as driving to school and work, and remaining ineligible for most forms of financial assistance, including scholarships and fellowships. However, in graduate school, these challenges become more pronounced as the financial, research, and academic requirements typically are much greater in intensity for students.

Even after the completion of rigorous academic courses of study, these college students were racialized into low status jobs (Gonzales, 2011). The student interviews revealed that despite their graduate school status, they experienced many forms of racialization and were still subjected to low status employment as waiters, bartenders, working at a dairy, or as customer service agents at a furniture store. In the following, we explore the three emergent themes from the undocumented student narratives.

Context of family marginalization. Despite the blocked pathways they faced, particularly those related to their undocumented status, the participants in this research study discussed a variety of experiences around family that helped them decide to pursue a graduate education. Diego, who had completed his undergraduate studies in mechanical engineering, was quick to discover that even with his degree in a high demand field, his immigration status served as a blocked path toward securing employment (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Instead, Diego worked waiting tables at a local Mexican restaurant where he had work for the past 5 years to help fund his undergraduate education. Diego noted the central role his family played in his decision to attend graduate school:

> See I never thought I was going to do a master's [in engineering], actually I never intended to do a master's degree. The reason I got into the master's degree was because I didn't have a way to work and at the time when I got my bachelor's, my daughter had barely been born.

The birth of Diego's daughter resulted in the postponement of filing an immigration application and potentially consular processing and obtaining the status of a lawful permanent resident. As the only undocumented person in a mixed-status family, Diego feared being barred from returning to the United States, having his waiver for unlawful presence denied, being found inadmissible to permanent residency, or being forced to return to México permanently. He explained,

> When I got my bachelor's, my daughter had barely been born and that's why I didn't file in the paperwork. My daughter was barely born and I wanted to be here and now that I'm gonna graduate I'm seeing that I will, but on the other hand I'm hoping for Obama to do something about the situation because I don't want to leave my daughter now. She's older and I don't think I'm ever gonna be ready for that. But you know it comes to a time that you either have to do it or you have to plan for something else.

Diego's case revealed that if he was forced to make a choice, he would rather continue living with undocumented status and struggle to get by to remain by his daughter's side,

rather than risk being denied residency and separated from his family. Diego's example reveals the prioritizing of family unity, even over the possibility of eventual permanent legal residence, shaped his decision making with regard to attending graduate school.

Yajaira, the student from the opening vignette, shared that an incident occurring to her younger sister was a primary driver for her decision to return to graduate school. Her younger sister who was also an undocumented college student struggled with the deep levels of stress associated with the costs of paying for tuition and living expenses, which resulted in a suicide attempt. In an interview, Yajaira described the impact of this emotional and unfortunate event with her voice breaking and tears rolling down her cheeks:

> I didn't have the words, I just sat down in the car and I was just shocked. I was shocked to have heard that my little sister needed a kidney transplant [cries] and I still remember the whole way. It's an hour and thirty-minute drive to my hometown and I do not remember the whole way. I was awake but I don't remember it and I said, "You know what God if you can just please be kind to my sister and have her not require a kidney transplant I will go back to school," so I think that was my main motivation [continues to cry].

The perturbation caused by the incident was trying on her family, leading Yajaira to make a *manda*, or a special vow to a saint or God, in return for the well-being of her sister. As she alluded above, Yajaira's decision to return to school and enroll in graduate school was, in part, a result of this *manda*. Fortunately, her sister's health improved significantly and Yajaira entered a very competitive master's program in biology.

Other students in the study extended their programs of study delaying graduating for not having a clear sense of what next steps to take. Joaquin, for instance, reflected that while he spent 4 years completing his master's degree in physics, his mother contracted and succumbed to an aggressive form of cancer *and* he also had been recently married. At the same time, he had no rush in graduating because he was uncertain of what he would do next; even if he graduated, he could not work in his field of expertise. For Joaquin, the decision to pursue a doctoral degree and continue his studies became clearer when he experienced marital problems in his young marriage:

> During that time, my mother died and then I met a young lady, I fell in love, and got married to her. Then we had a whole bunch of problems. I stayed there [in the program] because I didn't know what to do because even if I graduated I couldn't work . . . After that my enthusiasm went down. I was already desperate, I felt I wasn't doing anything. I went through a crisis at that time. After, I had the marriage, it was a period with much drama because we were not compatible, it wore me down, and at the end when I divorced her, I decided, when I found out that we weren't going to be able to be together I made the decision of applying [to PhD programs]. I did what I should have done four years earlier, when I was in undergrad.

Joaquin regretted not having applied to doctoral programs directly out of his undergraduate program where his stellar academic accomplishments garnered him the outstanding graduating senior award from his school. Although he did apply at that time and was accepted to several prestigious doctoral programs with full funding, without a social security number he would be unable to secure funding from any of the U.S. institutions to which he applied. Instead, he endured the loss of his mother and his

short marriage. Only after suffering through those two extremely difficult life incidents did Joaquin apply to doctoral programs, ending up in a Canadian research-intensive university in a doctoral program where he was offered a greater degree of financial support. He spoke of it in this way as follows:

> My advisor told me, "If you are going to take your career in physics seriously you have to do it now! Or do you want to wait to see what happens with this (immigration reform), as it might not ever happen. Or do you make a decision for your career? Maybe you can have your career but not California, or California but not your career." So at the end I decided for my career.

From drawing on spiritual and religious beliefs in times of crises, to valuing family unity, to the loss of family members, the various key family moments these students experienced set plans in motion to pursue graduate studies. Espinoza (2010) has described the critical role that families and home life experiences play in the academic achievement of Latinx students. Her research has illuminated the role of *familismo* which emphasized loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity (Espinoza, 2010). In the current study, participants all exhibited forms of *familismo* and maintained solid relations and ties with their loved ones. This sense of *familismo* gave them a sense of belonging from which they drew to do well academically. It was these reciprocal bonds and strong ties that students utilized and tapped during their most difficult experiences. These familial experiences allowed students to reflect on their situation and led them to make critical decisions in their life, including matriculation in graduate programs.

Guided pathways leading to graduate school. Without the assistance of supportive individuals within the institutions they were attending, these students likely would not have attended graduate school because they viewed it as outside their realm of possibility. As students were earning their baccalaureate degrees, supportive relationships were critical in influencing undocumented students' educational aspirations and trajectories. For instance, some students had the guidance of supportive relationships consisting of peers, graduate students, professors, counselors, and staff on campus who provided them with *guided pathways* and encouragement for how to apply and navigate the graduate school process.

For Soledad, an undocumented student majoring in sociology with an interest in education, navigating the graduate school application process, was especially difficult because she had been a transfer student and needed extra preparation in a limited window of time to familiarize herself with the process itself. Soledad shared how one of her peers was critical in her decision to continue onto graduate studies. She stated,

> I didn't really know what I was going to do after. I was focused on graduating and I was a sociology major here and I really didn't like it here. So I guess my thinking changed when I found out that people [other undocumented students] were going into grad school and Martha . . . really I have to thank her. She's the one who told me about it, because during the year that I came in, she was leaving to Harvard and so before she left, we did

> like a one-on-one grad school super marathon. "This is what it is . . ., this is what you have to do . . ., this is what you have to think . . ." and because she was a transfer student, she knew I had limited time. She helped me come up with a deadline, "This is when you have to turn everything in by, take the GRE and do all this stuff." I knew that my situation wasn't getting any better and I felt like it was such little time to be here as an undergrad. Two years, that's not that much as an undergrad. So I thought maybe I should just do a master's. That's how I got into thinking about grad school. She told me when to take the GRE, what to do, what letters, what research I needed to get into and that's how I decided to do more school after I graduated because I didn't know what else to do.

For Soledad, having Martha as an undocumented peer mentor provided her with the knowledgebase to know that gaining research experience, preparing for the GRE's, and being mindful of a tight timeline would leave her well-prepared to apply to graduate school. Soledad's status as an undocumented student left her ineligible to apply for graduate preparation programs targeting students who are first generation and from underrepresented background. Being offered the support and guidance through an unknown path toward graduate school, Soledad received the reassurance to confidently continue her studies. In the absence of institutional agents in universities who should know how to support students, peers played the role of "empowerment agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) by providing access to resources and knowledge denied to undocumented students, and thus, filling the structural holes within the universities.

Undocumented students all along the K-PhD pipeline did not meet the citizenship status qualification for federal or state programs aimed at increasing representation of students from similar backgrounds. Adela, a master's student attending the University of California, sought out the support of one of her friends who was on the path toward graduate school, as a result of his participation in the McNair Scholars program and the preparation he had received. The high stakes information Adela's friend shared while they both were undergraduates was essential in her future decision to apply to a master's program. She elaborated,

> If it wasn't for like one friend who got me really thinking about it [graduate school] . . . He was in McNair and started sharing resources with me, he told me about the GRE, he had books and tons of information. We would get together and just break it down, everything he was doing. If it wasn't for him, I would have never known.

These experiences via social networks and having access to high stakes information are critical for undocumented students who, in this study, were often the first in their family to enroll and then graduate from college. The advice and mentorship they receive from peers in the absence of formal mentoring relationships is crucial, often exposing them to information and providing them with tools to navigate the higher education pipeline. Such access to information from relationships and connections for navigating higher education and overcoming barriers resulting from racialization are similar to what Yosso (2005) referred to as social capital. These nondominant forms of social capital are grounded in the desire to see institutions of higher education

transformed with the presence and participation of students who, in many ways, were never intended to be in higher education.

Social activism and the pursuit of justice. A byproduct of the racialization and marginalization that undocumented students experienced in accessing higher education was a deeper social awareness of the oppression that they were forced to endure. Their own experiential and familial knowledges became an avenue for students to become critical of the differential treatment and living conditions of undocumented and immigrant communities. In turn, for many students, these experiences motivated them to work to create change seeking to improve the lives of all undocumented immigrants. They became interested in careers and areas of study that directly or indirectly had advocacy and activist components as they sought involvement with advocacy organizations or other entities that challenged laws, policies, and dominant ideologies that affected the daily lives of undocumented people. Students' personal experiences with discrimination and marginalization forged their interest and commitment to social justice, and served as impetus for them to pursue a graduate education.

For example, Pablo highlighted repeated racial microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) he experienced that motivated him to become an attorney and work on behalf of undocumented immigrants:

> I got involved in political campaigns. I knew that politics was something I liked and so being involved in politics and understanding that my whole life was dictated by immigration laws. Then, when I started doing my workshops about AB540, people would tell me, "You can't give legal advice because you're not an attorney." That's really when I said, "Well I'm gonna become an attorney so that people can't tell me that I can't give [legal] advice."

Pablo's own educational experience and social activism working for the undocumented community led him from politics to the field of law. Consequently, he became one of the first undocumented students in law school on his campus and was instrumental as a founding member of an AB540 student advocacy group there. The leadership experience he gained through the student group coupled with his experience working in political campaigns renewed his hope to continue with his studies and become a legal advocate for immigrant communities.

Students' educational trajectories were also shaped by the economic hardships they experienced in their country of birth and fueled a desire to create change and improve the living conditions of immigrants. These experiences allowed them to develop a critical social analysis, which led them to focus on careers paths that placed a great emphasis on the rights of undocumented immigrants and other marginalized communities (Zimmerman, 2016).

Aurora, a graduate student in economics, developed a social justice orientation as a young child through a comparative perspective, when she first came to the United States with her family. Through her lived experience as an immigrant, she gained a critical perspective of the economic interconnectedness between the United States and México—a recession had severely affected her small town in México and forced her

family to migrate north to the United States. Aurora alluded to her family's forced migration and economic asymmetries between the United States and México as shaping her plan and desire to give back. She explained,

> I decided that I wanted to go into economics because I want to eventually . . . in the future, I want to be able to go back to México and help with economic development. That was my idea after I'm done. I've always wanted to go back, and ever since I was younger I always questioned why did my parents have to come? Why is there illegal immigration? In my idea it's México's fault too, that it's so bad that people have to leave. So then I thought I'm going to study economics and then go back to México and hope I can do something there.

Aurora's willingness to question the present and historical along with the social and economic relations between the two countries resulted in her desire to pursue an academic specialization geared toward economic development to help improve the lived conditions of Mexicans, hoping to reduce the need for outward migration. Her interest in this area led her to apply and enroll in a master's program in economic development at a progressive private university on the East Coast. Unfortunately, due to the high cost of tuition and being unable to secure a loan after her first year, Aurora withdrew and explored other educational alternatives.

Other students showed interest in working toward social change, specifically to improve the conditions for current and future undocumented students. Some were the first undocumented students on their respective campus and in their departments, and felt a responsibility to assist and inform the next generation of undocumented students interested in pursuing graduate school. For example, several students founded an undocumented graduate student organization with a mission dedicated to serving the needs of new students by holding workshops and making information available on the graduate school application and navigation process. In turn, the creation of this organization led to greater numbers of undocumented students entering graduate school programs.

Student aspirations to pursue graduate school in pursuit of social justice aims varied. Gabriel, who earned a doctoral degree in Spanish and Portuguese, shared his views:

> One of the inspirations that motivated me to go to [graduate] school and to do what I'm doing . . . because I am reading and I am very interested in reading about feminist theory, queer theory and a lot of these people have had the same experiences. I relate to them and it makes me feel good to know that, okay we're people trying to get ahead in society and we're getting ahead.

The exposure to different theoretical humanist and critical traditions provided Gabriel with a nuanced understanding of how oppression is produced and reproduced. In deciding to pursue his doctoral degree, Gabriel hoped to teach and conduct research on the intersecting identities of undocumented students, especially those who also identified as queer. In interviews, he shared how he conceptualized being both undocumented and gay as "not welcomed by the United States or did not have a permit to live here."

Speaking in terms of sexuality, moreover, was "another type of permit that you have to ask from society to be accepted, the citizenship to live, to be welcomed in the world." The intersection of his undocumented status and his sexuality provided two critical factors that greatly influenced his educational trajectory, which carried over to his dissertation study wherein he investigated the lived experiences of dislocated individuals.

The experience of marginalization affected these students in profound ways and shaped their consciousness by creating the desire to give back to the community and develop broader pathways for future students. These findings overlap with existing research on the activism of undocumented students conducted by undocumented students themselves (Madera, 2008; The Students Informing Now Collective, 2017), researchers (Gonzales, 2008; Negrón-Gonzales, 2014, 2015; W. Perez et al., 2009), and community groups and organizations (Wong et al., 2012). Particularly at the high school and undergraduate level, researchers found that student leadership and civic engagement influenced their participation in school and their relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers (Gonzales, 2008). In addition, students joined clubs and created organizations where they began to partake in community service and developed their leadership skills and advocacy for the rights of undocumented students. Some students who had completed graduate degrees had few avenues left but to advocate for their rights to be citizens forcefully and actively (Gonzales, 2008). Previous research (Abrego, 2006, 2011; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2008, 2011; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013) highlighted the way in which undocumented youth and adults utilized civic engagement and advocacy to fight for legal change against injustice that defined them as outsiders to society. Similarly, for the students in this research study, their experiences with discrimination contributed to their need to make a difference in the lives of immigrants and also people of color.

Implications and Conclusion

The narratives of these undocumented students reveal that family, peers, and social justice commitments played an important role in influencing them to enter graduate school programs. These students attended graduate school in a context prior to DACA's existence hoping for legal pathways toward employment and greater inclusion. With great uncertainty surrounding DACA's survival at the federal level, institutions of higher education and higher education officials must find ways to support the well-being of undocumented students and their families, as well as immigrants in general who are presently under attack.

Further research is needed on this population that examines their academic and employment prospects. This research should seek to understand and respond to the new challenges undocumented students are likely to (re)encounter if DACA is rescinded through blocked pathways to accessing employment and graduate education. Furthermore, it is also important to learn about the navigational strategies these students have employed toward completing graduate degree programs as well as obtaining employment with or without DACA. Student decisions to pursue graduate studies are affected by their family's experiences of marginalization and in hopes of

gaining social mobility for the well-being of the whole family. Colleges and universities should provide readily available culturally responsive mental health services to undocumented students to help support overall health and well-being especially in dealing with the elevated levels of stress brought on by the severity of uncertain future prospects. A key finding from this study reflects other research (Gonzales et al., 2013; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009) that reveal high levels of isolation and mental health issues in the form of depression and anxiety these students experienced in the programs they attended. Greater awareness of the prevalence of mental health illness is necessary to make resources available in the form of counseling and providing social and emotional support for students who may be the first and only undocumented students in their programs.

Additional research can also explore collective organizing among students in a self-help context to learn about what institutions can do to provide the necessary support structures students need to succeed without experiencing unnecessary stressors. Students at one institution organized a campus group in collaboration with a community organization to support each other in the graduate school application process. As some of the only undocumented graduate students on campus, they became advocates for themselves and one another. Other undocumented graduate students in the DACA era have begun to collaborate with community-based and national immigrant rights organizations to create and disperse "how to manuals" for students of various degrees of documentation to best navigate the employment and higher education spheres.

Finally, this study also has implications for institutional agents at the university level including professors, counselors, and higher education staff and administrators to develop greater awareness of the adversity and constraints undocumented immigrant students experience throughout the educational pipeline (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014). With increasing numbers of undocumented Latinx students graduating from colleges and universities, there is great urgency for educators to know how to support these students as they traverse their undergraduate education, explore and enter graduate education, and prepare for career opportunities. Furthermore, this reality calls into question the commitments of institutions and graduate school programs to ensure that they have the necessary support structures including supportive faculty and material resources are in place to ensure all students are able to complete their degree programs in a timely manner. Some of the most promising approaches toward supporting undocumented students include collaborations with community-based organizations that provide stable employment, community building and a sense of belonging, and advocate on behalf of immigrant rights.

Overall, the narratives of these students highlight the complexities of being an undocumented Latinx immigrant in the United States. Although the students in this study represent a small sliver of the undocumented student population, their struggles suggest that, with support, this particular student population is capable of fulfilling their goals and dreams but at the cost of immense sacrifice and hardship to themselves and their families. In the end, their navigation into graduate programs was the result of their individual and collective determination along with the wealth of

resources obtained from community and family members who truly believed in and supported them.

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