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**Becoming Undocumented and Unafraid: Impacts of “Illegality” on  
Identity Formation and University Student Activism**

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**Becoming Undocumented and Unafraid: Impacts of “Illegality” on  
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**by**

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## **Dedication**

*This thesis is dedicated the members of the Student Action Organization (pseudonym) who inspire me every day with their bravery, determination, and compassion. Thank you for sharing your space, your wisdom, your hearts, and your stories with me.*

*¡Seguimos en la lucha!*

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# **Becoming Undocumented and Unafraid: Impacts of “Illegality” on Identity Formation and University Student Activism**

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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This study explores the ways in which the construction of illegality impacts the identity formation of undocumented organizers, as well as how this identity and broader understanding of social oppression leads to university student activism. This thesis documents the process by which this occurs, which is complex, painful at times, and beautiful. Through an analysis of 15 qualitative interviews with undocumented student organizers and field notes of meetings, hearings at the state capitol, and protests, this study uses activist research methods that serve a practical purpose for the social movement and contribute meaningfully to the academic knowledge base. Each participant, through their examples of interactions with systems, discussed the ways in which their skin color, perceived race, and legal status combined in oppressive or discriminatory experiences. Whether interaction with law enforcement, medical systems, or educational institutions, these students articulated the ways in which their identities impacted their perception in society, and thus their own identity formation. Participants

also discussed the process that led them toward activism. This thesis explores the ways in which undocumented status is not necessarily noticeable on the outside, which contributed to students' feelings of isolation or of thinking they were the only undocumented students in high school or college. Interviewees emphasized their start as organizers as being part of a call to action rooted in their experiences of finding a community to belong to. Participants also discussed allies' contributions to the movement, burnout and emotional stress related to organizing efforts, and the complexities of the phrase "undocumented and unafraid." Taken as a whole, this thesis details the formation of these individuals' identities over the course of their lives. Overall this research provides further evidence of the potential for advancing rights for those who fall outside the arbitrary bounds of illegality and further demonstrates the power of young people in this movement.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

“If your dream is only for yourself, you’re dreaming too small.” Victoria<sup>1</sup>, a board member of the undocumented youth-led organization SAO (Student Action Organization), gave her “story of self” to an attentive crowd on a late Monday night in the fall of 2017. It was the fourth meeting of the semester and the focus was turned to motivating members to help advocate for the new 2017 version of the DREAM act following the rescinding of the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program. Undocumented organizers of SAO often use their personal narratives as inspiring messages that can motivate their membership, provide a human perspective for reporters, or connect with undocumented community members at events.

SAO organizers understand the context in which they fight. The United States has never had consistent immigration policies. This country has always deported immigrants and sustained racist, xenophobic, and bigoted narratives regarding immigration. In the face of this, the organizers I have worked with and interviewed for this research have adapted, innovated, and mobilized to protect their families and communities. These students have presented a narrative of the undocumented identity that is complex, inspiring, and not “one-size-fits-all.”

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study looks specifically at the ways in which the construction of illegality impacts the identity formation of undocumented organizers, as well as how this identity and broader understanding of social oppression leads to university student activism. Using activist research methods, I work to present an analysis with both an academic and political purpose, documenting work with organizers in a way that explores both identity

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<sup>1</sup> All names of individuals and student organizations used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

formation and the complexities of activism itself. My aim in this thesis is to document the process by which this occurs, which is complex, painful at times, and beautiful.

This narrative is a fabric woven of stories of resistance, resilience, and survivors. It is a story of those who simply do not give up or back down. It is a story that has space for public acts of defiance and everyday acts of bravery. It has space for the undocumented, the DACAmented, and the allied. It has space for days of large mobilization, days of fear and hopelessness, and days of communal love and caring.

There is no *one* way of living as undocumented, and being undocumented is not the defining feature of one's life. In order to authentically write a narrative that I hope does justice to the complex realities, I draw from the words of student organizers themselves, as well as other authors in the field to explore how one *becomes* "Undocumented and Unafraid." I find that this is a process that involves interacting with systems that perpetuate notions of illegality, self-reflection to understand one's own identity as undocumented, finding a community and belonging, feeling called to organizing, and finding one's voice in the movement. This process is not uniform, but is unique to each person and involves both heartache and happiness.

Below I discuss the context of immigration policy in the United States, structural barriers facing the undocumented community, the impact of this context on mental health, and the national and local settings within which this thesis is situated. I then describe the Student Action Organization (SAO), the organization with which this research was conducted, as well as a brief overview of the chapters of this thesis and summary of my findings. In doing so, I am providing the foundation upon which this thesis will detail the experiences of undocumented organizers themselves as I work to illustrate the complexities of their identities and their work.

## CONTEXT

The politics of citizenship and immigration have been impacted by geopolitical hierarchies, in which nations police their borders and determine which immigrants they will recognize based on class, race, and national origin. The United States in particular has employed racist policies regarding immigration, which demonstrate the arbitrary nature of citizenship and determining legality. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) is a prime example of this type of policy. Simultaneously, IRCA increased border enforcement and created further employment restrictions for undocumented individuals, while also granting amnesty to nearly 3 million individuals. Examples such as IRCA exemplify the way in which the label of “illegal” can drastically shift based on policy; thus further demonstrating its arbitrary nature.

Recently, the trend in terms of immigration policy has tended toward increased enforcement rather than relief. In 1996 the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act provided legal mechanisms for massive deportations, which started the growth of removals in the United States. In 2001 the USA PATRIOT Act created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and within it, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This direct increase in enforcement has had tangible impacts for immigrant communities throughout the United States. Furthermore, in 2009 ICE revised 287(g) of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Action (IIRIRA) to enable local law enforcement to be trained by ICE and perform immigration law enforcement functions. This particular link between ICE and local law enforcement has recently been the focus of legislation and activism in Texas.

## **Structural Barriers**

Nationally, many systems exclude or create barriers for undocumented individuals. The United States government has adjusted both the category of citizenship and the rights of citizenship over time. While some might argue that undocumented individuals broke the law in order to be in the United States without papers, others point to rights enshrined in the U.S. constitution and international law to explain the importance of access to services for the undocumented community. For the purposes of this thesis I will write based on the notion that all human beings living in the United States have the right to access fundamental services that meet their basic needs. This concept comes both from social work principles and from international human rights documents related to the treatment of migrants, such as the United Nations Convention on Migrant Workers' Rights.

## **Mental Health Impacts**

The exclusion of individuals from citizenship as a result of the nation-state's construction of illegality has implications not only for accessing services and education, but also for immigrants' mental health. For many undocumented families, a baseline of stress level exists on a daily basis (Pew Research Center, 2017; Zayas, 2015). Fear of deportation and detention, or fear of family members being detained or deported has also been shown to be a major psychological and emotional stressor for members of "mixed-status" or all undocumented families (Brabeck & Ku, 2010).

Human beings are able to withstand many of life's pressures, adapting and coping with new situations that challenge them. When such a challenge causes genuine harm or the threat of harm and is experienced as an intolerable difficulty, however, it is referred to as a crisis (Walsh, 2013). Stress is the event that causes a crisis, and is experienced as an



internal or external demand that exceeds a person's coping resources. Traumatic stress is an event that involves "actual or threatened severe injury or death to oneself or others" (Walsh, 2013, p. 309). The trauma is not the event itself, but rather the person's reaction to it. If the event does in fact exceed a person's coping ability, the impact on that person's psychological and physical well-being can last for an untold amount of time. This can be experienced as anxiety, depression, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Zayas (2015) documents the way that citizen-children with undocumented parents experience a constant worry, fear, and stress that is a chronic condition and has a negative impact on their physical and mental health. All of these factors serve as important context for the lives of participants in this study.

### **National Context**

Since entering the White House, Donald Trump has created and made administrative changes to several executive orders that directly impact immigrant communities. In one change, he reinstated Secure Communities, broadening the definition of "criminal" and putting more individuals at risk of arrest. The second was meant to punish sanctuary cities – cities that refuse to cooperate with most ICE requests. Since Trump's anti-immigrant executive orders, Austin Sheriff Sally Hernández's refusal to cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Governor Abbot's slashing of funds for Travis County in retaliation, Austin has seen raids of its Latinx- majority communities. CNN and other news sources confirmed through a senior US immigration official that ICE raids were directly targeting "sanctuary cities" that limit local law enforcements' cooperation with federal immigration officials (Santana, 2017). The raids have created a heightened climate of fear throughout Austin, leaving

organizations scrambling to provide up-to-date information and support for worried families.

In the midst of this context, the question of how a human being could possibly *be* illegal once again is relevant. Given the many national and state forces working to define and enforce ideas of illegality and criminality, the way in which an undocumented individual encounters systems that exert power and control can be influential in forming one's identity.

### **Local Context**

Texas has been a battleground for immigrant rights for decades and continues to be a key state in which to view heightened threats to immigrant communities, as well as coordinated grassroots community activism and advocacy for immigrant rights. Texas legislature rapidly pushed forward Senate Bill 4 (SB4), which would have required local law enforcement to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement. While the bill was in signed into law in the spring of 2017, a federal judge placed an injunction that delayed its implementation. The law is making its way through higher courts, which so far has allowed certain aspects to go into effect. The constitutionality of the entire law is yet to be determined.

In the context of continued anti-immigrant sentiment, laws that have been supportive to undocumented youth have continued to be challenged in the legislature. HB 1403, passed in 2001, grants undocumented students the right to in-state tuition at state universities and colleges (Banks, 2013; Dougherty, Nienhusser, & Vega, 2010). This provides undocumented students in Texas with rights to accessing higher education that are not present in other states. Since its passing, bills that would undo HB 1403 are filed

in the legislature every session and are met with strong resistance from undocumented organizers.

While it is the location of the state Capitol, the root of anti-immigrant legislation, Austin also has some of the strongest immigrant rights organizations and advocacy networks. In terms of student activism, Austin is also home to a public university, a community college, and a private university. Each campus has had an increased presence of organizing related to immigrant rights over the last decade. All of these factors provide important context for the organizing work of the undocumented youth-led Student Action Organization.

According to the PEW Research Center, Austin had an estimated 100,000 unauthorized immigrants in 2014 making it the 20<sup>th</sup> largest urban area for unauthorized immigrant populations (Passel & Cohn, 2017). The BBC Austin Housing Market Analysis (2014) does not include information about the undocumented Latinx experience in particular, but does use the census identifier of “Hispanic” to discuss the data collected. The analysis shows that while the Hispanic population in Austin over the last ten years has seen the largest increase in size, Hispanic and African American residents have also experienced the greatest increases in poverty. The same study found that 20 percent of Hispanic renters, compared to 16 percent of other groups, lived with family or friends in order to afford housing costs. Nearly one third of children under the age of five live in poverty, and 83 percent of those children are Hispanic. This information shows the particular needs of the Latinx community in Austin at large, of which undocumented Latinxs are a sub-group.

The City of Austin 2013-2014 Community Needs Assessment found that the Latino population in Austin rose to 36.3 percent of the population in 2011 as part of an increasing trend (City of Austin, 2014, p. 2). The 2012 Austin/Travis County Community

Health Plan, *Together We Thrive*, reports that residents as a whole were concerned with their access to health care, including availability of health care services that were affordable. They also mentioned transportation, language, and cost as barriers. The Latino population in particular had the lowest rates of having health insurance and having their own health care provider. 82.8 percent of children under the age of 5 living in poverty in Austin are Latino/Hispanic (*Together We Thrive*, 2012, p. 14).



Figure 1: Austin, Texas Racial Dot Map

*Created by the University of Virginia, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. This map illustrates the racial demographics in Austin, TX.*

### **The Student Action Organization**

The Student Action Organization, founded in 2005, is an undocumented youth-led organization that works both on campus and in the larger community. Their major areas of work include support for undocumented high school and college students, deportation defense, and increasing support for queer undocumented individuals. They have also

worked to increase understanding of racism within the undocumented movement, as well as the existence of Black and Asian undocumented individuals. Until the beginning of the Trump administration and the threat to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, SAO also held monthly clinics to help undocumented youth apply.

Focusing on the Student Action Organization, I explore how their positionality and status enables them to build trust with their community. As largely undocumented student leaders, they have a distinct experience of providing services in their own community that they themselves also use for support. I further explore how they came to understand their own status in the local and national context of immigration policies, as well as their journeys to college. Through their interviews, I detail the process by which they become activists, taking on the role of organizers in their community and finding their voice in the process.

## **OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS**

In chapter 2 I detail the activist research methods used in this study, which incorporates 15 semi-structured interviews and observations recorded in the form of field notes. In chapter 3 I discuss the theoretical frameworks of Anti-Oppressive Social Work and LatCrit that help unpack questions around the construction of legality and illegality, as well as how and why undocumented students are called to activism and organizing. Chapter 4, “Becoming Undocumented,” utilizes the words of participants themselves to describe the ways they came to understand undocumented status in society and the ways they determined how they wanted to identify. Chapter 5, “Becoming Unafraid,” analyzes the way in which participants discussed the process of searching for and finding community, becoming more open about their undocumented status, and engaging in activism and organizing toward social change. In chapter 6 I summarize my overall

findings and discuss the limitations of the study, as well as its implications for practice, research, and the broader undocumented community.

## **ONE STRUGGLE**

“There’s no difference because our past connects us. Our skin color, our accent, our experiences, our challenges, our privilege, whatever may be, there’s a basis that is created by the fact that we’re all there because we’re immigrants.” – Alejandra

The narratives in this study help shed light on the process of growing up and learning limitations as undocumented students. Through encountering systems that impose restrictions on their rights and actions in law enforcement, health care, and college access, these students incorporated both an understanding of barriers and their own forms of resistance into their identities. The word undocumented, a direct confrontation to the word illegal, proves to be an empowering identity marker around which students can build new identities that focus on the power they do have, rather than the barriers they face.

The interviews also shed light on the ways in which organizations, such as SAO, can provide a space for undocumented students to transition from feelings of shame around their identity to feelings of pride. As one SAO member stated, “I’m very proud of just being an immigrant. It’s taken me a while to get there, but I am.” Being “unafraid” does not signify that an individual no longer has fear around their status, rather it speaks to the ability of organizers to enact change with their community because they are united with others in the movement. The shared community support that SAO provides as a space for healing, learning, and organizing is the foundation upon which one can become “Undocumented and Unafraid.”

## **Chapter 2: Research Methodology**

### **PURPOSE**

This chapter details the research methods used in this study. I discuss the primary questions asked in this research, the ways in which I used concepts from activist research as a primary influence in my study creation, and a discussion of my own positionality within activism and academia as it relates to this research. I then detail the qualitative methods used to create the study, recruit and interview participants, and analyze the interviews through coding.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This thesis research explores the experiences of individuals who come to understand the complexities of undocumented identity and who come to engage in organizing with the undocumented community. Using the frameworks of anti-oppressive social work and LatCrit, this study explores the following research questions:

- 1) How does one come to understand undocumented identity?
- 2) How and why are individuals called to action in organizing roles focused on undocumented activism?
- 3) What are major barriers to undocumented activism?
- 4) What are the mental health impacts of engaging as student organizers with the undocumented community?

### **ACTIVIST RESEARCH**

This study was largely informed by Activist Research. As explained by Hale

(2006), activist research is “a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results” (p. 97). Hale argues that activist research holds inherent contradictions that can be challenging, but that it generates “insight that otherwise would be impossible to achieve” (p. 98).

As a methodology within social sciences, activist research acknowledges that all research is situated in a point of view and created as a “dialogue among politically situated actors” (p. 98). In activist research, scholars acknowledge the contradictions between academic roles and political positionalities, while finding richer analysis in the center of the two. Hale points toward a “mediation” of the spaces of academia and activism, with the researcher held accountable to both. He argues that this research can then both serve a practical purpose for the social movement and contribute meaningfully to the academic knowledge base. Drew and Taylor (2014) argue that activism and scholarship can in fact be complementary and that research cannot be objective or neutral.

Kelley (2002) similarly discusses the relationship between social movements and research. Instead of viewing academia and activism as incompatible, Kelley argues that “social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression” (p. 8). The dialogue between activist efforts and academic research, therefore, can be a force of moving movements



forward. This outcome is not in spite of its complexities, but *in* its complexities.

Gutierrez and Lipman (2016) build on this idea of activist research as research aligned with an organized struggle that is “collaborative and engaged in political work” (p. 1241). As longtime activists in struggles for racial justice in public education, the authors aim to “support education justice struggles and movements for social transformation” (1242). The authors position research as one of many strategies that social movements can use to confront systems of power and oppression. As in the case of Gutierrez and Lipman, my work reflects my dual position as an academic researcher and activist - someone who has been involved in the movement for immigrant rights for years. It is tied to my family, my friends, and my community. My experience is that of being involved in working toward social change, which grounds my work in a personal understanding of social movements.

Loperena (2016) calls for activist researchers to constantly critique our positionality and power in relation to those we work with. As a Master’s student working with undergraduate students and recent graduates, as a citizen, and in my role as a researcher, I hold positions of privilege in my activist work. I work to not only acknowledge these openly in organizing spaces and my writing, but also to “step back” when participating in rights efforts for groups that I am not a part of.

Huschke (2014), whose research focused on an anti-racist migrant health organization in Berlin, argues that activist research “lets us feel the pain of failure and injustice more acutely” (p. 63). In this regard activist research and social work practice align - the notion of empathy, of better understanding the life of another human being

within the context of social oppression, is a key feature of social work practice. By working alongside participants toward social change in alignment with social justice principles, activist research enabled me to better understand the ways in which participants were impacted by immigration policies. As a part of this activist research process I have protested, testified at the legislature, and contributed in organizing meetings focused on immigrant rights, specifically rights for the undocumented community. These experiences have added a depth of knowledge not possible to obtain through individual interviews.

By working directly with SAO, this research addresses both the problem of oppression against the undocumented community and the mental health impacts of organizing work. Both of these problems come directly from stated goals of SAO board members. The interviews in this research were designed to provide participants as much control as possible over the content of the interviews, in part by providing broad questions and following the participants' dialogue for follow-up questions. Additionally, I discussed my research in general meetings with SAO members to talk through plans for action steps as an outcome of the research that would be useful for the organization.

Throughout this process I have engaged with SAO members regarding the purpose of my research and the topics that most interest them. I have also worked closely with SAO members regarding the potential for a useful outcome of this study. Below I detail the creation and implementation of this study, which implement qualitative methods within an activist research framework. As such, I used many traditional qualitative methods within the context of my role as both an activist and a researcher

throughout the process, with the ultimate outcome of working alongside SAO to both conduct research and disseminate the results in a useful way.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Building Rapport**

This research was founded upon relationships that were initiated through organizing work before the research project was started. As such, a basic level of collaboration was possible from the beginning. This was further enhanced through continued conversations with participants and other members of SAO throughout the process regarding interviews, the work of the organization, my role, and ideas for the useful application of the research results. Trust was built over time through my demonstrating consistent presence at meetings and events, as well as follow-through with commitments made to the organization. Barriers between myself and participants included different educational attainment, race, citizenship status, and knowledge of the research process. These were mitigated by providing information about the IRB process, collaborating for the interview design, and acknowledging and discussing my privileges throughout the process.

### **Entry Into the Field**

I have attended meetings and participated in actions of the Student Action Organization for four years, initially as a part of my own student activist involvement on campus. As a graduate student in social work, I have continued my relationship with SAO as I have worked to increase social work support for undocumented students and

community members. As a part of this collaboration, I have attended general meetings, board meetings, and community service events. These have included DACA clinics, where I have assisted in helping individuals re-apply for DACA and find referrals to resources. I have also been a part of the Texas Here to Stay coalition alongside SAO, through which I have worked to increase the availability of referral information for undocumented individuals in Austin, increased an understanding of trauma for immigration lawyers, and provided resource referrals at Know Your Rights clinics. Additionally, I was involved in the spring of 2017 in attending hearings regarding Senate Bill 4 (SB 4), the Texas “show me your papers” bill that was passed into law and currently remains tied up in the court system.

All of these experiences have greatly informed this thesis project. I have been engaged in immigrant rights work for years and see this research as an extension of that work with two aims: 1) To better understand the process by which undocumented activists are called to organizing and understand their identity; and 2) To uncover the complexities of this narrative in a way that is useful for undocumented organizers in their own work. With this aim, I approached the board of SAO in February of 2017 to ask if I could begin taking field memos at meetings and events, as well as begin to set up individual interviews. With their approval, I began the process of discussing the research objectives with SAO members and applying to the UT Austin Institutional Review Board to officially begin the study. Throughout the process of data collection, I increased my entry into the field by continuing conversations with different members. In particular, I engaged in informal conversations throughout the SB 4 hearing process and at the

different events and meetings held over the course of ten months.

### **Sampling Strategy**

For this research, any active members or board members of the Student Action Organization were sought for interviews. Active for this project signified that they had attended at least one general meeting, board meeting, or SAO event. This included students at two public state universities, a community college, and a private university which houses SAO. Since the interviews were conducted, new undocumented youth-led student groups have been formed specifically at the private university and the second public institution. While they have initiated specific work on their own campuses, these individuals from those institutions remain active in SAO's general work. The conclusions of this thesis draw from and are applicable to all four institutions, with the recognition that each holds its own unique context, challenges, and strengths.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria included 1) Age 18 and older; 2) Current member or board member of SAO; 3) Any citizenship status. I interviewed both undocumented individuals and individuals with citizenship status in the United States, without a preference for one over the other. I aim through this project to better understand the experiences of SAO organizers broadly, including those that identify as allies in the undocumented movement.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through in-person conversations, announcements I made at the SAO general meetings, and a written announcement in the weekly email

newsletter. Through these, information about the purpose of the study, participation incentives, and inclusion criteria were shared with potential interviewees. I approached the SAO board initially when beginning this project, so as to have increased buy-in for distributing recruitment information. Finally, recruitment also occurred when individuals who had been interviewed shared the information with other members. I made it clear from the beginning of contact with a potential participant that I would maintain their information confidential, that they would be able to determine the location of the interview so as to feel most comfortable, and that they could decide to step away from the research process at any time.

### **Participants**

Participants were 15 (6 male identified and 9 female identified) undergraduate students at three universities in Texas. Participants median age was 19 and they described themselves as White (6.67%) and Latinx (93.33%). Of the Latinx participants, the majority (92%) were of Mexican descent (the other 8% were of Salvadoran descent). 12 of the 15 participants identified as undocumented, while the other 3 identified as citizens.

### **Data Collection Methods**

In line with data collection used in activist research, the research for this thesis included qualitative in-person interviews, quantitative demographic information, field notes, and participation in organizing events and meetings. I took notes to describe my experience at SAO general meetings, at the Texas State Capitol, and at DACA and Know Your Rights clinics. These field notes were used as a record to track the changes in events, the organizing efforts, and my own reactions to the different spaces and activities.

These notes help to inform the analysis section of this thesis by establishing context for the themes I describe.

## **INTERVIEWS**

The primary data collected for this research were 15 qualitative semi-structured in-person interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and a half. Most interviews were approximately one hour. All interviews were conducted primarily in English, with participants using Spanish at different points throughout the interviews. I am a native English speaker and am fluent in Spanish from growing up with the language, learning Spanish in the United States and in other countries, and providing social services in Spanish with clients. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into written English (and Spanish, where applicable). In this thesis, phrases originally stated in Spanish have remained in Spanish as a part of the chapters and are followed by a translation into English in parenthesis.

The interview questions (see Appendix A) were created so as to provide a broad scope with specific probes. Further probes were added as themes emerged through initial interview coding. The interview questions cover topics relating to pre-high college, college, and SAO-specific experiences. This provided an opportunity to look at themes and trends throughout the lifespan of interviewees in a way that created rich data to explore in the analysis chapters of this thesis.

### **Compensation**

Compensation (a \$25 Visa gift card) was provided to each participant at the

beginning of the interview, before signing the consent form. The gift card was provided to all participants equally, regardless of the time spent in the interview. I did, however, work to limit the interview time to one and a half hours or less in order to not overuse the participants' time. I filled out the gift card information and provided the researcher signature for each gift card form. Participants then reviewed the form for accuracy. I made the decision to sign the forms myself, rather than to have the participants sign for their gift cards, as a protection for the individuals I interviewed who were undocumented.

### **Informed Consent**

All participants provided verbal informed consent in English and chose to read a consent form or listen to me read the consent form out loud. Participants were given time to ask me questions before consenting. Participants were also given the option to keep a copy of the consent form if they desired. UT Austin's IRB waived written consent for this research, given that the participants' undocumented status placed them at greater risk in the case of a breach of confidentiality. Additionally, identifying information was not collected beyond the stated demographic information and the contact information for scheduled interviews. This information has been stored electronically in a separate and locked file from the interview transcripts.

### **Participant Distress**

The topics discussed in the interview guide were potentially triggering for participants, particularly those around undocumented status and the way it has impacted their lives. Furthermore, the challenges of organizing involve emotional reactions. Taking this into consideration, as well as my role as a student in the UT Master's of Social Work



program, I created a list of mental health resources (see Appendix B) available to individuals regardless of citizenship status. This list was provided at the end of each interview after the recording had finished.

As a part of this process, I checked in with participants to ask how the interview process was for them and made sure they were aware of the mental health resources I was providing, in addition to discussing how triggers can lead to impacts later that day or even several days from the interview. Overall, participants shared that the interview was a positive experience for them and were receptive of the mental health resources sheet. Some individuals demonstrated emotional reactions while speaking about their undocumented experience. I took time to pause and provide tissues in these moments and asked to make sure the participant was able to continue. No participant entered a crisis state during the interviews and all appeared regulated at the end of our contact.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Coding was initially performed in vivo to create codes from the interviewees' own words. Five coding sections were identified: General, Pre-College, College Experience, SAO Structure, and SAO Work, with 20-40 parent and child codes in each section. For the analysis chapters of this thesis, central themes related to "becoming undocumented" and "becoming unafraid" were selected to discuss a central narrative throughout the interviews. Sub-themes from each larger section that have been selected to discuss these themes in this thesis include: Community, First SAO Contact, Coming Out, SAO History, Impact on Organizers, Undocumented Experience, Undocumented in

College, and Undocumented and Unafraid.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

MacDonald (2012) discusses ethical considerations of conducting Participatory Action Research, which has important links with activist research. These include ensuring that relevant parties and participants have been consulted regarding the research, allowing all participants to influence the work and respecting those who do not want to be involved, ensuring transparency of the research process throughout its timeline, continuously obtaining consent for research, negotiating the inclusion of others' perspectives and work before publishing, and accepting responsibility for maintaining confidentiality. Much of the ethical considerations most relevant to this research relate to the challenge of balancing confidentiality for undocumented individuals who are at a greater risk if their identities are revealed with ensuring an open process of involvement for all participants. This has primarily been navigated by ensuring confidentiality for the interviewees, while increasing transparency and collaboration regarding the research process itself and the outcomes defined for action-steps.

### **LIMITATIONS**

One important limitation in this research is that by the nature of the participants, it runs the risk of reinforcing the "DREAMer narrative." The DREAMer identity has generally been described in the context of undocumented young adults who revealed their immigration status as part of activism relating to pushing for the DREAM Act in the 2000s and as a way to disrupt negative stereotypes about undocumented immigrants (de

la Torre & Germano, 2014). In recent years, however, the DREAMer narrative has begun to be seen as a form of exceptionalism, whereby young students become the “safe” immigrants. SAO members and other undocumented students have argued that this enables the continued criminalization of undocumented communities as a whole. Given that my research participants are all college students, I work collaboratively with SAO to provide an analysis of their work that embraces complexity and does not leave out the experiences of undocumented individuals that do not fit into this narrative.

While this research included participants from four universities, another limitation is that it was heavily slanted toward one public university in Texas. The scope of the project, therefore, is limited primarily to the central Texas area. While there are emerging themes that correspond with other authors and interventions to the literature in this research, its ability to be applicable on a broader scale is limited by its geographic scope.

Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees were of Anglo or Latinx descent, which excludes Black undocumented, Asian undocumented, and European undocumented individuals. Furthermore, the Latinx participants are largely of Mexican descent, thus limiting the perspectives included in this thesis. It is important to acknowledge the limitation in its applicability to other Latinx, Black, and Asian undocumented student organizers.

Finally, as a part of Master’s thesis research, this project was also time-limited. This is reflected in the number of participants, the lengths of the interviews, and the amount of the data that was coded to be included in this work. Given these time constraints, I strive to portray the participants, their work, and their understandings in a

complex, grounded, and in-depth manner.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research was driven from its initiation by the principles of activist research, from its design to its concluding action-steps. As such, I worked to balance my roles as a researcher and an activist when writing about and working toward social change. As a part of this process, participant feedback and cooperation was incorporated throughout and participant voices have been highlighted at the forefront of the analysis chapters. Overall, the methodology for this Master's thesis worked to include and support practices that are anti-racist and anti-oppressive, and which contribute to increased knowledge of systems of oppression as well as work to combat these forces. This was implemented in the research design phase, the interviews, field notes, the coding analysis, and the determination of future use for the results. Lastly, following participant involvement throughout the research process, the final results have been written in both a Master's thesis and a bilingual Spanish-English report so as to increase community accessibility to research findings for future initiatives.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This research is grounded in the concept of the social construction of illegality as it impacts undocumented students in their understanding and formulation of their identities and motivation to become activists (Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2014). As such, it is crucial to look at the history of how illegality has been created in the U.S. and the ways in which racism nativism has impacted this construction. For this analysis both Critical Race Theory and its companion, LatCrit, are used to form a further analysis of how categories of legality and illegality are created along a spectrum that is fluid. The purpose of this analysis is to delve into the complexity of the notion of illegality, so as to provide both a strong foundation in how it is created and a sharp critical lens that destabilizes its normalization. Secondly, this analysis aims to explore the ways in which undocumented students are called to activism and organizing. In this chapter, a discussion of current frameworks regarding activism of undocumented youth is presented as a foundation upon which to understand the results of my interviews with undocumented student organizers in the subsequent chapters.

As a framework, Anti-Oppressive Social Work Research (AOSWR) seeks to find a paradigm most congruent with “a progressive view of social work” that aligns with the fundamental values of “humanitarianism and egalitarianism, respect, self-determination, acceptance, a belief of the individual as a social being, that societal decisions dominate economic decisions, a belief in participatory democracy, and a social welfare system that emphasizes equality, solidarity, and community” (p. 206). As such, AOSWR is useful as

a basis upon which to build this analysis. In recognition of the power dynamic that exists between practitioner/researcher and client/interviewee, AOSW works to emphasize the ways in which interventions and designs in both social work practice and research can replicate systems of oppression. In line with CRT, AOSW works to intentionally incorporate anti-racist and anti-discriminatory perspectives. As such, AOSWR draws from participatory and action research frameworks.

AOSWR specifically aims to study oppression itself as part of work toward undoing institutionalized oppression. The literature, therefore, focuses primarily on communities that have been denied access to services and that face systemic oppression. (Strier, 2006) As such, AOSWR is an appropriate lens through which to discuss the experiences of undocumented individuals in the United States. As a companion to the previous analysis of the construction of illegality, AOSWR provides a further lens through which to analyze the practical implications of Coutin's notion of spaces of exclusion as they relate to social services. As with other theories that analyze oppression, notes of caution regarding AOSW include being wary of over-generalizing populations and assuming to understand the experiences of those facing oppression. Rather, AOSWR's usefulness lies in the theory-practice link that enables the above analysis of the construction of illegality as a system of oppression to be utilized for practical considerations for service providers. Below is a figure that illustrates the overarching theoretical framework that has guided my understanding of the research problem. As the figure illustrates, I draw on Systems Theory and LatCrit to inform my understanding of Critical Consciousness and my enactment of AOSWR.

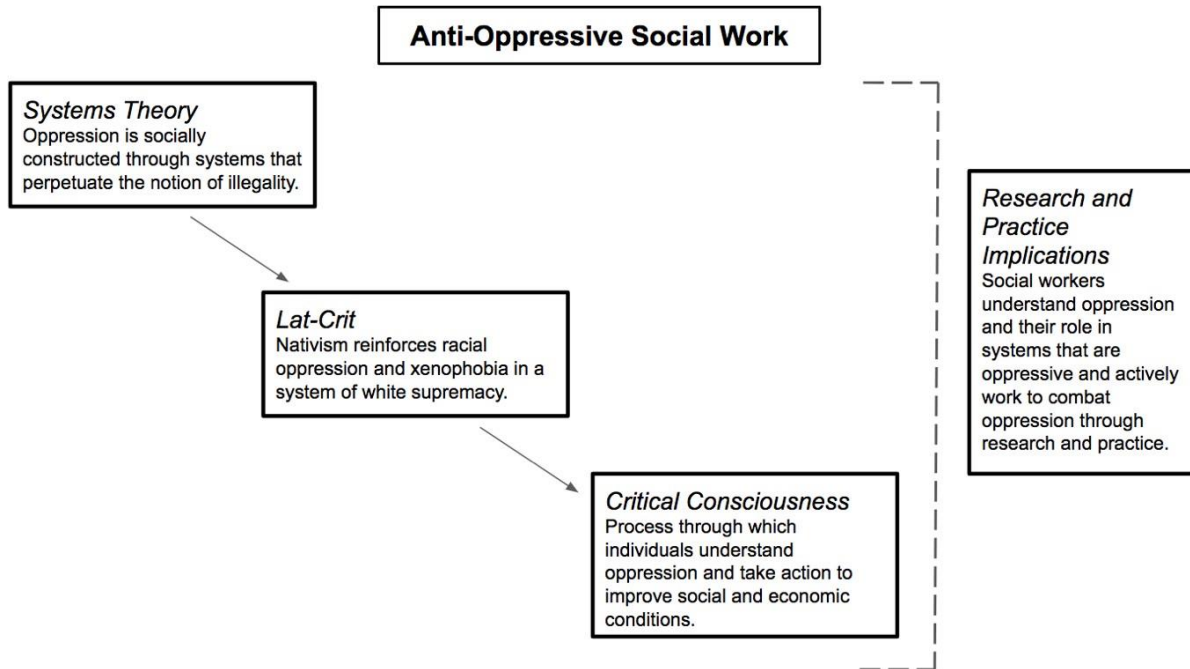


Figure 2: Anti-Opressive Social Work Theory-Practice Link

In this chapter I first provide a historical perspective and contemporary analysis of how different conceptions of illegality shape the lives of individuals living with undocumented status in the United States, which is vital to the discussion of theories that influenced this research. Second, I situate the concept of illegality within the framework of social construction, originally highlighted by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and built upon by Coutin and De Genova. In this section I bring in systems theory to explain how this social construction becomes embedded in the daily interactions of interviewees. Third, I discuss nativism and LatCrit as they specifically relate to the construction of citizenship in contrast to the “other,” or the “immigrant.” I look at the ways in which white supremacy, established as the norm in the United States, has impacted immigrants both theoretically and practically. Lastly, I provide an analysis of the current literature

regarding undocumented youth activism within the context of the critical consciousness framework and the notions of physical, social, and legal existence.

### **HISTORY OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF ILLEGALITY**

In order to analyze the current conceptualization of illegality that has influenced immigration policy, it is important to document the history of immigration policy as it relates to the U.S. legitimizing and delegitimizing different forms of migration. De Genova argues that an analysis of the construction of “illegality” must take into consideration the legal history of illegality so as to see how it has been constructed over time and disrupt the notion that legality is somehow fixed – thus further normalizing it (De Genova 2004). What follows is a brief discussion of this history of U.S. policies around migration, toward an understanding of how illegality has been constructed over time. While the construction of illegality began well before the 20-century, the Bracero Program is a useful starting point for the trends that influence our current systems.

The Bracero Program, a temporary work program for Mexican migrants that lasted from 1942 and 1964 (Donato, 1994; Vogel, 2007; Cohen, 2006). Paret (2014) refers to this period as the “legalization” period, in which labor contracts facilitated migration that was sanctioned by the U.S. and Mexican governments. (Cohen, 2006). This period demonstrates that when the United States was in a time of economic need, migration could be a solution and could be legitimized. During this time the 1947 Knowland Agreement created a legalization process through which undocumented migrants were sent back to the border to be processed legally as *braceros* (Paret, 2014;



Gratton & Merchant, 2013). This is important to contrast with later U.S. policy that criminalizes and delegitimizes Mexicans migrating because of economic need. It also demonstrates the fluidity in the conception of “illegality” and how it can be adjusted over time. This period also began a pattern of U.S. employers relying on Mexican labor, a demand that has not diminished and has spurred further migration (Vogel, 2007). Furthermore, it normalized the role of Mexicans as laborers in the United States, which has carried through to this day.

Although the Bracero Program officially ended in 1964, Mexican migrants continued to seek opportunities for employment in the United States. In the 1970s and 1980s there began to be more concern among the U.S. government and non-immigrant citizens about the potential impact of these immigrants (Paret, 2014; Donato, 1994). In 1986 The United States passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which granted amnesty to 3 million undocumented migrants, including farmworkers and former *braceros*. (Donato, 1994; Vogel, 2007). Given the continued demand for labor, however, large volumes of undocumented migration continued well after the end of the Bracero Program in 1964 and the creation of IRCA in 1986 (Donato, 1994). Again, the United States adjusted the boundaries of “legality” to include a certain number of new individuals, but retained the conceptualization of “illegality” as for others. The fact that immigrants from the same country, coming for similar reasons, to the United States have at various times been classified as legal or illegal based upon government policy further demonstrates the historical social construction of these categories.

## **THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ILLEGALITY**

The ways in which citizenship is imagined and created by the nation-state has traditionally occurred through laws, governmental systems, and in the public imaginary in media, social interactions, and a legacy of racial prejudice in the United States. As an example, shared meanings about undocumented individuals influence public opinion that shows itself in the way that health professionals demonstrate prejudice in hospitals. These same shared meanings and interactions then affect the actions of undocumented individuals who do not seek health care because they are afraid of facing prejudice and of being deported (Maldonado et al., 2013).

The construction and pervasive use of “illegality” has become a common part of discourse, legal frameworks, and enforcement actions in Europe as well as the United States (De Genova, 2002). Even the vocabulary used to describe migrants: “irregular, unauthorized, clandestine, extra-legal” connotes an “othering.” Each word is one of a dichotomy (i.e. irregular versus regular) that reaffirms the normative notion of citizenship as a valid and fixed category.

Illegality and citizenship are each a “juridical status that entails a social relation to the state...preeminently a political identity” (De Genova, 2002, p. 422). In addition, the concepts of illegality and citizenship are intrinsically linked in theory and in practice (p. 422). The nations who receive migrants have created policies over time that continue to adjust the definition of “citizen,” as well as “legal” and “illegal” migrants. This creates a hierarchy based on the structural oppression of nativism. Within this hierarchy, the government centers “illegal” immigration as a *problem* to be solved. The resulting

policies have created deportation and detention mechanisms that enact these ideas and make the concepts behind them more concrete. These narratives have also become a part of society in the way that they are taken up by immigrant communities. The terms *ilegal* and *mojado*, as with other derogatory words used to describe people of color in the United States, have been used to create counter-narratives in communities as a way of reclaiming the labels that have been placed upon them. The song “Vivan los Mojados” by Los Tigres del Norte, a popular Mexican band, is one example of this.

The fluidity “illegality” as a concept is further demonstrated in the way in which it can be adjusted or reversed by the nation-state that originally defined it. Examples of this include DACA status, which provides temporary relief from deportation as well as a driver’s license and work permit for two years. Another example is the use of “amnesty” to provide status to individuals based on the date that they entered the country, as well as their continued presence. The most prominent example of this is IRCA, signed by President Reagan in 1986.

The concept of “illegality” has also become tied to the notion of criminality. Scheel and Squire (2014) argue that the use of the term “illegal” to describe migrants “criminalize[s] those who have no choice but to migrate” and that these labels are “integral to the governing of migration” (p. 188-189). Through the criminalization of migrants from Mexico and Central America, the United States government has determined who is “illegal” and therefore who is “deportable.” This also provides the government with the supposed justification for threatening and incarcerating individuals who have arrived without documents. As such, the enacting of these concepts through

policy become another tool of the institutionalization of nativism as a form of oppression and control. The analysis of “illegality” as a “*spatialized* socio-political condition...lived through a palpable sense of deportability” is particularly relevant for understanding the ways in which undocumented youth come to conceptualize “illegality” in society (De Genova, 2004, 161).

In the context of criminalization, De Genova (2004) notes that the concept of illegality in immigration connotes a “transgression against the sovereign authority of the nation-state,” rather than a crime against an individual (p. 175). Immigrants are therefore constructed as opposing the *nation*, and the U.S. is able to “conveniently evade the racialized history of the law of citizenship” (De Genova, 2004, p. 175). This is also an area in which contradictions of rhetoric and practice of immigration enforcement become apparent. Rather than discuss “illegal immigration” as a crime against the nation, politicians will often speak of immigrants “stealing jobs” or “committing crimes against citizens,” thus forming the idea that the “crime” of undocumented migration is actually committed against a citizen of the United States.

An additional contradiction in immigration enforcement has to do with the relationship between U.S. and Mexican migration. De Genova (2004) examines the ways in which immigrants from Mexico in particular have both provided the largest immigrant base and have faced the most severe restrictions in terms of *legal* immigration, therefore falling into the constructed category of “illegal.” Through a historical lens, De Genova notes the ways in which U.S. immigration policy has both sustained Mexican immigration in the past for labor needs and restricted Mexican migration as it opened its

borders to migrants from Europe. To this day, undocumented Mexican migration provides a much needed labor source for many U.S. companies, as simultaneously they are the targets of much of the political rhetoric around the “dangers” of migrants.

### **NATIVISM AND LATCRIT THEORY**

While Social Work theories do not yet provide a specific lens through which to analyze the experiences of undocumented individuals in the United States, LatCrit Theory specifically focuses on the experiences of Latinx individuals and includes an analysis of the ways in which nativism serves to reinforce racial oppression. LatCrit Theory began in the 1990s as an expansion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that included an analysis of nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and class. LatCrit explores issues important to the diverse Latinx communities of the United States (such as immigration status and language) and disrupts the Black/White paradigm prominent in Critical Race Theory, which often excludes Latinx experiences. (Aoki, 2008).

LatCrit has been used to analyze various aspects of the Latinx experience, both including and separate from the topic of immigration. LatCrit theory has a strong presence in writings on education, in which it is used to link theory and practice as a social justice project (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Furthermore, both CRT and LatCrit specifically analyze the impacts of structures and systems that oppress non-white communities. García (2016) notes that critical race scholars have shifted in their analysis of migration away from assimilation theories, which emphasize immigrant adoption of dominant cultural norms, and instead have moved toward an understanding of immigrant

communities as being racialized. This frame is particularly important for laying the foundation to discuss the ways in which individuals learn about the repercussions of their undocumented status, a result of the constructed notion of illegality, through interactions with different systems.

It is important to situate an understanding of the construction of “illegality” within a racial analysis with white supremacy constructed as normative in contrast to people of color, including immigrants. Racist nativism is a conceptual frame that “helps researchers understand how the historical racialization of Immigrants of Color has shaped the contemporary experiences of Latina/o undocumented immigrants” (Huber, 2010, p. 79). Racial constructions and institutional racism has overall maintained hierarchies that position whiteness at the top. Nativism is the way in which foreigners are perceived as threats to nationalistic identities. The frame of racist nativism acknowledges the ways in which nativism has targeted particular groups according to constructions of race as a function of white supremacy. (Huber, 2010)

Undocumented individuals encounter the convergence of racism and nativism in their interactions with systems and individuals that racially profile them by assuming their legal status (Mucchetti, 2005). Laws such as SB 1070 in Arizona and SB 4 in Texas are examples of the ways in which policies at the state level demonstrate racist nativist frameworks. By encouraging police officers to ask about immigration status, these laws perpetuate stereotypes of who “looks illegal” when officers determine whether or not to ask about status during a stop. It is through this type of legislation that the boundaries of legality and illegality are further negotiated, with very real consequences to the

individuals that are stopped. The ability of individual police officers to interpret such laws in determining against whom to take action, or who to question, demonstrates the practical implementation of this social construction. The consequences for undocumented individuals of policies created by nativist-influenced policies – detention and deportation – serve as continued parameters of enforcing the constructed notion of illegality.

### **CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ACTIVISM**

Critical Consciousness, as discussed in the methodology chapter, is an important framework within which to analyze organizing efforts of groups that have been historically marginalized. Originally conceptualized by Freire in 1970, critical consciousness is “the process by which oppressed and socially marginalized people critically analyze their social and economic conditions and take action to improve them,” and has since become an important concept for theories of organizing and activism (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015, p. 848). Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) analyzed theory and practice articles in this area of work to uncover the major threads: 1) Critical social analysis, 2) Collective identification, 3) Political Self-Efficacy, and 4) Sociopolitical action (p. 849-850).

<b>Stages of Critical Consciousness</b>	
<b>1. Critical Social Analysis</b>	Understanding inequalities and injustices, increasing critical thinking.
<b>2. Collective Identification</b>	Reclaiming a collective identity that has been oppressed.
<b>3. Political Self-Efficacy</b>	Gaining confidence around collective ability to organize and make change.
<b>4. Sociopolitical Action</b>	Taking action toward change that addresses systemic oppression.

Table 1: Stages of Critical Consciousness

Critical social analysis is the process through which individuals understand social inequalities and social injustice as part of developing increased critical thinking around accepted norms in society. While much of the literature focuses on class, gender, and race-based norms, this notion can certainly be applied to citizenship-based norms. As part of this process, individuals often begin to see the ways in which systems of oppression are socially constructed and question the claimed inferiority of certain groups. Collective identification includes both a group gathering around a specific identity and reclaiming an oppressed category with pride. As Watts & Hipolito-Delgado explain, this process of group identification and gathering also is part of an impetus toward change and action. (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015, p. 849).

The notion of political self-efficacy follows collective identification in that it connotes an increase of confidence around a group's ability to organize and make change. Political self-efficacy is specifically the step in which authors describe motivation for action occurring. The final stage, sociopolitical action, describes the steps taken by



groups facing systems of oppression to take action toward a change. While the authors analyze this final stage as inherently behavior-driven, the collective identification stage also often involves group gathering in order to form a positive image in contrast to negative portrayals of their identities.

Literature about critical consciousness discusses its components largely as the process by which individuals “address internalized attitudes and receive knowledge that influence their sense of their self and the world” (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015, p. 848). As such, it is an important theoretical framework within which to analyze how undocumented students come to understand their identity and feel compelled to action around their rights. Watts and Hipolito-Delgado discuss this action as strategic, which requires a critical analysis of the problem and an understanding of structural oppression. Additionally, they speak to the importance of community action as key for putting into practice a critical analysis.

### **CONCEPTUALIZING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT ACTIVISM**

While literature on undocumented student activism is limited, several authors have engaged in qualitative research to better understand the motivations, interactions, goals, and achievements of undocumented youth organizing efforts. Forenza, Rogers, and Lardier (2017) specifically apply the concept of critical consciousness to a discussion of political activism by and for undocumented students. The authors’ interviews with undocumented students and “adult allies” largely focused on change efforts around college access for undocumented students. They described the stages of critical

consciousness discussed by participants as they concluded that undocumented students did not have equal access to higher education, confronted notions of undocumented undesirability in society as a group, and determined action steps to create change for undocumented students.

While Forenza, Rogers, and Lardier (2017) provide examples of literature that supports the positive outcomes of critical consciousness and activism, they do not discuss the burden of organizing as an oppressed group and the burnout or fatigue that comes along with activism. Chen and Gorski (2015), for example, discuss the burnout faced by social justice and human rights activists as a result of the pressure they put on themselves to make an impact. Additionally, this study focused on “adult allies” that were involved in organizing efforts as key individuals that leveraged undocumented student organizing. This aspect in some ways undermined the conversation around critical consciousness in the undocumented student movement. As such, analyzing ally contributions to undocumented movements is important to consider both from the ally and student perspective. Additionally, in order to analyze undocumented student organizing in the framework of critical consciousness, it is important to discuss specifically how undocumented organizers participate in this process as separate from ally involvement.

Negrón-Gonzales (2014) discusses undocumented youth activism in California as navigating illegality and staking a claim to “citizen” participation (p. 259). He emphasizes the socially constructed nature of illegality as a construct that results in the differential treatment of undocumented youth and discusses “re-articulatory practices” as ways in which these young people navigate spaces and resist nativist oppression. Negrón-

Gonzales discusses the ways in which undocumented youth “broker illegality” as they navigate systems for both themselves and their families. He further discusses the ways in which the DREAMer movement demonstrated a move toward action of undocumented students to question the notion of citizenship, while at the same time often using internalized ideas of citizenship as a way to advocate for change. Negrón-Gonzales further discusses “breaking the code of silence” by coming out as undocumented publicly in a more forceful brokering of illegality. Furthermore, *testimonios* are specifically mentioned as a re-articulatory practice that directly confronts the construction of illegality. This concept ties together the stages in critical consciousness of collective identification and sociopolitical action whereby personal stories of experiencing oppression as a group can be leveraged as tools of organizing.

Fiorito and Nicholls (2016) discuss undocumented activist strategies of performance that center their narratives. Drawing from theory of theatrical performance that can be seen in social interactions, they discuss the ways in which differences between undocumented activists are negotiated “backstage” in order to present a unified front for their actions. The authors note the ways in which this strategy requires negotiation, conflict, and compromise, as challenging and intense work. They also argue that this process produces a more coherent “frontstage” performance as an outcome. Fiorito and Nicholls are among the few authors that engage directly and purposefully with the emotional work of activism as an essential piece. They argue that it is in fact this work that creates unity. In actions such as sit-ins or other protests, this unity is essential for success and the hope of making change. It also ensures, practically speaking, that safety

protocols are followed and communication between activists is smooth.

Unzueta Carrasco and Seif (2014) discuss undocumented youth activist strategies of testimonies and civil disobedience in Chicago. They argue that the placing of immigrant bodies at the forefront impacts the conversation around immigration. By asserting their own stories in contrast to normalized citizenship norms, these activists “disrupt the power of the nation-state to make these determinations, and expand the debate about and boundaries of citizenship” (p. 279). As with Fiorito and Nicholls, Unzueta Carrasco and Seif discuss a view of undocumented youth activism that is inclusive of all identities, particularly emphasizing the importance of understanding intersections between the undocumented and queer communities. Furthermore, the authors integrate an analysis of the ways in which activists at times reify the concept of citizenship through personal testimonies of “deservingness.” They discuss ways in which activists have moved toward a broader conceptualization of goals in undocumented organizing. Unzueta Carrasco and Seif specifically discuss the strategy of deportation defense, in which organizers work to prevent the pending deportation of an undocumented community member, as a key part of increasing the scope of undocumented organizing beyond the “good citizen” or “good student” model.

Perez et al. (2010) look specifically at the “civic engagement” of undocumented Mexican students, which included activism as one of its components. They found that older students were more likely to participate in activism than younger students. The authors analyze the way in which the transition from high school to college, an environment that poses additional challenges for undocumented students, is a space in

which youth begin to engage in collective action. The authors do accept the norm of citizenship throughout their writing, discussing the ways in which it is an end goal for many activists and using it as a reference point for their analysis of civic engagement. Overall Perez et al. note that despite being marginalized in many ways, “civic engagement” among undocumented students is in fact higher than the average levels.

Meyer and Fine (2017) use the term “grassroots citizenship” to discuss undocumented activism that is group, community, and solidarity-based. They argue that this is done through a critical analysis and collective action to engage in politics around their rights. While the way in which they describe the methods through which undocumented communities mobilize for rights corresponds with other authors, the concept of “grassroots citizenship” itself undermines the complexity found in the undocumented movement. By including the word “citizenship,” the authors equate undocumented organizing with other movements for rights and in so doing both retain the underlying assumption of citizenship as a normative category and gloss over the complexity of the aims of undocumented organizers. By analyzing the ways in which undocumented organizers “act like citizens,” Mayer and Fine retain the construct of illegality as an assumption in their assertions.

In contrast, Coutin (2000) discusses the dual experience of legal and social existence. In her analysis of “spaces of nonexistence,” she explains that its multiple forms can include social isolation, physical destruction, and legal and political removal. In an understanding of legal and social existence/nonexistence as a gradient or spectrum, the ways in which migrants move in and out of these forms of being can be better

understood. In the social construction of “nonexistence,” it is formed through “excluding people, limiting rights, restricting services, and erasing personhood” (p. 28).

Coutin examines the ways in which physical and legal presence are often correlated, though do not always coincide. This can create a socially constructed space of legal nonexistence for migrants living in the United States who face practical implications of being excluded from “legality.” Strategies of the nation-state that create this space of nonexistence include: limiting ways in which immigrants can register their presence (on housing applications, etc.); creating time restrictions that correlate to status (such as the year requirements for DACA); the way in which wage labor is defined (not being able to work officially); the undermining of official familial ties for legal purposes; and limited mobility (checkpoints, etc.). (Coutin, 2000)

As Coutin (2000) notes, “legal nonexistence does not prevent physical presence and social participation because illegal immigration has long been officially prohibited but unofficially tolerated” (p. 40). The contradiction inherent in the U.S. immigration system that demands cheap labor but denies “legal” migration to its source results in the physical and social existence of undocumented immigrants throughout the country. Coutin therefore discusses the concept of the “Art of Not Existing,” through which immigrants find use for the grey area in which they live for work, records of their lives, and maintaining “continuous presence” in the U.S. as potential protection from deportation. She further argues that “the space of illegality produces innovative strategies and practices” (p. 55).

Rodriguez (1996) discusses the concept of “contested terrains,” spaces of

opposition in transnational communities of migrants. One adjustment to Coutin's concept would be to adjust the idea of "nonexistence" to "contested existence," thus re-affirming migrant agency while acknowledging the state's role in denying their "legality." Even so, Coutin's work helps to bring a more nuanced approach to the analysis of undocumented student organizing – one in which citizenship is not cast as the norm against which other legal categories are inherently measured and toward which undocumented people are aiming as an end-goal. As with many social movements, there is tension within undocumented organizing about its final goal regarding the entire system of nativist oppression and legal rights as an outcome. Through her concepts of legal, social, and physical existence, all of which can occur across a spectrum and blur with one another, Coutin provides a framework that is useful for conceptualizing undocumented organizing.

When one combines Coutin's conceptualization of legal, social, and physical existence with the framework of critical consciousness, a more complete picture of undocumented organizing can be obtained as both a process and a fluid movement over time. Undocumented students move within physical, social, and legal existence through their presence in the United States, their connection with many different social networks, and for some of them, their DACA status. In terms of organizing, collective identification, political self-efficacy, and sociopolitical action involve in many instances increasing public physical and social existence as a major strategy of activism. Additionally, the collective identification stage specifically can involve forming new networks to create community as a group, thus increasing social existence. Lastly,

sociopolitical action often involves rights-claiming which can involve a demand for increased legal existence in some way, and which in the past specifically increased legal existence when pressure from DREAMer activists eventually led to former President Obama's creation of the DACA program.

## **CONCLUSION**

Of the authors that discuss undocumented student activism and organizing, many focus on the ways in which students were taking action on their own behalf. In contrast, other authors analyzing undocumented student movements note the importance of first-person testimony in organizing and the challenges raised by organizers in creating a narrative that does not leave out significant parts of the immigrant community or reinforce normative notions of citizenship (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014; Negrón-Gonzales, 2014).

A conceptualization of the undocumented community as a whole combines the impacts of nativism, the construction of illegality, and the framework of critical consciousness. In this perspective on undocumented student organizing, the collective identification stage not only unites undocumented students, but also includes their parents, relatives, and any other undocumented individuals in the United States. This inherently widens the critique of nativist oppression beyond, but including, issues of access to higher education and creates space in the sociopolitical action stage for actions that reflect a broader demand for systematic change.

This chapter aims to frame undocumented activist efforts in a larger context,



including the construction of illegality, the framework of critical consciousness, Coutin's spaces of nonexistence, and the ways in which authors thus far have analyzed undocumented organizing. Maintaining an understanding of illegality as socially constructed in an exclusionary way and set in contrast to citizenship helps us to understand the ways in which nativism has perpetuated these norms throughout society to the detriment of the undocumented community as a whole. This concept is further explored in the findings of this research in the "Becoming Undocumented" chapter.

Bringing in the conceptualization of critical consciousness helps us to understand the processes in which undocumented students become aware of their positionalities within systems of oppression, come together as a group, and move toward actions that demand change. Additionally, examining prior research on undocumented organizing helps us to see the ways in which activists and their efforts have been framed. Coutin's discussion of physical, social, and legal existence brings a nuanced approach to an analysis of undocumented organizing that when paired with critical consciousness, brings to light the complexity of activist efforts. These frameworks are further explored in the findings of this research in the "Becoming Unafraid" chapter.

## Chapter 4: Becoming Undocumented

### INTRODUCTION

“I didn’t even know the word undocumented existed.” For undocumented children, their status can be a source of fear, an unknown quantity, or simply a normal part of daily existence. Many discover this fact of life when they hit milestones, such as obtaining a driver’s license or applying to college. Regardless of the point in time, encountering these systems can oftentimes mean encountering limitations based upon the socially constructed concept of citizenship. In this chapter I look at experiences in childhood and as young adults with both families and systems that create the boundaries of legal status for undocumented students. I discuss some of the “coming of age” experiences that are more challenging for undocumented students and look at the ways in which they come to view their own identity in relationship to others.

Through interviews with 15 students from the Student Action Organization (SAO), I explore the ways in which students learn about and embrace their undocumented status as they join SAO. I argue that the social construction of illegality is a force that undocumented students face as they grow up and “become” undocumented through their experiences with family, figures of authority, and different systems. In each of these experiences, undocumented children begin to understand the limitations placed on them by society and question the very institutions that have labeled them as being “illegal.”

Through interviewee’s narratives, I first take a look at how they initially learned about their undocumented status and what their reactions were. Then, I analyze their

experiences as children and young adults encountering systems including criminal justice, health care, and education. I argue that in each of these systems undocumented individuals face experiences that are similar to other oppressed groups, but which also differ in important ways because of policies around legal status. I then bring in narratives about DACA and discuss how it became a grey area in terms of legal status, further complicating the process of being and becoming undocumented. Lastly, I look at the ways that interviewees view their own undocumented status and engage directly with the concept of illegality, questioning some of the systems that have labeled them as such. I conclude with the argument that undocumented identity is understood as being formed prior to adolescence and legal status should be analyzed as a separate category within an intersectional framework.

### **FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH “ILLEGALITY”**

Undocumented children may grow up with an understanding of their legal status as being negative, as parents tell them not to speak of being undocumented, to hide this secret. Santiago, a sophomore in college, explained:

My parents always told me, “Don’t tell anyone. Don’t tell anyone...” you felt ashamed and like an outcast. Like, “Why can’t I tell people?” And this fear comes out of protectiveness. And if you look Hispanic, you might not be a citizen.

Several SAO members explained that they grew up with this sense of fear around their status, that it affected how they acted and in what spaces they felt comfortable. As Sam explained, this often came from the fears of parents themselves who wanted to keep their families safe. Others, however, discovered their status when they confronted barriers in

high school. Briana, a freshman, discovered her status when she found paperwork at home:

I was a baby when I came to the States, so I had no idea so I just remember finding the socials. I got nervous because she was like we might, I could get deported and I was like what, and she was like that's why we don't apply to certain jobs. That's why we never leave the country. I'm like, well that's not fair, so it was, I obviously did not understand the full extent, but it was this very like, the start to the nervous journey... 'Yeah, I was never open about it. My parents had to keep quiet about it... 'It's working super hard but not knowing what could happen.

This “nervous journey” is one that many undocumented youth embarked upon once learning about their status. The uncertainty that Briana describes contributes to an unease that can become a part of daily life. Javier, a sophomore, discussed how this constant unease impacted his walk home from school one day:

When in my last elementary school, the school was like one block away from my house, but I remember walking back and I saw this brown truck just like right in front of my house, and at this time I had like this weird feeling so I was kinda like terrified and right next to my house was actually like this little forest, so I went and hid there because I thought it was like the immigration's truck like going around like, sweeping the neighborhood, like trying to get people, so I ended up hiding in the forest for about like, I wanna say two, three hours, and it's kinda funny like, looking back because it wasn't until a couple years later that I realized it was just a UPS truck dropping off a package, but yeah, so like, one of the things that like when I was much younger that I didn't really understand.

Javier's story reflects the impacts that internalized understandings of legal status can have on children growing up in a climate of fear. The ICE raids that Javier had seen or heard about caused his instinct to flee at the sight of a brown van. This type of experience helps to reflect on the very real impacts of systems that criminalize particular groups in society. Many children are left to wonder why. Why do their differences result in such treatment? Sara, a freshman in college who discovered her undocumented status when needing a

social security number for the Gradespeed system in high school, had such questions:

'Yeah, I think in a way – I mean, I always knew where I was born. I knew that my parents were born in Mexico. I knew that I had come here when I was five, but we never sat down and had that conversation like well, we're different in some way. I think it was just – I mean growing up you always see it in the news, like people getting deported and just like you hear the words, whether it be illegal alien or undocumented immigrant. So you have an awareness that this is happening. But, I mean, I think even now it's still something that's like – I'm trying to understand just because –I mean, I understand the laws obviously, but it's just like a concept that's hard to grasp. Like yes, you were born in a different part of the world, but why is that such a bad thing?

Regardless of the age at which these students discovered their undocumented status, shaping that understanding as part of their identity occurred over time as a process through conversations with peers and parents, as well as through interactions with systems that treated them differently.

### **DACA: A “GREY AREA”**

The majority of the undocumented individuals interviewed had DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), which provides a social security number and two years of protection from deportation, a work permit, and a driver's license. DACA, as well as other temporary forms of relief such as TPS (Temporary Protected Status), provides important implications for the notion of legality. Temporary forms of immigration relief demonstrate the fluidity of legality - the ways in which it can be applied and removed. Students with DACA often describe themselves as “undocumented,” thus underscoring the point that these statuses are not so easily categorized.

Alejandra described her reaction to DACA: “I had DACA, so it was the first year 2013, of DACA being implemented, and actually having a social. Being in this gray area

of – I’m not illegal, but I’m not legal, legal, right?” Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, (2017) adopt Menjivar (2006) in the use of the term “liminal legality” as it applies to DACA, which has characteristics of both documented and undocumented status. For students who spent much of their childhood learning to understand the concept of illegality as a part of their identity, obtaining DACA can create confusion around the implications of their new status.

While students did see DACA as having limitations as a temporary form of protection that did not extend to all areas of life, interviewees also referred to DACA as being a privilege:

“There are a couple of stages in life that I call the rite of passage. Getting your license, going abroad, I don’t know, maybe something – going to college. Those three things, for me, were things that I thought I couldn’t do until DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals made it possible.” (David)

‘Yeah. So, I never really realized the big impact it had until, I think, once I got it, and I was able to get a job and get an ID and everything, and so seeing how much easier that makes with a Social Security and not having to leave it blank or having to go through that trouble. And so, when I went to the conference, that was the first time I got on an airplane, so that was a big change from not ever being able. So, it’s like a lot of things that your whole atmosphere changes because you have access to things than before. (Elia)

Students also noted the fact that DACA was limited in who could apply and receive the status. Not all SAO members or college students at the university where recruitment took place had DACA. These students face additional barriers:

I’m pretty privileged because I have DACA, so I’m about to have a driver’s license, but people who don’t have that same benefit, I’ve noticed that we’re still struggling to see – like, if a person is pulled over and they’re undocumented, what kind of ID can they use? (Violeta)

Not all undocumented students at UT are DACA recipients and that’s something

that goes by people so easily and I guess just let it pass by but these students face even more challenges because they can't take paid internships. They can't work. They have to find resources, scholarships and that for once is another thing. I'm not sure what fraction of the undocumented population on campus is without DACA, but I know a few people within my class, a few being six or seven that don't have DACA and that's a lot. (Victoria)

On September 5, 2017 President Trump rescinded the DACA program. Two federal judges have blocked his action and allowed for renewals to be processed, but not new applications. The Supreme Court has so far refused to hear DACA cases, but as of this writing, new cases continue to move their way up the court system. (Liptak & Shear, 2018) It remains to be seen if the Supreme Court will take a DACA case, and if so, what the result will be for the 690,000 DACA recipients enrolled as of September 4, 2017 around the nation (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017).

### **UNDOCUMENTED, ILLEGAL, SIN PAPELES**

Throughout the interviews, students discussed how they came to understand their own status and place in the world. Generally speaking, those that grew up in communities that were less policed and had a larger percentage of undocumented individuals tended to be less afraid or ashamed as children.

I don't think I was like, ever ashamed of being undocumented because I – I would always say I've always been proud of where I was born, but at the same time, I could see why like, it would've been shameful to someone else too, like, being undocumented and having like, friends, like, everyone around you isn't and look at you weird, yeah, so, I kind of saw it from both sides...Just this like, underdog kind of emotion because it almost – it always felt like – I mean, me being undocumented six-fold years, it almost felt like I had to put more work like, into certain things, or go about reaching certain goals differently than everyone else...where I come from like, everyone else around me is Hispanic, maybe not all of them are undocumented but a big majority of them are, and just knowing like, there's people like you around you can like, make you not feel ashamed of

that status...it was either Mexicans, Hispanics, blacks, and like, we all grew up together, so it's not just that undocumented experiences but it's that like, being a minority experience. (Federico)

Federico's understanding of the undocumented experience as intrinsically linked with that of the "minority experience" demonstrates some of the key intersections of oppression that undocumented individuals face in common with other oppressed groups – high policing, higher rates of poverty, less access to health care, less overall feelings of security, and a sense of facing a system that was not built to serve them.

On the other hand, several interviewees felt isolated or alone with their status while growing up and were taught not to let others know, for fear of the consequences.

"I grew up with fear, with shame, with embarrassment. I hated the fact that I was brown, I hated the fact that I was undocumented. I didn't even know the word undocumented existed. Like, I didn't have that vocabulary. I just thought I didn't have papers, that's it. Sin papeles, kinda thing...I hadn't come out to many of my friends unless they were undocumented. I think I had like two maybe in high school. But we didn't go to the same high school. I didn't talk about it with my parents. I talked about it with my partners, here and there. I didn't talk to my teachers. I wasn't comfortable with it." (Alejandra)

Interestingly, Alejandra also linked her experience of being undocumented with that of being a "minority" when she said that she "hated the fact that [she] was brown." Her interaction with the cop, as discussed previously, might very likely have turned out differently had she had white skin. This reality of colorism and racism as it impacts the undocumented lived experience is crucial for understanding the construction of identity. Undocumented Black, Asian, Latinx, and European individuals all live their identities in very different ways according to their place in the intersection of identities. At the end of the day, the accumulation of these experiences of family norms and interactions with



systems add up to crucial parts of their internalized identity. Sofia described how she went through this process:

“I just thought of it as a legality kind of deal, I didn’t think much of it you know?, I was like OK, I don’t have this number. I don’t exactly know what it means. Here’s the way I thought of it – I don’t have this blue little card. That’s it. Blue little card. I don’t know exactly the meaning of it. But I don’t have it. Even though it’s become a part of my identity, you know, at the time. Now that I think about it, that’s true, I, I didn’t want to say it. I wasn’t necessarily completely nervous because um, I mean I was, I was still accepted, but not fully because I was still withdrawing from who I truly was. You know, it’s weird how being undocumented, how this legal status becomes a part of who you are. Like it really, really has and I feel like other people...anywhere that are also undocumented immigrants, like they can identify with that.” (Sofia)

While other interviewees’ narratives link the undocumented experience to that of other minority groups, Sofia’s explanation brings into focus some of the unique experiences of undocumented individuals that link immigrant communities across the United States, and in fact, the world. Living in a world in which one is not “legal” not only can become a crucial part of one’s identity, but also can leave the question of how to then interact with the world. Do you retreat? Do you step outward? To whom do you “come out”? Some undocumented students had their identity and existence validated when they encountered a new way of thinking about their status as they met organizers:

“I didn’t put it until actually sophomore year of college. I was, I always used the term “illegal.”...actually used the term “oh; I don’t have papers,” because that’s what my parents would always say...When I went to a SAO meeting and someone, and one of the officers said we do not use the term “illegal” because that is a very derogatory term. It’s a very degrading term and we prefer undocumented because we don’t have certain documentation. I was like, well that sounds a lot nicer, and again, it took away that shame from being “illegal” because illegal meant bad and it just reminded me that I just don’t have documentation. It made me feel less guilty about my status and less ashamed and less nervous to talk about it undocumented sounds way better than illegal.” (Briana)

Briana's narrative epitomizes many of the experiences in these interviews – students meet others not only who are like themselves, but also who are thinking in an extremely intentional way about their identities and directly confronting the systems that attempt to shape those identities. This can lead them to further question the social construction of legality itself:

There's that label of an alien citizen. Alien citizenship was like – the Latino population in the United States is always seen as, "You're part of the American culture, but not really..." I love this quote from Selena, "You have to be more American than the Americans and more Mexican than the Mexicans." (David)

David points directly to the heart of the concept of illegality – "alien citizen," a contradiction of terms in and of itself. While immigrants come from many countries, a large percentage of Latinx immigrants in the United States are originally from Mexico. In Texas, a land which once was part of the Mexican nation, this heritage rings ever louder. David's Selena quote points out another limbo in which undocumented Latinx immigrants often lie – that of cultural differences. When one is undocumented, this can be exacerbated by racial profiling in terms of determining how much they want to be recognized as Mexican in a state with a "show me your papers" law.

Sara brings the SAO's questioning of illegality a step further, pointing out the ways in which the term undocumented being accepted by mainstream media has led it to become tainted and underlining the key concern of the social construction of illegality:

"Yeah, so legally, yeah, I get it. But just...the two terms that are illegal or undocumented, they're always just so – they're used in such a negative way that it kind of surpasses the idea of laws, like it goes into morality and humanity." (Sara)

Here Sara gets to the heart of the notion of illegality. How can a human being *be* illegal?

By bringing in the question of morality and humanity, Sara is pointing out the larger issues with the U.S. immigration system.

By creating a hierarchy that places citizenship at the top, the U.S., and other nations with this same system, have created a system of oppression that parallels racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, ageism, and classism. This system functions in a similar way – demarcating rights based directly on a hierarchy. There are similar forms of verbal oppression (such as the use of the term “illegal aliens” in the news), physical oppression (detentions and deportations), exploitation (not paying undocumented workers a fair salary), and marginalization (barriers to accessing housing, health care, and other essential services). As made clear in this chapter, oppression based on legal status is important to analyze as its own separate issue in discussions of social justice.

### **CONFRONTING ILLEGALITY: A SYSTEMS APPROACH**

The systems that undocumented individuals navigate provide consistent reinforcement of the differences they face as a result of their status. SAO members described experiences with the criminal justice, health care, and education systems that were instrumental in shaping their identities. Some watched their parents engage in these systems with unfair results, others experienced oppression first-hand with professionals that were discriminatory. All carried these stories with them as important pieces toward understanding how they fit into society.

#### **The Criminal Justice System**

Interactions with law enforcement were brought up many times throughout the

interviews as memorable events. As with Javier's story, some SAO members focused on a general fear of police and ICE. Others had specific memories of interactions with law enforcement that impacted their lives. Alejandra, a senior in college, was stopped by police on her way to work when she was in high school:

I had DACA already. Because I was waiting to be 18 to get my license without doing the work permit, the driver's permit...I just carried my passport. I'm driving, and it's a 30, and I was going 45 or something...And I was driving and so I never saw the cop behind me. But I'm moving through the lanes and the lights come on...And then he like, on the megaphone he's like – Stop the car now, like, pull over...And so I do, I pull over. And then I'm like hella scared, 'cause I had never interacted with a police officer. I didn't know my rights, I didn't know what the fuck was I supposed to do...So he's like – driver's license and registration, insurance. I had the registration, I had my passport, and the insurance. He then, he's African American, and he then follows to ask – where do you live? And so I told him...my address and I'm not sure what happened that he got the impression I didn't speak English? But then he followed up with – like, 'adonde vas,' which is where are you going, uh, 'donde vives' he repeated again And then he told me – you're name's not on the registration. So you shouldn't be driving this car...So he tooks my shit and then I'm crying, like I literally start crying...it was very, very terrorizing to feel this police officer talking to me in Spanish...that was the first time I've been racially profiled I guess...Like, again the same, the fear, the fuckin' embarrassment of being brown. What had happened if I had blonde hair, and white skinned, or you know, all these different scenarios. Would he have treated me the same? All these ideas would come to my head. He takes my stuff, he comes back, he gives me back my passport. He tells me "I'm giving you a ticket for speeding, a ticket for not having insurance, and a ticket for um no license." So I got three tickets.

This is an example of how the legal system creates the illusion of choice. You have to have a license to drive, but you cannot obtain one if you are undocumented. When driving is the only way to access your means of survival, this limitation creates situations in which individuals are highly likely to break the law because they have been demarcated by the state as not having the right to documentation.

The actual interaction itself links back to the concept of fear and shame. These

feelings stem from interactions such as this one, where the cop determines that he should speak to her in Spanish and makes her feel, in her words, terrorized. These types of interactions are direct ways in which the construction of illegality confronts undocumented individuals in their daily lives. First, there is the experience of racial profiling and Alejandra's association of being brown with being stopped and questioned, particularly in Spanish. Second, there is the interrogation about papers and where she is going after she shows a passport as her form of identification. As law enforcement, police officers enforce the state's construction of citizenship and legality through their actions. This can create a general fear of any actions by law enforcement, as explained by Francisco. Francisco is a freshman in college who spoke of growing up in a neighborhood with predominantly people of color:

I would say like, the bad side of that too has always been like, you have to be extra cautious because like I – like I mentioned it's – it's a community with minorities with bad things going around, crime at some points, so there's always like, that sense of fear towards the police, and them not always being able to help out as much...at least where I grew up in, the police was kind of like feared more than like, gone to for a certain time, like, if someone were to ever break into your car, or whatever you would just go and fix it instead of calling the police in fear of them like, asking more about your status or – or more about you instead of asking about the – the crime that just happened, or sometimes they wouldn't even show up, so. Yeah, just – I would say that's part of a bad undocumented experience, like, being not always identifying that there's help there for you. My grandma – there's this one point the police were like, [the police] were knocking on doors for some reason, they were like, checking up on something, and my grandma got so scared of that because one of my uncles has been deported before and he's had to come back illegally of course, and undocumented and like, she just – the idea of police like, scares her, so instead of running and getting it, opening the door, she like, runs to the restroom because her stomach just like, turned...the fact that she had to rush to the restroom because she couldn't like – like control herself just from knowing that the police were knocking at the door, that was a bad experience.

Francisco's memory of life in his neighborhood demonstrates the additional concerns with communities fearing police: the primary system available for protection in the United States, as in many communities of color, instead enhances oppression and increases fear. With undocumented communities, however, there is an additional layer of deportability that creates a different relationship to police interactions. Perhaps in no case is this clearer than in instances of family violence not reported because of fears of deportation. Sofia, a junior in college, described her family's struggle with domestic violence that went unreported because of fears around undocumented status:

It really really hit me, I mean to be completely honest with you, two years ago when my mom and my sister suffered a psychological and a psychologically abusive relationship that I myself have had with my dad for such a long time. And two years ago it affected them. Because it affected them, things just got way out of hand at home and we had to leave. And so my mom lost that financial dependency on my dad. And there was two things going on that related to just immigration. One, my mom was getting discriminated trying to find employment. And two, my mom's hands were tied because at the same time it's like 'what do I do with my husband who's also undocumented? I don't want to report him.'

Studies of domestic violence have demonstrated the challenges with individuals making the decision to leave relationships of domestic violence and reporting to the police (CITE). With undocumented individuals, the impacts of power and control can be heightened by their status. Javier also remembered family violence and fears of reporting to the police:

One occasion that I remember vividly is that when I was younger, well, when we came here to the US we didn't really have a lot of family, we only my grandma from my father's side...she was actually kind of abusive to me and my mom, so since a young age I knew that of my status and we felt like we couldn't really approach the police officers out of fear of repercussion that they themselves had residency, but we didn't have anything...so that kind of prevented us from trying to reach forward for any additional help, which is one of the reasons why we

ended up moving...that's one of the things that ingrained in me of don't speak of your status.

Javier's memory exemplifies an additional dynamic of reporting to police – when the perpetrator of violence has legal status, this can add a further complication in the decision of whether or not to say something about the abuse. In other occasions, perpetrators may use their status as part of their power and control – using deportation as one of their threats.

Jaime, a recent graduate of college, faced this system directly when he was 18 and his father was detained:

My father had been going through deportation proceedings, during that time. He was coming back from work and one of his co-workers didn't have his seatbelt. Because of that, he couldn't provide an ID. They detained all of them. And ICE intimidated my father and his co-workers into signing the voluntary departure. My dad was detained in a center for 30 days and then was released. And we went to court for two to three years.

Rhodes, Mann, Simán, Song, Alonzo, and Downs (2015) identified the impact of local immigration enforcement policies on the health of Latino immigrants in the United States. They found that immigration enforcement has been delegated more over time to local police that have agreements with ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). The Immigration and Nationality Act and the Secure Communities program allow for this type of collaboration, which the authors found increased fear of local authorities and fear of accessing local services, including police protection and emergency services.

The study also found that among Latino immigrants, the fear of deportation, their undocumented status, their interactions with law enforcement, and racial profiling were factors that contributed to their reduced utilization of health services and to negative

health outcomes (Rhodes et al., 2015).

### **The Health Care System**

The intersection of systems that undocumented individuals encounter, which compound fears that dictate the ways in which they access services, has important implications for quality of life. Briana discussed one such intersection and how it impacted her high school experience as an undocumented student:

In high school I was a pretty good student. I did, I graduated top ten in my class. I did sports. I did a lot of organizations...But my father freshman year could not find a job due to not having a social. And my mom also got really sick during high school and didn't have health insurance, so that was very stressful because we could not get the help that she needed. And my dad couldn't get a job, even though he met all the requirements, because of this nine digit number they don't have. So even though I was doing very well in school, it was very, I was always very nervous because of our financial situation. And that happened from literally freshman year to senior year.

Taken together, the experiences of these undocumented students being to paint a picture of the layered stress that they faced, beginning at young ages. As they grew older, however, some students described taking action in situations that they felt were unjust. Sofia remembered one such instance and the impact it had on her understanding of undocumented identity:

I got shingles, I was diagnosed with shingles last August. And I had to go to the hospital...I don't have any health care insurance...I'm so sure that *many* immigrant families go through this, but I'll speak specifically for the immigrant Hispanic community. Cause I myself am Mexican, so I feel like I can do that. But I went to the hospital, and my mom and I we were in the room for maybe an hour, and I was in a lot of pain, my mom was freaking out, you know, everything was emotionally overwhelming. So there was – room for logic, room for like some thoughts that could like pan out in the future were not there necessarily and then my mom also just wanted for her daughter to feel better because she was in a moment of distress, you know she was very stressed out...When the nurse came in with a clipboard, and she said 'hey I need for you to sign all this paperwork'



and it was like I don't know, I wanna say maybe seven pages of paperwork. She gave it to me, and I thought 'ok, first of all what is this. I haven't even – a doctor hasn't even been in here.' So I checked the paperwork, I read over it... it almost seemed like she didn't want for me to read it because she was like 'it's just, it's just paperwork, like it's fine, you can just sign it.' I thought ok, no no no, I'm gonna read it...I was very like affirmative about just like I, I wanna do what I need to do right now even though I'm in a lot of pain because I know what it's like to pay for a lot of like, a good amount in medical bills. So I read it, and I was right. At the last page, it said that we had to pay \$1,070... and I asked the nurse, 'we've only been here for an hour, I haven't been – I've been checked by a nurse, I haven't been told of anything other than that though.' And she said 'ok, um, do you want for me to see if there's an alternative?' And I was like 'Yeah, is there an alternative payment? Like is there a payment plan? How can I go about this?' And my mom in the back was like 'Namas firmalo, ya ya, no importa' 'It's ok, like money doesn't matter at this point, like your health matters.' And it's like 'Yes mother, I would agree with you on that if it wasn't like a full semester of college at ACC, you know?'

Sofia touches on three important themes. The first of these is the level of stress that she describes in the doctor's office. She noted her own stress, as well as her mother's anxiety and concern over her daughter being ill. When she points out that this leaves no "room for logic," this is an insightful observation that is backed up by neurobiology – when the neurological system is taxed and the emotional part of the brain is engaged, cognitive thinking is challenging, or even impossible (Bourne & Yaroush, 2003). For undocumented families, a baseline of stress level may exist on a daily basis. Adding medical emergencies can then push individuals to a level of stress that exceeds their ability to engage with logical thinking. This connects with Sofia's next points, her own self-advocacy and her mother telling her to go ahead and sign it. Sofia goes on to describe her thoughts on her mother's reaction:

The other thing I noticed from my mom...In the Hispanic community it's very common to feel like you just kinda have to comply...And it's like, well yes, but you have to further investigate. Like you have to know how to go about

surpassing this cultural value that was placed upon you growing up...So that's what I did with the nurse and she was like 'do you want for me to screen you for like see if maybe you can pay something different like pay less' and I said 'yes please, please do screen me.' So then she came back, she brought in another clipboard, and she asked me questions like 'are you working' and I said 'yes' she was like 'how much do you earn a month' I said 'this much'...She was like 'ok, well now that I have your information, I'll come back and give you your new payment plan or your new bill. It went down to fifteen dollars...' 'Oh mamá, quince dólares. Vamos a pagar quince dólares.' 'So don't tell me that I didn't try you know, like next time mmm we're not complying.' So, but then the doctor comes in and the attitude changes completely. I'm not, I'm not even kidding. It was very, it was like a very brief, like 'this is what's going on, here's this, and that's that'...Like maybe like five hours that we were there? I was just like 'wow, that was not ok. That was not ok at all' Like how many other people that may not have health care insurance, you know, go through this process? Where it's like 'here's all this paperwork that you may not understand, sign it' you know, and people just sign it sometimes...you feel like complying, and you feel submissive to the situation then, you know, because maybe in the past I don't know, the, the resources or the knowledge was not there, was not handed down to you.

Sofia connects her mother's reaction to tell her to just sign the papers with a larger point about the Hispanic community. She is simultaneously encountering systemic barriers and confronting those challenges through self-advocacy. When Sofia wonders about other families that have not been empowered to self-advocate, she taps into a larger discussion of the ways in which undocumented individuals interact with systems and authority figures, as well as other cases in which those people in positions of power may take advantage of undocumented families. All of these interactions shape one's understanding of what it means to be undocumented in the United States.

Several authors have discussed the ways in which the health care system underserves the Latino, and particularly the undocumented Latino, community. Even when children are citizens and could have health care coverage, undocumented parents sometimes are afraid to register for that health care or are not aware that they can

(Hernandez, 2004; Brabeck & Ku, 2010). In their analysis of the 2007 Pew Hispanic Center/Robert Wood Johnson foundation Hispanic Healthcare Survey with 4,013 Latino adults, Rodríguez, M. A., Bustamante, A. V., and Ang, A. (2009) reported that undocumented Latinos had the lowest percentages of healthcare coverage, usual source of care, blood pressure checked, and cholesterol checked in comparison to US-born Latinos.

Many undocumented Latinos have reported being discriminated against in hospitals and emergency rooms and being afraid to seek services because of the fear of being reported to immigration authorities (Maldonado, Rodriguez, Torres, Flores, & Lovato, 2013; Nandi et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2006; Edward, 2014; Leclere & López, 2011). In one study 18% of patients believed hospital staff reported to immigration enforcement, 9% said they were asked about their citizenship status at the hospital, and 12% reported a fear of going to the hospital because of discovery (Maldonado et al., 2013). Another study found that 39% of their overall sample of 756 individuals “were afraid of receiving medical services because of their undocumented status” (Leclere & López, 2011, p. 153). These trends illuminate the larger narrative that comes from Sofia’s particular experience and reiterate the challenges of intersecting systems.

### **Education**

For some undocumented youth, their status does not become a barrier until they begin the college application process. For these students, the English class prompt of writing about your dream college can bring about feelings of resentment, embarrassment, or frustration. While some students have supports in high school of these applications, many schools do not have specific knowledge of the particular process that

undocumented students have to go through. Undocumented high school students face barriers in scholarship eligibility, understanding how to fill out the TAFSA instead of the FAFSA, and determining which status to select on applications. As Violeta explained:

“I didn’t think about it that much until my senior year when I couldn’t apply for federal scholarships, and it was such a big obstacle. And so, before that, I didn’t think about being undocumented as much, but then that year I did.”

Several interviewees explained that the first individual they told about their status was their high school counselor or teacher. Overall, undocumented students describe this process as “coming out,” a phrase generally associated with the LGBTQIA+ community<sup>2</sup>.

Violeta described her experience with feeling pressured to come out on a larger scale:

“I was in the newspaper. I remember that the first person that I told about my undocumented status was to my journalism teacher. She was the teacher I was the closest with, and she encouraged me to write my story on the newspaper so other students could see because she thought she knew a couple of other undocumented students, but she couldn’t tell me who they were. It made me feel very pressured because she’s someone I looked up to, and I didn’t want to share my story. I wasn’t ready to do that, but I didn’t want to disappoint her. And she kinda kept pushing me to do that until I finally gave in. And I still think about it, and it makes me kind of mad that – I don’t know if she knew that it was kind of forced. It was just a lot of pressure, and I wasn’t ready to tell my story, but I still wrote it. And after that, people looked at me differently, and I don’t think a lot of those people deserved to know my story. But at the same time, I’m also grateful that I told my story – not the way that I did, but I’m grateful that I did because otherwise I don’t think I would be open about it. Because in my story, I wrote about how that was some of my struggles, and how I didn’t qualify for federal aid, so after that, people just didn’t look at me whenever we did that. Or some of them just kind of looked like they felt sorry for me, so that made me really angry because I don’t need anyone’s pity. And that made me really determined that even if I can’t get federal money, I was still going to go to school.

While not all students were pressured into such a public “coming out” experience,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see Corrigan, P. & Matthews, A. (2003). Stigma and disclosure: Implications for coming out of the closet, *Journal of Mental Health*, 12:3, 235-248 and Grov, C., Bimbi, D., Nanin, J. & Parsons, J. (2006). Race, ethnicity, gender, and generational factors associated with the coming-out process among gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 43:2, 115-121.

nearly every undocumented interviewee felt forced to come out to a teacher or counselor in order to apply for college. Some had to explain why they could not fill out the FAFSA, others were not eligible for the scholarships recommended to them. In one way or another, high school teachers and counselors made huge impacts on the lives of the students in how they handled this forced revealing of status. Fortunately, Violeta's story took a more positive turn as the reactions to her newspaper article unfolded:

But after my story, and people saw it because it's a big high school, like a couple thousand students, and a lot of other students came up to me, and they told me that they were undocumented. At that point I was really, really angry that I had done, and I was really full of regret, but then whenever people started coming up to me, that's when I let go of some of that anger. But other students started coming up to me, and they didn't know how to apply for college, and our college and career counselors at the college center, they didn't know how to help undocumented students apply for college, so I basically took it upon myself to learn how to, and then I would teach other students how to do it, and then I had to teach my counselors how to help other undocumented students. It was a very tiring experience. It was a lot, but looking back now, every single one of those students that came up to me are in college, and they don't have to pay a single dollar for that. And so, even though it was a lot of work, I think that kind of set my path towards my passion for education equity. So, yeah, I'm mad that I had to share my story the way I did, but I don't regret it anymore because otherwise I wouldn't had the opportunity to do that.

While most students did describe coming out to counselors as being a supportive experience, counselors in the state of Texas have differing expertise on helping undocumented students apply to college. In general, counselors in schools with larger Latinx populations tended to have more knowledge to help students than those with a lower population. One student worked with Breakthrough, a program that supports first generation students applying to college – he was provided with significant supports to navigate the system and described how helpful this was for him. None of the interviewees

were told that they could not attend college, but were told not to apply to scholarships. Several worked with counselors that did not know how to navigate the systems. In one case, this resulted in an Ivy League university withdrawing the acceptance of an undocumented student because she mistakenly marked the wrong legal status box on her application. This demonstrates the tangible detrimental impacts of socially constructed notions of legality. Briana discussed the stresses in her application process:

Applying to college was very difficult for me because for undocumented students, we do not have all the resources available to us and neither do our college counselors. Neither do our friends...I was even scared to come out to my counselor in high school. I wasn't sure how she would react...She didn't know what [undocumented] was. But after I explained it to her, she was very supportive and I think again, she was very sad for me because she knew it was very hard to apply to college.

Any out of state school would basically have, there's a part where it usually says what is your status? U.S. citizen, permanent resident, international student and under it would be like HB1 Visa, and I was like oh, I'm not any of these, so I would call the office and I would be like oh, I have DACA and they were like, well you're an international student.

To me, that'd be, that's weird because I came, like I'm not really international, and then I found out for a lot of schools I can't apply to loans or some of their scholarships, so that was very stressful because even though I was accepted to out of state schools, I could not go because I couldn't afford it...Very scary because I, I didn't know who to trust or what certain information meant, so it was very scary and it was very exhausting, because I didn't know again if I was being provided with the right information, who to go to, what resources, what paperwork sometimes I needed.

Nearly all interviewees discussed the way in which undocumented students are classified as "international students" for the purposes of college applications, required vaccinations, and university orientations. Not only does this create distance from other students, it also lends a sense of being ostracized – students who have lived in Texas since they were two years old are labeled "international" when entering the university

system at the age of 18. David discussed how he experienced barriers at UT.

“Some services, there’s extra steps. To drop a class, there’s extra steps, too, that we have to go through as undocumented students. We have to go to the international office. If we want to get an emergency loan, we have to go through extra steps. If we want to get a regular loan, it’s super difficult because we have to get a co-sponsor who’s a US citizen to be able to sponsor us for that. We cannot receive federal aid. So, having to look for different avenues for funding because many of us don’t come from a wealthy family. Many of us comes from families who are barely making enough. Whose families are exploited by employers who take advantage of our status. So, it’s finding those sources of income so that we can support our education. I felt like something’s wrong here. I’m not an international student, I’m a Texan. So, it was weird. And I think it’s still weird being classified like that because I don’t consider myself international, in a way. I’ve grown up in Austin. I know the city more than a lot of people who go to UT.

At the same time, this can be the first time that undocumented students start to meet peers and realize that they are not alone in this process. Maira explained this:

I know I struggled a lot finding all the information which they went over, like the vaccine part, and then getting affidavits signed, and all that stuff, and then like financial aid. And I noticed that a lot of the other people that were there, they didn’t know that either. I remember one person didn’t even do her FAFSA because she didn’t know you can do a TASFA. So, yeah, it was just interesting to see that we’re all in the same struggle, pretty much.

New undocumented students attend an international student orientation where SAO provides key information about being undocumented in college and discuss their organization. Every undocumented student interviewee discussed this as a memorable experience that helped them to understand their rights and opportunities at the university. For several, this was the beginning of their journey toward becoming more active in SAO.

Of the four institutes of higher learning that interviewees attended, two were public universities, one was a smaller private school, and the fourth was a community

college. Students described different experiences of each campus. The community college seemed to have the fewest barriers in place for undocumented students. The private university held some challenges for students, but they also described feeling like they could create closer connections with professors because of small classroom sizes and gain more monetary support from the university.

The university located in a smaller more conservative town was described as having an “oppressive environment,” but with a great internal support network at the Office of Student Diversity. The university located in a larger more liberal city was described as the opposite – the surrounding community had many resources to offer undocumented individuals, but they lacked institutional support. Both of the public universities also had an increase of white supremacist flyers on campus, and one had specific death threats against undocumented students. In the “Becoming Unafraid” chapter, the emotional impact of organizing under oppressive conditions is further discussed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through these interviews, I have demonstrated that “becoming undocumented” is a process that occurs over the entirety of one’s life, as individuals move through different systems. In current literature, authors tend toward the conclusion that undocumented youth do not face the same exclusion as adults because of their incorporation into free public education. Gonzales (2011) argues that undocumented youth transition from “de facto legal to legal” because they have access to free public education and are less



persecuted as children because of FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) and that undocumented status has “little to no negative effect” in schools (p. 607).

Gleeson and Gonzales (2012) argue that students do not need to “develop the same heightened consciousness surrounding their unauthorized presence,” even if they do face some barriers while in school.

In contrast, my findings demonstrate the ways in which undocumented children are in fact aware of their own legal status and face increased stressors as a result. Additionally, they often are not able to be fully themselves with their peers because they do not feel comfortable revealing their own status. While there are particular experiences in high school that further define this status, many do understand their own “illegality” at young ages when they fear police, witness wage theft of their parents, or fear for the deportation of family members. I argue that previous literature around undocumented youth and illegality focuses primarily on the education system, while in reality students encounter understandings of barriers from many systems as they grow up. Additionally, from a mental health perspective, the “de facto legal” argument leaves out the many ways in which undocumented status can increase stress, fear, and create other social challenges for undocumented students.

Few authors have discussed the mental health impacts of the experiences of undocumented youth. While they retain the emphasis on undocumented status impacting students during adolescence rather than in childhood, Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguinetti (2013) do focus on the chronic stress created by systemic restrictions that create barriers for undocumented young adults. The authors also emphasize the

importance of maintaining connections as a resilience factor. Overall, the authors analyzed undocumented status as a “catalyst for mental distress,” not necessarily a determining factor. Siemons, Raymond-Flesh, Auerswald, & Brindis (2017) discuss the impacts of immigration policies on the mental health and wellbeing of undocumented youth, specifically noting the ways in which DACA provided some security while also maintaining uncertainty around rights. Future research should include pre-adolescent children, as many of my interviewees discussed stress they faced as a result of status at a much younger age. In terms of preventative work, it is important to understand how this might impact the mental health of undocumented children as they develop.

In addition to an increased focus on the impact of undocumented status on mental health and on childhood, future research should continue to explore the ways in which undocumented youth encounter systems that hold barriers for them. Not included in this research is the impact of the media, religion, housing, and financial institutions. Future research should explore the impact of these systems on the formation of undocumented identity and understandings of the implications of legal status.

This chapter demonstrates the *process* of “becoming undocumented,” which becomes understood by undocumented youth through family discussions, encountering barriers in systems, and directly questioning the concept of legality in and of itself. For students who then attend college and join organizations of their undocumented peers, they often embark on a second process of “becoming unafraid” as they take ownership of their identities in defiance of the construction of illegality. This second process is explored in the following chapter, “Becoming Unafraid.”

## **Chapter 5: Becoming Unafraid**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The initial coming out process for undocumented students, discussed in the “Becoming Undocumented” chapter, can be seen as twofold: 1) Coming out to friends, partners, or others in an individual’s social circle; 2) Coming out to teachers, counselors, or other high school staff as part of the college application process. In this chapter I argue that there is a third step to this process; that of coming out publicly as an undocumented student organizers. These students place themselves in front of news cameras, rallies, and are public about their status on social media. Despite facing threats at the national level, as well as threatening messages on campus, these students continue to be vocal about their activism for the rights of undocumented individuals. At the same time, they work to provide services needed for the undocumented community, bearing in mind the safety of those who do not aim to be in the spotlight.

In this chapter I will explore the following questions: How does one take the step from individual to organizer? What motivates undocumented student activism? What are the practical consequences of this activism on the physical and mental health of undocumented student organizers? And lastly, what does it mean to be “Undocumented and Unafraid”? I argue that, as with “becoming undocumented,” becoming an activist in the movement is also a process that one goes through. Based on interviewee’s narratives, I argue that becoming “undocumented and unafraid” specifically is a process based in finding community and feeling called to action by peers and by internal motivations to make a change for other undocumented individuals and families. Following their

transformation over time as they learn about their undocumented status, these students further this process by creating narratives that are in direct opposition to the construction of “illegality” and asserting their own power through organizing.

### **THE PROCESS OF BECOMING “UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID”**

Throughout this chapter I will use the words of interviewees to demonstrate the becoming undocumented and unafraid as a *process*. Below is a diagram that demonstrates the journeys that participants described. The organizers interviewed for this research were all at different steps of this process and described their experiences as being distinct from one another. This illustration does not serve to generalize the undocumented experience, but rather to point to some of the common themes described by the 15 organizers.

“Becoming unafraid” means something different to each individual and does not happen in a step-by-step manner. For these organizers in particular, however, some common elements united their experiences and help illustrate how one moves through this process.

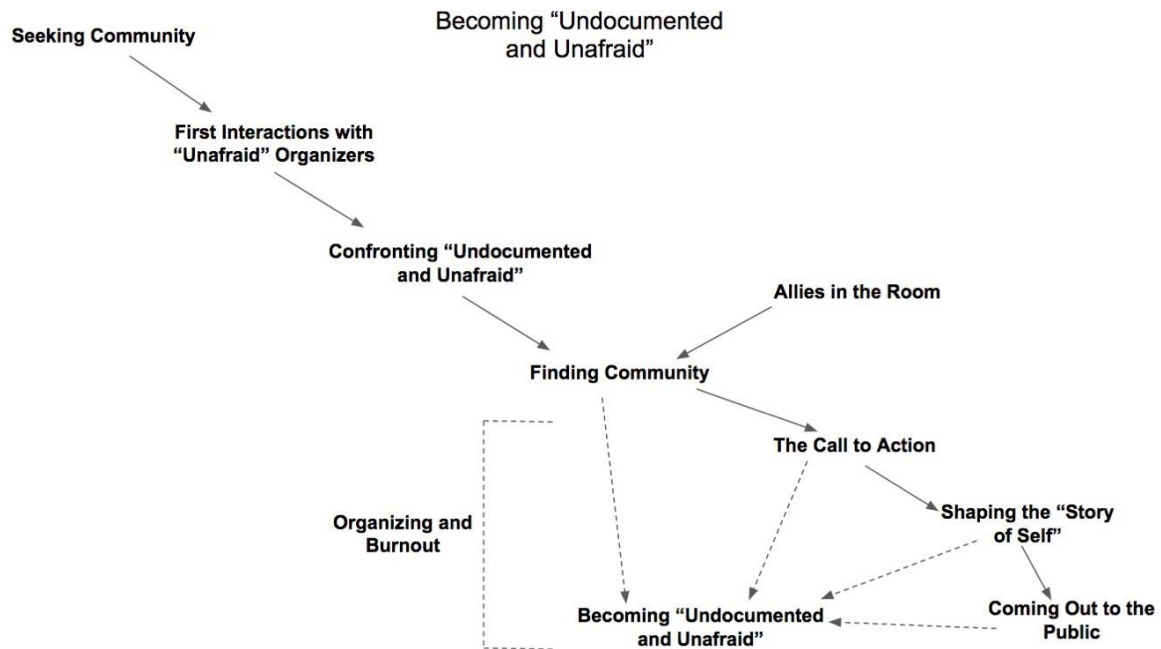


Figure 3: Process of Becoming “Undocumented and Unafraid”

### SEEKING COMMUNITY

One major theme throughout the interviews was that of seeking community. Undocumented students discussed the ways in which their childhood experiences created a sense of disconnection or loneliness. Some entered college believing they were the only undocumented student on campus. Interviewees expressed a longing for a community they could belong to in which they could be open about their undocumented status.

“I just remembered SAO and wanting to know others like me...I felt I didn’t have a community. I felt that I didn’t have anybody who was like me. Brown, even. Like, even if they were citizens I didn’t have any Hispanic friends. I had Asian friends. Black friends. Not Hispanic friends. I didn’t find them where I was. Cause I was a bio major at that point. Then I switched out to chemistry. And there weren’t many Hispanics. I was surrounded by Indians, Asians, other ethnicities, but not mine. So, it felt lonely. I didn’t know where I was gonna fit in or where I would feel comfortable, where I would feel inspired.” (Alejandra)

“I wanted, in a way, to get to know, or get involved in an organization. Get

involved in a group. Meet other people, especially, folks who had the same experiences as me.” (Jaime)

Jaime and Alejandra both discussed their desires to find community and connection, specifically with individuals they could relate to. As mentioned in the Becoming Undocumented chapter, interviewees tended to see themselves as both aligned with other minority communities and as having experiences quite unique to being undocumented. These feelings are reflected in Alejandra’s desire to find connection with individuals that shared her more specific experiences. Additionally, “coming out” to others about one’s status was overall discussed as a stressful process. As such, seeking community for these students held a higher need for safety around the pieces of their identity they could be open about. Alejandra also mentioned wanting to feel inspired and Jaime was looking to get involved in an organization – many SAO members discussed having had a desire to take action long before joining the organizing and wanting to find a way to direct that impulse.

### **FIRST INTERACTIONS WITH “UNAFRAID” ORGANIZERS**

As most undocumented students attend the summer check-in, during which SAO members present about undocumented student life and the organization itself, members often find their way into the organization because of a positive first impression at this meeting. In their first interactions with SAO, many interviewees described being surprised at how open members were about their status. The most common ways that interviewees first encountered SAO was during high school (if they were from Austin), at the International Students Check-In, or by attending a SAO meeting. For allies, they

generally learned about SAO from a close undocumented friend who was already a member. Alejandra discussed her first interaction with SAO at this check in:

That impression is always present with you. And so that was my first feeling where I was like, Oh my god, there are more undocumented students. I'm not the only one, so that realization was the first one. So I did come into the, to UT, believing I was the only one.

I remember at the end of the presentation I stayed behind a little bit and I talked to her about my situation and like how I was really in awe that there's more of you, well more of us. Umm, and it instantly felt welcoming, it instantly felt like I was ok to say these things out loud, which I hadn't all my life... 'So there was comfort, there was safe, it was a safe environment, I didn't feel ashamed, I didn't feel afraid, in that specific, in that specific time frame.

Despite not having met the representatives from SAO previously, Alejandra described her feeling of comfort and of being free to discuss her status. Given the stigma Alejandra associated with being undocumented, the impact of this one interaction held implications for her future as a college student. Here the concept of shedding fear also starts to come up. The idea that one can feel safe and without fear because of the people in the room is important for understanding how that feeling can be translated into public activism later. Victoria also talked about how the check-in motivated her to become more involved:

“When you're an international student at the university, you go to an international briefing and check-in. And SAO takes a portion of this briefing and check-in because all the students that are undocumented and are classified as international students really don't have the visas to show for this international briefing and check-in. So, SAO does a presentation as to what our status means on campus and how they as an organization can provide support for this community. So, being in that room and listening to the presenters and knowing that they were in my shoes and they were also undocumented just made the whole difference for me. And they were doing things. They were changing things. They were talking about legislature and how they had made DACA possible and so that just inspired me to be able to continue and have a link the organization.”

Victoria's comments parallel the narratives of many interviewees – seeing undocumented individuals 'in their shoes' presenting and taking action was mentioned several times as a hugely important moment. The idea of seeing oneself in leaders or figures of authority and being inspired to one day walk in their shoes was a theme throughout the interviews. Not all students, however, immediately took action. While Alejandra and Victoria became involved soon after the summer check in, other students remembered it being a positive experience and joined later because of outside pressures. Briana sought the community support of SAO when she was worried that undocumented family members were going to be deported and was not able to help them:

So I learned a lot about the organizations, the services it provided and I think it was, at the end of my freshman year, I really struggled being undocumented. I was having family issues and it all revolved around our status. So I decided to try to join SAO and to be more involved because at that point I needed people who understood the experience. I talked about it with a couple people and it was nice because I didn't feel judged or I didn't have to really explain into detail and they recommended me to certain lawyers or gave me their experiences with family members who have gone through similar things. It is nice because in some what it is empowering that I am around people who can understand me and it's also not as scary. It's a very calming feeling.”

Briana also sought a community in which she could be understood without having to justify her experiences or concerns about her family. Similarly to Alejandra, she felt comfortable enough to open up about not only her status, but her family's legal concerns. This demonstrates the power of shared experiences and connection in creating feelings of safety not found elsewhere.

### **CONFRONTING “UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID”**

As an organization that provides general supports to undocumented students as



well as engaging in activism, SAO members are careful to ensure that students new to the group understand that they should not feel forced to engage in organizing right away.

Briana explains that this was helpful when she joined the organization to seek support around her family situation:

I remember that during our immigration and briefing check in that it was all students and it was, they mostly talked about just having a community, that we didn't have to be activists or go protest. They said that we could come and it's just a comfortable space where we could ask questions, and I think because first, when I was at the orientation, I was very nervous because they were talking about protests and going and being active at the capital and I was like, that is not for me yet. So learning that it could just be a place where I could talk to people about being undocumented, who were also undocumented and allies was something I really needed.

Given the fear that several students faced around their undocumented status while growing up, it is logical that they would not be excited about being open about their status in public at a protest. Some students described strong reactions to hearing others describe themselves as undocumented to a crowd. David remembered what it felt like to hear undocumented students who were open about their status:

I saw them give their presentation, and I was very – I guess the first word I could use is alarmed and astonished to see people say, “I am undocumented,” because for me, it was always something that you kept on the downlow. You didn't really tell people because you didn't want to be seen as an outsider. We all know how much charge the word alien has. So, I didn't wanna feel excluded or ostracized from my friend groups, so I never told people. But whenever I saw SAO members vocalize that status, it filled me with a lot of encouragement.

Encountering students who are open about their status can often be an important step towards individuals finding ways to be more comfortable with their own identities. While David described the experience as “alarming,” he also noted that he was encouraged by this interaction. Alejandra also felt shocked when she heard an entire room of students

chanting “Undocumented and Unafraid” at a meeting:

That has stuck with me since that day. Cause I was like – damn, they’re yelling it out loud. Like people can hear us, like outside this door. It was like, it was like – they’re so open, yet it’s so controversial in my head. I wanted to join. Like, I wanted to plant myself there and I wanted these people to be my friends.

For most interviewees, the idea of being undocumented and *unafraid* was a foreign concept before coming to college. In seeking a community that reflected their own experiences, these students were welcomed into a larger tradition of organizing, a group that was close-knit with individuals who had already gone through the third stage of coming out as undocumented publicly. While this created cognitive dissonance for those who had grown up with feelings of shame around their status, it also opened doors to a different way of moving through the world.

### **FINDING COMMUNITY**

For many students, the first few meetings with SAO were the step that they needed to start to feel that they had found the community they were looking for. The feelings of safety and security among peers created positive associations with the organization and its work. In contrast to “seeking community,” in which students talked about their feelings of isolation in spaces where they did not fully feel connected or a sense of belonging, interviewees identified SAO meetings as a space in which they had discovered a community of people around whom they could be their complete authentic selves. David explained how this felt for him, as a student who is both undocumented and gay:

“There’s other resources for LGBTQ students on campus that I never felt

comfortable – I felt comfortable going, but I can only speak about one identity was being gay. And then, SAO however, I could talk about being undocumented and talk about being LGBTQ because I really enjoy the intersectional scope that SAO has about all the issues. So, we're undocumented, but we're also people of color, or we're also queer people. And that, to me, was what was necessary because in order for me to feel very comfortable with someone, I couldn't be selective of my experiences. I could come out and say, 'Well, this is one experience.' And I knew there were other people that were queer and of color that were very proud of themselves. And I was like, 'I wanna emulate that.' And I could talk to them, be like, 'These are my experiences with being LGBT in a Hispanic household.' That someone that was LGBT might go through, maybe in a white family, might not understand. So, just being able to talk about being a person of color, being queer, and finding that connection made me very comfortable”

As an organization with both undocumented students and allies who are part of the queer community, SAO creates a space in which conversations about both identity groups can exist simultaneously. One way in which they do this is by inviting all meeting attendees to share their pronouns when they introduce themselves to invite gender inclusivity. Several SAO members mentioned this as something that stood out about initial interactions as a new concept, and one that they embraced when they understood its significance. In David's experience, he was able to live comfortably and openly in his intersectional identities, as well as have conversations about how family support differs across cultures. SAO's intersectional focus that included the LGBTQIA+ community also helped other members not part of that community to better understand the diversity in the undocumented experience:

“I don't have a lot of friends that are within the LGBTQ community, so I'm not as familiarly exposed to those different kind of, type of things. It was good, it was good to be exposed to the community to learn more and become educated, as to different struggles and to see the intersectionality within the LGBT community, and also the undocumented community, it definitely helped me in in bridging and understanding, and then after I like kept meeting a couple different SAO members

that were also a part of the LGBT community became much more aware of their different like struggles, and like different complications that they have, with not only being undocumented but also part of the LGBTQ community.” (Javier)

### **THE ALLIES IN THE ROOM**

For allies at SAO meetings, seeking community was also a motivator for involvement. Initially, the three allies interviewed described feeling similar to the way in which undocumented students felt while growing up. Two of the three allies interviewed in this research learned about SAO because their best friends were undocumented and involved in the organization. The third ally interviewed came from a mixed status family and sought out information about immigrant rights organizations while in high school and in that way learned about SAO being at the university. Both Zachary and Nilda described feeling somewhat out of place at the first meetings they attended:

“I think the whole cultural aspect – being the only white person in the room, and I think it was uncomfortable for a good while. Just because I didn’t understand what my place was, if I had a place in the movement, what I could do, what I couldn’t do. I thought everyone was really fun, and also really brave. I think to be so out about their status, when all that pretty much I had known about undocumented people were typical news stories, and never really thought I had exposure to someone that was undocumented when in fact, my best friend was...so I think for the first couple meetings, I guess maybe a few things. Foremost was just I guess friendly acquaintances, who I guess we’re not friends, yet, but definitely had the potential of becoming friends, just because I wasn’t I hadn’t made a lot of friends at UT, at that point, and just like I don’t know felt somewhere where I could come, and be welcomed by people that knew me and I knew them and work towards a good cause.” (Zachary)

“I think it was, at that point in time, I think it was the first meeting of the semester. So, there were a lot of people there. It was kind of nice seeing other people click and socialize. But I didn’t feel – not that I didn’t feel welcome, but I didn’t feel like I had that underlying commonality of being undocumented, so, I felt a little out of place. But it was still nice. It was still very welcoming. I just felt like an outsider. It kind of felt like maybe I don’t have a place or – to try to help

these people that I don't have my immigration status in common with. It felt – it was very different because I don't think I've ever been in a position where I was the minority and where it felt like a bad thing because, sometimes, it's like being a certain race or ethnicity or certain gender is favorable for you, if you're trying to get somewhere in life. But in any other context, having a legal status is good. But I was in a situation where it was like, oh, you're still a minority, but it's not that it's not good, it's just that you can't relate to these people on that level because you just don't have any idea what it's like. It also just felt – it definitely felt different. But I think it was nice to get exposure to these problems that, even though so many people in my life are very keen to – I have no idea. All of my mom's friends are undocumented. So, it's like I grew up with them, but I just didn't have that understanding of their reality until I was in college.” (Nilda)

While undocumented students discussed their immediate increased comfort at SAO meetings, some allies noted the opposite. In confronting their own privileges while being in a space with the intentional purpose of supporting undocumented students and inviting openness about status, these friends were unsure how to act. While this may be the experience of any individual who holds privilege in a particular area of their identity and interacts with a group who does not, the increased stigma relating to undocumented status has made SAO a particularly unique space in which undocumented status equals pride. As Nilda mentioned, this can create some unease in how to move through the space as someone with citizenship. At the same time, both Zachary and Nilda felt similarly to undocumented interviewees in that the community feel at the meetings caused them to be interested in connecting with the group.

### **THE CALL TO ACTION**

Throughout their general meetings, SAO hosts workshops about varying issues relating to undocumented students and the undocumented community as a whole. Topics of their meetings have varied from discussing how to provide college access

presentations to high school students, to understanding the legislative process and testifying, to how to know your rights, and to how to be an ally. The meetings provide a space for undocumented students to talk openly about their experiences, as well as for student and faculty allies to increase their understanding about the community and the types of supports they can provide. For some undocumented students, the workshops become a call to action:

“I remember, first, she gave us her story of self, and then she talked about – well, what stuck out to me the most was she talked about teaching high school students about what it was to be undocumented in the whole college process, and that’s what caught my attention because I didn’t really have a lot of that in high school, so I wanted to help others with that.” (Elia)

“SAO uncovered topics that we didn’t talk about. So, deportation is something that we don’t really talk about in our house. It’s something that we know it’s there. They talked about the elephant in the room. And that, to me, scared me, but I think at the same time, it put me into perspective of, ‘I am transitioning into a different part of my life, in which I’m becoming a young adult, and I have to look at issues that are my community is facing.’ And it was good for me to be able to have those conversations because my parents didn’t wanna have those conversations. A lot of undocumented families live in fear, and the only way of coping with that fear is by not talking about it. And by talking about it, it made me want to be part of the movement.” (David)

Elia and David both touch on a primary theme throughout the interviews of students feeling called to action because of the motivation to work for their communities. As in other interviewee’s narratives, Elia was inspired by the team that worked on college access for undocumented high school students. Having struggled in her own application process, she saw the need to provide better supports and was motivated to do so as part of SAO. David saw an opportunity to not only be more open about his own status, but to help families that he saw as being similar to his own. Again and again in these interviews,

student emphasized that the work they engage in is inspired by their own families and the difficulties they have faced together. They translate their own experiences into a broader understanding of the undocumented community and use their first hand knowledge of families' needs in order to increase supports. SAO members demonstrate the ways in which individuals who face oppression respond by organizing and affirming their rights on their own terms.

In addition to seeking community themselves, allies also were motivated to get involved because of SAO's work:

“So, I have a friend, my best friend is undocumented. And when I was in college, I wanted to do some – or I wanted to get involved in something that was worthwhile. And I knew that she was involved in SAO, but I didn't really know what they did or the implications of being undocumented. And then, when I started going to some meetings, and I saw the work that they did, I was like this is really like – this is not a bunch of bullshit like a lot of orgs in college are. This is real people helping other people, for the sake of helping.” (Nilda)

“I remember thinking that it was really good work, and I was really compelled by just the feel of the room. And, that's what kept me coming back, even though I didn't come back for a whole – the whole rest of the semester. It stuck in my mind and made me wanna come back...the spring of 2015, that's when I got more involved, because that's when the legislative session was happening. And, the campaign to keep – the Texas Tuition Equity Campaign, to keep in-state tuition and state financial aid for undocumented students. That was going on here, and that was a really big part of what SAO was doing, and that's when I started to get a lot more involved, with that campaign, mostly, and just going to more meetings, and stuff like that.” (Mara)

As with the undocumented interviewees, Nilda and Mara were initially drawn to SAO because of the feeling of connection, but were compelled to help the organization take action because they saw the impact of the work that students were doing in the community. SAO has provided services to high school students, trained educators, held

DACA clinics, given Know Your Rights presentations, and organized major actions on and off campus. For allies, both the fight for immigrant rights and the level of engagement SAO has with the community has motivated them to take action.

While some engaged with SAO soon after the summer check-in and others sought out the organization for specific supports while in college, other interviewees faced an external motivator for increasing their involvement. For several students, the impetus to take a more active role in SAO came after the 2016 election when Donald Trump, a Republican candidate running on a strongly anti-immigrant platform, won the presidency.

I'm a first year so it was kind of like scary and – yeah, so I decided to – I went to a couple of meetings but I guess I didn't really find the overall purpose of SAO. I knew that they were kind of just like a sense of support and although that seemed nice, I guess I didn't know what I was really looking for. So I just went to a couple of meetings and then I didn't go back. But then this past year, you know, with the election and everything that happened, I think I kind of realized that I needed to be more involved. And so I already knew about SAO so I contacted them again and I was just asking for more info on their meetings and stuff and they told me when they were. So I've just been coming in and I'm really enjoying it so far. (Sara)

I think it was election, after the election. That, it was the first time I felt that a very powerful politician had an impact in my life and I refuse to allow him to scare me and that's when I really started meeting with the SAOer's and I just noticed that there are people that support us. (Briana)

Members of SAO's board noted in their interviews that the response to the 2016 election was an immediate rise in engagement on the part of undocumented students, as well as student and faculty allies. Sara and Briana were younger college students who had this experience of feeling motivated by the threats against immigrants coming from the White House. Added to this was the local context in which the Texas legislature was working in the spring of 2017 to pass the anti-immigrant "show me your papers"



legislation SB 4 and Austin was the target of ICE raids as retribution for refusing to cooperate with ICE retainers. Families were refusing to take their children to school and overall immigrant service agencies were hearing of increased fear in the community. This resulted in a sharp increase in involvement at SAO meetings, which grew to hold 40 to 50 attendees each week, triple their usual numbers.

### **COMING OUT TO THE PUBLIC**

After students have had their first interaction with SAO, become members, and engaged in some of the direct service work, many take the next step toward coming out publicly about their status. David explained how SAO was integral to his ability to do so:

“And although it took me a year to reflect, to internalize and have this internal conversation, because of those individuals, I was able to come out as undocumented. And I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have done it otherwise because I knew that I could come out as undocumented, and I knew that I can go to a SAO meeting even if I didn’t show up in months. And every single time I would attend a meeting, I would be welcomed with love, regardless of who shows up. And that’s what I really appreciated. And that’s what I felt at the end, that although we talked about our struggles, we understood that there’s love and compassion in our struggles.”

The importance of feeling connected, appreciated, and welcomed as a part of David’s process in coming out publicly as undocumented holds implications for the concept of being “unafraid.” David described his process as year-long, in which he was able to take an introspective look at his notions of undocumented identity, witness other students who were open about their status, and feel appreciated for all of his identities. He described his public “coming out”:

“So, I told myself, “You know what? I want my sister, and I want siblings, and I want other people that may not even be related to me, but are undocumented, and

we have a special connection because of that, I want them to have a better future than I did. So, I went to a SAO meeting after Trump was elected, and that was necessary because I needed to see other people that were like me and allies. And then I posted – I don't use my Twitter a lot, but I forgot that I had my Twitter connected to my Facebook. So, they're like, 'Hey, take a picture with the United we dream. I'm undocumented and unafraid where you go.' So, I was like, 'I'll post it on my Twitter. No one follows me on Twitter.' So, I take the picture. It says, 'My name is Samuel Cervantes, and I'm undocumented.' And then, I didn't realize that it was posted with my Facebook. So, it was like, 'There it is.' I came out to everyone on social media, which was good. It was liberating. Honestly, it was like – I got to the point that I don't care who knows because it doesn't matter who knows. It matters what I'm doing for the community. And after that, I became more open. I was taking interviews, and I started doing work at the legislature. And that, for me, was very liberating.”

While technological difficulties played a role in David's larger coming out to the public, it was the combination of SAO's support and the external threats from the presidency that pushed him to take the step of posting about his status. As David said, he grew to care more about his community impact than about who knew of his status. This process gave him the confidence to not only discuss his status openly on social media, but to become one of the key individuals leading legislative advocacy who appeared frequently in new interviews.

### **Shaping the “Story of Self”**

Undocumented students at SAO, both in their meetings and at public events, emphasize the importance of the “Story of Self.” For members of SAO, the “Story of Self” serves an important purpose of creating connection, inspiring others, and normalizing the undocumented experience. It is a process in and of itself, changing over time as SAO members grow older, learn about new aspects of the undocumented experience, and understand how they want to play a role in organizing. It also is an

important part of coming out to the public. Interviewees discussed both the power of the story of self and the importance of avoiding stereotypes when crafting it:

“Something that I encountered that I find interesting that I never thought about was the fact that I was the ideal DACA undocumented student, being that I graduated No. 2 in my class, I made really high achievement in high school and every time I was asked to share my story, I would always showcase that. But coming into UT and talking to other undocumented students, they were like, ‘Oh, okay, you’re one of those. Yeah, you’re like the Harvard type of person that everybody wants to hear about.’ And I began talking to them more and realizing that sometimes that narrative makes other undocumented students feel less like, ‘Oh, I’m not the A-student, so I shouldn’t speak to the media,’ or, ‘I shouldn’t do these interviews because there’s nothing extraordinary about me.’ And so they themselves keep to themselves because they are like, maybe they are comparing themselves.

And so I stopped really showcasing that narrative for the sense that I didn’t want other undocumented students who were barely feeling comfortable with saying they were undocumented to feel that they had to be this person in order to claim that they were undocumented and not receive backlash for it. So, I think that’s another challenge that other students may face, just not being the ideal undocumented people that society wants to hear about, the person that deserves it all, that should be pursuing college.” (Victoria)

‘It makes me uncomfortable when people use the word DREAMer if they don’t know why that’s problematic. When people think of DREAMer, they think of this student who was high school valedictorian, 4.0, Ivy League, STEM major. That’s what they think about. And it completely erases students that are not STEM majors that don’t fit that mold. And it doesn’t just erase those students, but it also erases non-students, the people who can’t afford to go to college, who choose to go to community colleges because that’s all they can afford. It erases people our age that have to work to provide for their families. And it also erases our parents. So, whenever people say “DREAMer” when they mean undocumented people, it’s just that specific mold, and they erase everyone else that doesn’t fit that, and it erases our parents, and just people in general who are not privileged enough to get an education. (Violeta)

As a part of their organizing efforts, Victoria and Violeta, as with other SAO members, have been cognoscente of narratives in the media emphasizing the accomplishments of undocumented students. It can be easier for the broader U.S. public

to sympathize with students, which is then combined with values of education and achievements. Victoria and Violeta, however, point to the ways in which using these narratives to validate undocumented individuals can be exclusionary. As an organization that serves the broader undocumented community, SAO has been intentional as an organization in centering the narratives of their families in addition to their own stories as part of their work toward immigrant rights on a broader scale. In doing so, and by voicing their stories of self in the media and at rallies, these students are helping to shift the conversation around immigration both locally and nationally.

### **ORGANIZING AND BURNOUT**

While being a part of SAO provides many benefits for both undocumented students and allies, being physically, mentally, and emotionally engaged in this work also has its consequences. For full time students, most of whom have to work at least one job in order to support themselves and their family, their contributions to SAO's organizing efforts add further tasks to their plate with no monetary compensation. Furthermore, the work itself relates directly to many of their own identities and is emotionally charged. Particularly in the midst of anti-immigrant sentiment at the national and state levels, maintaining organizing efforts to support a fearful undocumented community has created added pressures. Victoria discussed how these factors can make the organization's work challenging:

“And I think just academically, knowing how to cope with this transition, how to cope with starting being open, how to cope with taking a role in the movement and at the same time, maintaining your academic standards, studying, developing better skills if you have a tougher schedule. I think there are just quite a number

of things. Working to change the situation for many families is very important to me, because I once wanted that change in my family, whenever my father went through that wage theft, I really prioritized SAO work sometimes even before my academic work. If I knew an event was going to happen while I had class, I would go to the event rather than go to class or lecture... 'It's been tough to take on this responsibility because I feel some of the board members and I joke about the fact that SAO is basically a nonprofit, but we're unpaid for the work we do. And I think that's really how it is because you put a lot of time into this.'

As a result of the strain many members have put upon themselves to excel in class, at work, and with SAO, a common theme discussed by interviewees was the experience of burnout. Victoria and Violeta explained how their organizing work during the 2017 legislative session pushed both of them toward burnout:

“I have experienced burnout. So, with the legislative session and class and I had work at some time, all of them three piled up. It was tough to the point where I would fall asleep on the bus sometimes because I didn't get the adequate sleep and sometimes I would be running super late to the class and just thinking, “I'm not going to make it, so why bother?” And just going to the Capitol instead. And always, I know that my priority is to finish school for the sake of being an asset to my community, but at the same time, it seems that the most immediate priority for me was to stop something from going wrong in the legislative session. So, yeah, I would go probably sometimes like four to six hours a day at the Capitol, spend it in the committees and the hearings and then come back to my class, go to work and then try to study and it was not healthy. My habits were bad. I would eat once a day and I would just feel tired and I don't really know if I ever followed any priorities or anything but it was very tough. There was a time where I stopped working because of testifying for SB4 and all the time that I would have spent at work I started spending going out to that – I don't know if you know that place in the architecture building, there's like a courtyard and sitting there and just sitting. Sitting was my peace of mind and just bringing it all in and thinking, “Okay, today this is what you're thankful for. This is your objective and try to fix this because it's already like halfway through the semester.” But, yeah, it took some time to really just get back to being functional in every way that I had been before.” (Victoria)

“Yeah, this past semester. Because living in San Marcos, I traveled every single day – well, almost every single day – not just for work, but also to the Capitol to testify and then we'd be there for 16 hours. And it wasn't just physical labor, but it was emotional labor that eventually I just couldn't do anything... 't was exactly

a week before finals, and I was in class, and all of the sudden, I started feeling really dizzy, and then I just got a terrible pain in my stomach, and I didn't know what was going on... 'And it was this terrible, terrible pain. And I felt like I was going to throw up, and I don't know, I felt even more tired because that day that I slept, that was the first time that I had slept in a long time for more than one hour because I slept for tiny periods of time, so it didn't really count as sleep. And that time that I slept I was kind of crying. And then it turns out that I had anxiety, so I had to get medication for that. And I mean, I was in pain for the rest of the week, and I just couldn't concentrate on anything. It came to the point where I couldn't even get out of bed. I wasn't eating, and I just didn't have the energy to do anything at all... 'I wasn't sleeping. I was just kind of laying there, and it was just this huge depressive slump. And I think it was before SB4 passed, so I think that's what kind of affected me the most. And I mean, I'm still recovering from that a lot. But yeah, a lot of people had told me that this would happen, but I didn't really listen to them because I was like, 'Oh, whatever.' That I would get so sick that I just wouldn't be able to do anything at all. I was like, 'Oh, they were right.'” (Violeta)

For undocumented students and allies alike, legislative sessions can be particularly intense periods for organizing. They can last several months, while anti-immigrant legislation makes its way through committees and votes in both chambers. SAO was receiving information about fear in the community relating to SB 4, as rumors circulated the city relating to its contents. In combination with the ICE raids that had occurred early that spring, it certainly felt that immigrants were being targeted more than usual. SAO members went to the Capitol for hours at a time, until the early morning, to testify in committee hearings. Each time the committees would change the registration times to sign up for testimonies, would abruptly cut off individuals testifying once they hit the two minute mark, and would stare at their phones during the hours of testimony. Each time, after over a thousand individuals testified against the bill, it was passed out of committee and then out of both the Senate and House. This type of work against a system that is participating in direct oppression can be exhausting and had an impact on

organizers.

Aside from specific campaigns, SAO's work in general can cause organizers to feel burnt out. In particular, interviewees discussed the challenges of holding their own identities and putting immense energy into organizing efforts:

"I'm very much like, work, work, work, work, work. There's no time to talk about being tired. I remember my dad saying is just you didn't sleep well, right? Well, like you always have to work. Work, work, work, work, work, work. Well, in the SAO meetings, we acknowledge that. We have a triple threat. Being a student, having to pay for school, and being undocumented. And we acknowledge that. That is very tiresome. People don't understand. It sucks so much energy, so much emotional and physical energy." (David)

"We were continuously talking about our stories, and what we've gone through, and information, and what are we gonna do tomorrow, that you don't ever stop to take care of yourself. I know a lot of times we have the mentality that, if we take a break, you could be using that time to do something. You could be making a change in that moment. So, a lot of people don't take that time to de-stress and focus on themselves. (Elia)

In SAO's case as activists there is an added emotional toll of taking on the role of organizing while living as part of an oppressed group in society. In the face of national and state-wide anti-immigrant efforts that have always faced undocumented families, SAO members often feel that they have to do the work or it will not get done. Oftentimes, this may be true. Even so, the effect of doing so while studying and working can be detrimental to organizers' overall health and wellbeing. As a result of experiencing and witnessing burnout in organizers, several SAO members have become increasingly interested in conversations around mental health as it relates to both organizing and general supports:

"I've been realizing that I was feeling sad...And then I ended up realizing that I wasn't sleeping well because I was thinking too much, and I had too much in my

plate, which I think it's something that ends up happening when you're part of a marginalized community. You can't really turn off one side. Like, I can't turn off being brown. I can't turn off being undocumented. I can't turn off being gay. These are identities that are always being engaged. And there's days – I don't have the privilege of being apolitical. I don't have the privilege like, 'Oh, I don't care about politics,' because everything at this moment is affecting me. But I've realized that if I wanted to be a better advocate, I can't be tired. I can't be unhealthy. So, I've realized that finding that good balance of being active in the movement, but at the same time, taking care of myself.” (David)

“I think we need a lot of resources for the mental health of the undocumented students. I do not know a single undocumented student that does not suffer from either depression or anxiety. I know undocumented students that suffer from PTSD and since sometimes we are afraid to talk about our issues because we're scared of how people will react, we don't talk about those feelings. We don't talk about those worries, and I wish sometimes, even mental health professionals would talk about it.” (Briana)

Despite the feelings of responsibility toward organizing and David's comments about not being able to disengage from things that directly affect you, many members of SAO have worked toward increasing their self-care to prevent burnout. Much of this comes as a consequence of so many students experiencing signs of burnout themselves or witnessing them in others. Briana also points out that undocumented students face mental health challenges as a result of the oppression they face because of their status. Furthermore, lack of resources available to undocumented individuals decreases the likelihood of these students finding treatment. Even when they do, Briana's concern that mental health professionals do not understand how to work with undocumented individuals is important to consider. There are key implications for staff at university counseling centers and in the communities who have not received training in working with undocumented individuals in terms of understanding systemic oppression, creating safe spaces for clients, and providing services relevant to the clients' experiences.



## **BECOMING “UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID”**

“I think just like being willing to put their faces and their voices out there for them. I know that they done rally's and they've gone to the hearings for us before. And just seeing them with a SAO banner. You know, just showing up at the capitol or at city hall or anything like that, I think that builds trust with the community. Because they see that these people, I mean, they don't have to do this, but they're more than willing to do it. And it's not like just for themselves. It's like for everyone.” (Javier)

For these undocumented students who joined SAO in search of community, it is that same feeling of community that provides the platform for them to embody being “Undocumented and Unafraid.” Within the board itself, Sofia explained that there is a bond, “which is very helpful too because not only are we organizers, but we're our own support system.” Briana noted the importance of this community including both documented and undocumented individuals: “there were so many different people and that made me feel like we, it's not only us. There were allies.” Feeling the strong support of community behind them was a common theme interviewees discussed when explaining both the motivation for action and the ability to feel “unafraid.” Federico elaborated on this feeling of what SAO provides him with:

Just giving us hopes for the future most of all, because that – that was the most important things, knowing that we can't do much about it, but we can stand together and that's another thing like the sense of family that SAO has is one of the bigger things because I've been to many different organizations and none of them I can like, quite just fit into fully, but SAO it's always that sense of family.

Zachary and Nilda also talked about how they saw the process of becoming

“Undocumented and Unafraid” for their friends:

“I hear, often, when I first encountered SAO and everyone chanting undocumented, unafraid, ‘at first, I can't really do it along with them because I'm still afraid.’ And so, usually, they're a big achievement or milestone. I hear it's often a big milestone for them when they are able to say it and resonate with it

into that's when I went from really just kind of coming to SAO for the personal support and resources, but then, also, that's when they're able to, for the most part, be able to give back and come to terms with their status and fight for those that are still silent or have very much reason to be afraid. [His friend] it seemed like he was very much undocumented and afraid. And then, being able to see that transition to him now where he is very much undocumented and unafraid and openly talks about his status. It's not something that defines him or holds him back. So, that phrase kind of recollects that transition. I also think it's a big kind of identity moment for my undocumented friends. (Zachary)

"It's definitely an act of defiance, I would say because I think, often times, people, especially for undocumented people, I think it's like well, aren't you scared that you're going to get deported? Aren't you scared that people are going to know that you're undocumented? And if you put that out there, what are the implications for you? So, it's definitely like – it definitely is a little bit of defiance, in some way or another, because you're saying no. I understand the repercussions of saying you're undocumented, but I want to say it anyway because it's important for people to know that I'm here and that my existence is just as valid as everybody else's." (Nilda)

As individuals with citizenship who have both been in the organization for several years, Zachary and Nilda bring more of an observer's perspective to their understanding of the process of becoming "Undocumented and Unafraid." Zachary emphasized the way in which undocumented student organizers often transition from acceptance of their own identities to action for others in similar positions as themselves. Nilda brought in the larger picture of how the phrase works in movement-building – it serves a purpose in contradicting the social construction of illegality and directly standing up against individuals in authority. Jaime his experience with this process:

'When I started college, I was very shy, very timid. I would not do any public speaking or anything. But I think after that, I developed where I'm able to share my story. I'm able to go in front of the camera to tell others what I've gone through. And to speak to people in positions of power who can make decisions about these issues. To be able to tell them directly how decisions has affected my family and my community. It has helped me a lot. Because I don't think the high school me would be able to go to any police chief and tell them, "I am

undocumented. These are the issues that are affecting me and my family and my community.” That’s something that I have done. I remember, in a way, I felt empowered. Just being able to speak for my community. But at the same time, knowing that – yeah, at any point I could be detained and be put in deportation proceedings. Sometimes, it’s nerve-wracking. Sometimes, it’s like – if I am put in those proceedings, I can do something from the inside, such as help the community who’s inside, who doesn’t know anything, who might not know things. And I feel like – I don’t know. I see it in many ways. I think I have built a strong network that is very supportive. So, I don’t feel as in danger as many other members of my community. My network has – it’s comprised of different student organizations at UT. It’s comprised of different community organizations, city officials, state officials, who I think have a big voice in everything that happens in the community...It has been very empowering, I think. From not having a status to being able to vocally speak and change policies and politics.”

Interviewees also discussed the way in which they see their openness about their status as helpful to the community they serve. Violeta explained the impact this has on the parents at SAO’s events:

Well, I think the main factor is that we actually put ourselves out there. And we say, “This is who we are. We are undocumented, and we went through those same experiences.” Or a lot of our target audience is also older people, like parents, so I think a lot of immigrant parents see their children in us, so their instinct is to try and protect us and get closer to us. So, I think that because these people see us like their children sometimes, it’s very easy. They have affection for us, and I’ve personally experienced this, a lot of moms especially, like, ‘Oh, you’re just like my daughter,’ and it’s easier for them to trust someone that they love – someone who was like a person that they love. So, it’s the fact that we’re very open with people, and we say, “This is who we are, and this is why we do things. We are undocumented, and we do what we do because we’re undocumented. Because our parents, our family members, our friends are undocumented, and we want to help you because we know what that’s like.

Many SAO members who were interviewed discussed their own role in organizing as particular to their experiences, rather than as something that everyone should feel pressured to participate in. David explained that his mom often worried about the public role he had taken on in the movement:

I always tell her, “MLK, Cesar Chavez, I bet their mothers felt scared. And I bet relatives felt scared for them. But you know what, Mom? Sometimes you need to lose a little bit of your safety to gain more.” And that’s what I tell myself a lot, that I have friends who are undocumented that are not part of SAO, that are not part of the movement, and I don’t judge them because who am I to judge someone who is part of my own community to begin with? But it is not genuine for me to advocate for my community if I judge those who are not able to come out because I am fighting for them. And I just want them to feel that there’s an organization in the event that they need it, that it’s there.

It is exactly this perspective, held by many SAO members, which enables individuals to move from feeling afraid to feeling unafraid. Without the pressure to put themselves in the spotlight, but with encouragement and support to be proud of themselves and their status, members move at their own pace towards the feeling of “Undocumented and Unafraid.” While individuals who had been part of the organization for a year or longer tended to feel more comfortable using the phrase “Undocumented and Unafraid,” a few of the newer SAO members were not quite at the stage in which they felt comfortable with it. Federico explained:

Yeah, I’m not – I’m not too confident like everyone else, like other SAOers because part of me isn’t – like, part of me is my family and I’m not gonna lie and say that I’m undocumented and unafraid because I do fear for – for them, for my mom, who’s undocumented and my – the rest of my family who – who is too, so I can’t quite say that.

When asked specifically what the phrase “Undocumented and Unafraid” meant to them, however, most interviewees explained that it did not mean literally never feeling fearful. It doesn’t mean not thinking of consequences or feeling the freedom to walk into any space without fear. Rather, Briana explained:

“I was thinking about this phrase the other day and unafraid doesn’t mean I’m going to march to the capitol or I’m going to go to a rally or I’m, I don’t know, I’m going to confront a politician. It means accepting that you are undocumented,

accepting the possibilities but continuing to move forward. Continuing to go to school, continuing to stay positive, to knowing your resources, to seeing the news and seeing something you might not like or remembering, this is something important I learned is not to be ashamed, to just continue going on with my life and trying to succeed and not allowing politicians or different organizations tell us that we don't deserve to be here or that we don't have rights."

Elia also felt that the phrase did not necessarily connote direct activism or putting oneself in the limelight:

"To me, it means being able to being open about being undocumented and therefore seeing it as something empowering, not something to be ashamed of or being afraid about it. So, not necessarily going out and yelling that you're undocumented, but just not lying about who you are, and just recognizing where you come from, your background, and just being there for your community."

Similarly, Mario explained that he sees "Undocumented and Unafraid" as an acceptance of identity and the ability to fight for one's rights:

"But I think being able to break out of that, and being able to say, 'I'm undocumented, and I'm here,' and being open with that, I think is part of being yourself, and being able to accept yourself, and being able to – and I think, for me, that was something that SAO have really helped me do. I think before, I was afraid of that status and afraid of expressing that. But I think being able to be with people who are open about that and who are able to discuss and fight for that, I think has been really positive for me... I think it means a lot. I think, like I said, we've been told and – just growing up, we've always been told, 'You should be scared, and you should be worried about what's gonna happen.' But I think finally letting it out, and wanting to fight, and being able to do that, it really does – I think it makes me less afraid."

## **CONCLUSION: CARRYING ON THE LEGACY**

The students interviewed in this research had been involved in SAO for a wide range of time – from less than a year to over five years. Additionally, many of the students involved in the activism around SB 4 had been members of SAO in the past and were graduated or in graduate school. After the announcement on September 5, 2017 that

DACA would be rescinded, SAO held a community meeting aimed at providing comfort and healing. Former members, some of whom were in college before DACA was originally passed in 2012, came in to share their experiences of the time before DACA and provide reassurance to younger students. This rich legacy, a network that is maintained through informal connections between former and current group members, provides a legacy upon which current students do their work: “That energy was passed on. And it was passed on to me. And now I get to pass it on to someone else. And so on and so forth” (Sofia). In conversation, former members of SAO explained that this organization is unique in the sense that one never fully leaves it – just as one does not leave behind their undocumented identity. As was illustrated in this chapter, it is this very legacy that creates the cycle of membership in which older members have already gone through the process of “becoming unafraid” and pass their knowledge and experience onto new members. In this way, there will always be students to inspire others and demonstrate what life can be like as undocumented in college. The rich networks that SAO has built with nonprofits and legal aid groups throughout Austin also reinforces this legacy and creates a broader support network for the work of future SAO members.

In analyzing the narratives of these student organizers it is clear that “Undocumented and Unafraid” is more than a slogan. It is a *process*. One in which students who have come to understand the concept of illegality by confronting systems that are oppressive are able to change the narrative and view their undocumented identity as something of which to not be ashamed or afraid. In witnessing students who have already gone through this transformation, they find a supportive community that validates

their own experiences and encourages them to move through life with pride in themselves. As students who have often seen their families and communities struggle, they see the work SAO does as a call to action and are able to put themselves on the front lines because of the immense support that is behind them. They recognize their privileges as college students and DACA recipients, and they use these to uplift the voices of the undocumented community as a whole. “Undocumented and Unafraid” is a phrase that describes an entire transformation from student to organizer, from feeling oppressed to feeling powerful. Of using their own stories as the platform on which the immigrant rights movement as a whole can be seen, heard, and understood.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis has worked to integrate LatCrit, Anti-Oppressive Social Work, Activist Research, previous literature on undocumented identity and activism, and 15 participant interviews in order to discuss the ways in which oppression on the basis of legal status has impacted interviewees in their identity formation and roles as organizers. In this work I have centered the experiences of participants and grounded my theoretical analysis in what they have shared with me.

This conclusion will discuss: 1) My findings in the context of the current literature on this topic, 2) Lessons learned from the research process and findings, 3) Limitations of the research, and 4) Implications for research, practice, and the undocumented community as a whole.

### **SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

In “Becoming Undocumented,” each participant, through their examples of interactions with systems, discussed the ways in which their skin color, perceived race, and legal status combined in oppressive or discriminatory experiences. Whether interaction with law enforcement, medical systems, or educational institutions, these students articulated the ways in which their identities impacted their perception in society, and thus their own identity formation. Furthermore, participants emphasized the social construction of illegality as “irregular, unauthorized, clandestine, extra-legal” as they discussed their own critiques of identifying human beings as being “illegal” and



challenged the idea that they were not deserving of rights (De Genova, 2002). They did so in their testimonies during the SB 4 hearings, in their interviews when they questioned out loud the labels that had been applied to them, and in their actions as they placed themselves on the forefront of the public view of undocumented individuals despite the risks. At the same time, participants emphasized the real threats they face, particularly under the current administration with DACA in question. While they were, to a certain extent, under a protected status, they were keenly aware of family members who were not. They were also aware of the ways in which they themselves were criminalized for their own appearances and status. This speaks to De Genova (2004) and the concept of the “spatialized socio-political condition” faced by undocumented individuals confronted with the reality of detention and deportation.

In “Becoming Unafraid” participants discussed the process that led them toward activism. As undocumented status is not necessarily noticeable on the outside, students discussed their feelings of isolation or of thinking they were the only undocumented students in high school or college. The context of participants’ call to action as rooted in their experiences of finding community, therefore, speak to some of the unique factors inherent to undocumented organizing. As one participant stated, “It has been very empowering, I think. From not having a status to being able to vocally speak and change policies.”

Taken together, the “Becoming Undocumented” and “Becoming Unafraid” chapters detail the formation of these individuals’ identities over the course of their lives. Similarly to the concept of critical consciousness, these students discussed their own

growth in understanding inequalities and increasing critical thinking, reclaiming an oppressed identity, gaining confidence around their ability to organize and make change as a group, and their final steps in taking action to challenge systemic oppression (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Their understanding of how the world perceived them as children greatly informed their view of society and their place in it, their understanding of injustice, and their desire to affect change for themselves and their community. Asserting their humanity in the face of systems that define illegality is as much about their identity formation as it is a form of activism.

Overall my results correspond with the literature that currently exists on undocumented student experiences and organizing, though writing on this subject is greatly limited. My findings corroborate other authors' analyses of the ways in which undocumented students face barriers in high school and college, as well as how student activism works to center narratives and push the established boundaries of citizenship. This research also pushes against some of the concepts around undocumented identity as tied to high school "coming of age" experiences, explores the mental health impacts of organizing efforts, and links the concepts of identity formation and activism specific to the undocumented youth experience.

Of the literature that does address undocumented student activism, none emphasize the negative consequences of burnout and the emotional toll of that type of work. Participants in this study emphasized the impact that organizing had on their emotional well-being, mental health, energy, optimism, and ability to continue as an activist. This research contributes the beginning of a conversation about burnout and

organizing specific to undocumented student activism in the hopes of a broader conversation about the emotional impact of organizing against an immensely oppressive system.

One important organizing tactic found in literature about undocumented student activism is the use of personal narratives (Negrón-Gonzales, 2014; Fiorito & Nicholls, 2016; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014). Participants in this study also discussed the importance of the “story of self” as a way to provide a community to other undocumented students and as an organizing tool. At the same time, participants voiced some of the challenges in “coming out” publicly in this way, and concerns about situations in which they felt forced to do so as part of their activism. While powerful, this research suggests that personal narratives should also be shared within one’s comfort level and in an empowering way. Additionally, it adds to discussion in organizing circles about the burden of discussing oppression being placed on those facing discrimination, and in mental health circles of the potential for narratives to be re-traumatizing. While this does not imply that stories of self should be eliminated, it does demonstrate the need for a discussion of their use that is more complex.

To extend Coutin’s concept of legal “nonexistence” (or as proposed in Chapter 3, contested existence as spaces in which migrants navigate their legal status despite state negation of their rights), undocumented student participants employed the “art of existing.” Undocumented students in this study used their existence in the frame of “legality” through their DACA status to leverage their privileges through activism. They also used their social and physical existence as a key part of organizing efforts, despite a

lack of full “legal existence” as defined by the state. At the same time, spaces of “nonexistence” have been useful for students when hosting meetings that they did not want advertised or when working with other members of the undocumented community without any form of protection from deportation. This research further demonstrates that moving in and out of spaces of existence has been an effective strategy for various different types of work – activism, advocacy, community organizing, know your rights clinics, and others.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

There were some important takeaways, or lessons learned, from this research experience. The first was to clearly define my research question and interview questions prior to beginning the interview process. Additionally, I learned to allow flexibility to incorporate new questions based on previous interviews. I also learned the importance of grounding research in methodology from the beginning, fully understanding a methodological technique and determining whether or not it is the best fit for the research project. In terms of theoretical frameworks, I learned how to align my theoretical frameworks with both my methodology and my participant results. I specifically learned to ground my theoretical analysis in the words of my participants, rather than vice-versa.

In terms of the interview process, I learned how to differentiate my position as a researcher and as a social work Master’s student. I created ways to find firm boundaries around those identities so as to provide resources and support post-interview in a way that did not blur my own position as a researcher. Along these lines, I learned to incorporate

some of my social work training into the interview process - the skills of summarizing, reflective listening, nonverbal supportive gestures, and empathetic responses are as appropriate for interviews as they are for client interactions. As stated previously, however, I learned to negotiate the distinction between active listening and therapeutic listening. This will be a continual process of untangling as I move forward, and is something I intend to continue to be intentional about.

One important take-away for me has also been the process of self-care while writing a thesis. Working on the issue of undocumented activism during a time in which the Trump administration canceled DACA (which continues to hang in an unknown state) and has drastically increased immigrant surveillance, detention, and deportation has been challenging on an emotional level. As someone with many undocumented and DACAmented friends, with clients who are undocumented in my social work practice, and who is ingrained in organizing efforts, there were many days in which engaging with my thesis research felt triggering or too heavy. I learned to allow myself to take a break, to set short-term deadlines for myself with my thesis advisor, to invite self-compassion around these challenges, to confer with other colleagues writing their theses on challenging issues, and to draw inspiration from my research participants as motivation for continuing to write.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The in-depth nature of qualitative research methods holds particular limitations, especially when working with individuals whose identities need to be protected for their

own safety. While my own participation in undocumented organizing efforts and status as a student increased my access to participants, I faced limitations in recruitment in terms of my available time, trust with individuals who had not yet gotten to know me, and funding available for participant incentives. Additionally, I faced limitations in terms of recruitment in that I was only able to pull from one organization, rather than from a broader pool of students. One of the results of this limitation was that the majority of my participants were from the same public university, with only four of the 15 from other universities or colleges.

Another limitation of this study have to do with my capacity as a single individual conducting this research project. This limited my ability to transcribe my own interviews and to analyze a broader number of codes relating to their content for the final product. This also contributed to my total number of interviews, which was limited by my own time available to meet individuals.

Furthermore, this study is limited by the fact that it focuses primarily on students currently in college, meaning that undocumented young adults who organize outside of higher education were not included. While I was mindful to not perpetuate the “good Dreamer” narrative in my work, this limitation is of consequence to the perspectives I was able to illustrate. Additionally, the majority of my participants were of Mexican heritage, meaning that my participants are not representative of the broader immigrant community, While proportionately there are more immigrants in Texas of Mexican heritage, this does provide an important limitation to my findings of the formation of undocumented identity.

A significant limitation of this study is that it does not focus on an exploration of intersectionality in terms of identity formation. While I discuss some aspects of the undocuqueer experience, it is not a focus on my work. Neither are the experiences of Black or Asian undocumented individuals. This is an area that is important for continued discussion, as these intersections create different experiences of understanding undocumented identity.

Lastly, my research contributes to a body of literature that is primarily focused on Mexican-descended undocumented college students without incorporating a broader intersectional approach to recruitment and analysis. Future research into a discussion of identity formation and activism in the Undocuqueer, Black undocumented, and Asian undocumented population is urgently needed as we continue to untangle the ways in which racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, and nativism impact undocumented individuals of all walks of life in the United States.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Despite the aforementioned limitations of the research, my findings do point toward some important implications for research, social work practice, and the undocumented community as a whole.

### **Implications for Research**

While authors have started to document the experiences of undocumented youth organizing efforts, few have discussed the impetus for such activism or the ways in which it links to identity formation (Negrón-gonzales, 2014; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014).

This research provides a broader approach through which to view organizing, which takes into account the implications of such efforts on the mental health of the organizers themselves given their own positionalities.

Additionally, much of the current research on undocumented identity focuses on formative experiences in high school and college that lead to one's understanding of legality (Gonzales, 2011; Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013). In contrast, participants in this research discussed the heightened awareness of their own status, as well as their parents' status, at a young age. This holds important implications for future research into the ways in which undocumented status impacts pre-adolescent children in terms of their identity formation and mental health. Additionally, further research can explore the institutional challenges that undocumented children face before reaching high school.

This research also provides a contribution to the discussion currently situated in LatCrit of the ways in which nativism impacts individuals as a form of oppression in the United States. In my analysis of the formation of illegality, I discuss both its arbitrary nature and its very real consequences for the lives of undocumented individuals. The narratives of participants in this study hold implications for a continued analysis of nativism as a major form of oppression that must be analyzed both at the scale of racism, etc., and in tandem with other forms of oppression.

### **Implications for Practice**

This research holds important implications for social work practice, both on a general level and specifically with undocumented youth. First, while the framework of



anti-oppressive social work is useful for analyzing participant comments in this research, there are important critiques to be made. Sakomoto and Pitner (2005) critique Anti Oppressive Practices as being too broad with little clarification for implementation. Furthermore, they comment on the challenge inherent to social work in that there is always a power dynamic between service provider and client. Therefore, an understanding of the limits of being “anti-oppressive” must start with this fact. The authors suggest the use of critical consciousness, “the process of continuously reflecting upon and examining how our own biases, assumptions and cultural worldviews affect the ways we perceive difference and power dynamics,” as a framework through which to bring practical considerations to the forefront in a micro and individual level focus (Sakomoto & Pitner, 2005, p. 441). This critique is important to consider in terms of implications for social work practice with undocumented individuals.

The first key implication for practice demonstrated in this research is based in the fact that undocumented students are not a homogenous group with the same challenges. Participants demonstrated that differences in their upbringing, their community context, and their high schools greatly impacted the way they viewed their own identity and potential for higher education and activism. Additionally, facing challenges of nativism and discriminatory systems held different impacts and implications for different students. For practitioners it is important to take this into consideration so as to not assume that undocumented students are all ashamed of their status, are all afraid, and are all unsure about accessing higher education (as the national narrative would have one believe). In line with the concept of cultural humility, it is important for practitioners to both have an

understanding of how oppressive systems may treat undocumented students *and* learn from the student themselves what their own unique experience has been (Gallardo, 2014). Additionally, it is important for practitioners to not assume undocumented identity and to simply demonstrate that they are a safe person to “come out to,” rather than forcing the matter.

The second key implication from this research is that support for undocumented students and families needs to be comprehensive, take into account institutional barriers, be trauma-informed, and start at a young age. Participants discussed the many barriers they faced in navigating systems and how this contributed greatly to their own identity formation. Social workers often find themselves in the role of helping clients navigate systems. Educating oneself on the particular barriers build into institutions for undocumented individuals and knowing how to problem-solve to access resources regardless is an invaluable contribution that a social worker can make to help compensate for these inequalities in services.

The third key implication of this research based in participant discussion of the ways in which institutions of higher education create barriers for undocumented students. Understanding these barriers, and solutions to these barriers (examples: removing citizenship requirements from student funding, having an undocumented student center, ensuring that counselors are aware of challenges faced by undocumented students), is crucial information for social workers with young undocumented clients to have. Additionally, social workers have the capacity to work at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Oftentimes universities require institutional-level interventions in order to undo

the challenges put in place for undocumented students. As practitioners who work directly with undocumented clients, social workers are well-positioned to act as advocates and allies in pushing for these changes.

The fourth key implication for this work comes from the undocumented students in this study, who demonstrated the importance of peer support in improving their mental health, self-esteem, and feelings of being connected. In fact, the very action of moving toward activism was grounded in the ability to find and be part of community. As social work practitioners, creating and supporting peer networks for undocumented students and families, bearing in mind issues around safety and confidentiality, can be an important part of intervention plans. This implication is grounded in the fundamental basis of social work - the importance of human relationships - and is specifically focused on the ways in which individuals best receive support when they are able to be completely authentic and feel that they are in a safe and supportive environment.

The fifth, and final, key implication for social work practice has to do with the profound impacts of undocumented organizing for activists. For social work practitioners there are several components to this implication: First, becoming an ally and using one's own privilege (when requested) in efforts for undocumented rights is a powerful way to provide support and advocate. Second, activism can be an incredibly empowering experience for undocumented students that can provide them with a much-needed platform to demonstrate their compassion, intelligence, humanity, and strength. Providing support for these efforts can be vital. Third, activism can also be an incredibly stressful, draining, and defeating experience, particularly when faced with a strong system of

oppression. As such, providing emotional support and emphasizing mental health and coping strategies when working with undocumented activists is an important contribution that social work practitioners can make to support their efforts.

### **Implications for the Undocumented Community**

This work also holds implications for the undocumented community as a whole. Participants demonstrated their commitment not only to their own rights, but also to the rights of their undocumented family members. In the media, “Dreamers” are often described as “individuals brought to this country by their parents as young children.” Recently, the Trump administration officially announced that it would begin to separate migrant parents from their children at the border and punish them for smuggling. The individuals interviewed in this research continuously maintain that their parents are as deserving of rights as they are.

In Austin, one of the moms of a SAO member started an organization for undocumented parents to gather and organize as well. The strength of undocumented organizing despite strong anti-immigrant policies and sentiment holds important implications for the future of the undocumented community, as all around the country immigrant rights organizations are making advances despite strong barriers. This research provides further evidence of the potential for advancing rights for those who fall outside the arbitrary bounds of illegality and further demonstrates the power of youth in this movement.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

It's 2018 and another group of SAOers are preparing to graduate. They are decorating their caps, planning a celebration, and thinking of those who made them the people they have become today. A new group of undocumented students and allies prepares to provide the summer orientation for undocumented freshman who may not realize that there is a community that awaits them, ready to support them in their life and in a journey toward activism if they so choose. This new group of students will take on the mantle of organizing and will continue the challenging balance of work, school, and activism. The graduates will continue to lend their support, as so many who have come before them continue to.

Policies around immigration will continue to shift and change with the political tide, and undocumented organizers and allies will put their force behind those that increase rights for their communities. The ultimate fate of DACA rests in the hands of the courts and undocumented youth will continue to find challenges and successes regardless of their status. If this research demonstrates anything, it is that the power of community is stronger than the power of oppressive systems. Perhaps not all at once, perhaps not in every situation, but in the day-to-day moments that bring humanity, optimism, and compassion to the forefront.

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

Thank you for meeting with me. Your answers in this interview are confidential and your name won't be used in the final report.

I'm trying to learn more about how SAO is run, how the organization provides services, and how you all feel about the work you do. I also am more broadly interested in understanding the experiences of undocumented individuals in Austin, Texas.

Please do not use your name or that of anyone else to protect the identity of SAO members. Additionally, you can skip any question and pause or stop the interview at any time, and you will still receive the \$25 gift card. Lastly, you will have the opportunity to view the final transcript of your interview and redact any information you do not want to appear in the final report.

Can you start by telling me how you become involved with SAO?

*Probing Questions:* Ask for specifics, timeline, and feelings  
What experiences in the past led you to SAO?  
Ask about life experiences in their history and in the present  
Ask about school, work, hobbies/fun, other organizations  
Ask about their history as being undocumented or an ally

Can you tell me about SAO?

*Probing Questions* What is the organization's structure?  
What is your role/are your responsibilities?  
What/how has your experience been?  
What does SAO do?  
What services do they provide?  
How do they provide them?

What are the unique experiences of undocumented students at the university?

*Probing Questions* What are some of the strengths?  
What are some of the challenges?

What are some of the unique experiences of undocumented individuals in the Austin community?

*Probing Questions* What are some of the strengths?  
What are some of the challenges?

What is SAO's relationship with the community?

*Probing Questions* How do you develop trust with the immigrant community?  
What are things other organizations can do to build trust with this community?

What has SAO's experience been with service provision within the context of the new presidency?

*Probing Questions*      How has SAO dealt with these changes?  
How has the immigrant community in Austin reacted?  
How has service provision changed?

If it's ok with you, if I have follow up questions after I have time to let this sink in, is it ok for me to reach out again?

## Appendix B

### Resource Referrals

UT Counseling and Mental Health Center

[\(512\) 471-3515](tel:5124713515) Student Services Building, 100 W Dean Keeton St, Austin, TX 78712

Safe Alliance 24/7 Hotline: 512.267.7233 (SAFE)

P.O. Box 19454, Austin, TX 78760

YWCA Greater Austin

[\(512\) 326-1222](tel:5123261222)

2015 S Interstate 35 # 110, Austin, TX 78741

El Buen Samaritano

512-439-0700

[www.elbuen.org](http://www.elbuen.org)

Capital Area Mental Health Center

512-302-1000

[www.cacaustin.org](http://www.cacaustin.org)

Austin Child Guidance Center

512-451-2242

[www.austinchildguidance.org](http://www.austinchildguidance.org)

Lifeworks

512-735-2100

[www.lifeworksaustin.org/counseling](http://www.lifeworksaustin.org/counseling)

Waterloo Counseling Center

512-444-9922, ext 204

[www.waterloocounseling.org](http://www.waterloocounseling.org)



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