Examining the Experiences of Undocumented College Students: Walking the Known and Unknown Lived Spaces

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of selected undocumented college-aged (UCA) students attending a community and four year college, and the trauma they live on a daily basis. A conceptual framework is provided for examining the tensions experienced by undocumented students. The framework is suggested as a tool to analyze the explicit and implicit lived spaces of UCA Latino students living in the United States. Using qualitative mixed methods, as an exploratory study, undocumented college students identified four themes that uncover the journey they travel in their desire to improve their life possibilities and negotiate access to educational and societal institutions.

Introduction

The criminalization and virtual internment of undocumented youth in the United States is the result of historical prejudice and a failed immigration policy that condemns youth into a lifetime of uncertainty (Acuña, 2007; Chávez, 1991; Pizarro, 2005). The impact of past injustices and a failed immigration policy is painfully clear in K-12 schools and colleges where undocumented students live in constant fear of their status been disclosed and where, despite their educational success, their dreams and professional objectives are currently futureless (Olivas, 2004; Rincón, 2008).

Sources estimate that there are some two million undocumented children in schools in the United States with an estimated 65,000 graduating from high school every year with no more than 5% attending college (CNNU.S., 2009; Horwedel, 2006;). Existing law established by the Supreme Court case Plyler vs. Doe in 1982 gives undocumented immigrant students the right to a K-12 education under the 14th amendment. The court, however, never extended that right to higher levels of education (Horwedel, 2006; Olivas, 2004).

Over the years both federal and state court's decisions have not only limited the undocumented students by capping their education but also produced a bitter debate throughout the United States on the issue of access to higher education and undocumented students. Horwedel (2006) and the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (2007) have estimated that there are some 50,000 undocumented college-age students in United States colleges, with over one-third living in California. Given the data, we may deduce that Mexican youth are highly represented in this group (Díaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Meiners, & Valentín, 2010). For undocumented students the main issues of access to higher education are both legal and financial. Passel and Cohn (2009) also document that at least 39% of undocumented students live below the federal poverty line and 40% lower than legal immigrant families.

Overview of the Literature

The debate over the rights of immigrants, especially from Mexico, is not new. The educational rights of Mexican origin children in general, and of the undocumented in particular, have historically been at the center of the debate (Chávez, 1991; Zinn, 2003). A clear pattern of discrimination against the Mexican origin population and the marginalization of their children are historically evident (Acuña, 2007; Zinn, 2003). Thus, important questions for understanding the present conditions facing undocumented Latino immigrants are: What has been the historical anti-Mexican sentiment and U.S. immigration policy? And, how have immigration policies hindered

undocumented college- age (UCA) students' access to higher education?

The vast majority of UCA students did not make the personal choice to enter illicitly into the country (Chávez, 1991; Zinn, 2003). Instead, they were caught in the historically complex web of American immigration policy. Legal and undocumented immigration from Mexico to the United States has been constant for over one hundred years, recurrently triggered by the American appetite for inexpensive labor. Along with the demand for labor came a failure to implement a viable and just immigration policy that meets the labor demands of the nation and provides access to post secondary education, while keeping immigrants and their families together (Acuña, 2007; Diaz-Strong et al., 2010; Jacobo, 2006).

The Amnesty Act of 1986, known as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), not only proved the need to secure foreign labor but also created much of the turmoil we are currently experiencing (Díaz-Strong et al., 2010). The law granted amnesty to undocumented immigrants who entered the U.S before January 1st 1982, and resided here. While the law placed some two million people on a path to citizenship it did little to rapidly unite families, thus creating a wave of unauthorized children into the United States. These children eventually went to school and were the target of Proposition 187 in California. The goal of Proposition 187 was to bar undocumented immigrants from receiving social services, health care and public education, under the "Save Our State" initiative. The law was overturned by federal courts but not without adding to the legacy of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States (Acuña, 2007). A consequence of the Amnesty Act was the influx of undocumented children to the United States to be with their families with the hope that one day the laws would change (Díaz-Strong et al.,2010). In this regard the present continues like the past.

Today, when undocumented children enter school, they face a world of uncertainty and fear. During their high school years as they apply for work and college they must confront the reality that they are unauthorized in the United States and could very well be detained and deported. For many UCA students, the years can go by without ever being detained. Nevertheless, they consistently struggle having to negotiate their living spaces and schooling (Soja, 2007). They live hidden lives.

Immigration raids have a direct impact on undocumented youth as they experience severe emotional strain and trauma and suffer from extreme isolation, are vulnerable, and are easily exploited (Capps, Chundy, & Santos, 2007). Students tend to live in fear and shame, feelings that are often fueled by political discourse and biased media in the United States (Díaz-Strong et al., 2010; Jacobo, 2010). The psychological stress experienced by undocumented youth builds up as they enter high school and college. The recent defeat of immigration reform at the federal level, including the Dream Act in 2010, further alienated UCA students as their legal and academic status continues to be unresolved. The Dream Act of 2010 was proposed federal legislation that would grant high school students with good academic standing legal status in the United States. Legal status would also be extended to undocumented immigrants of good moral character who wanted to serve in the armed forces or attend college.

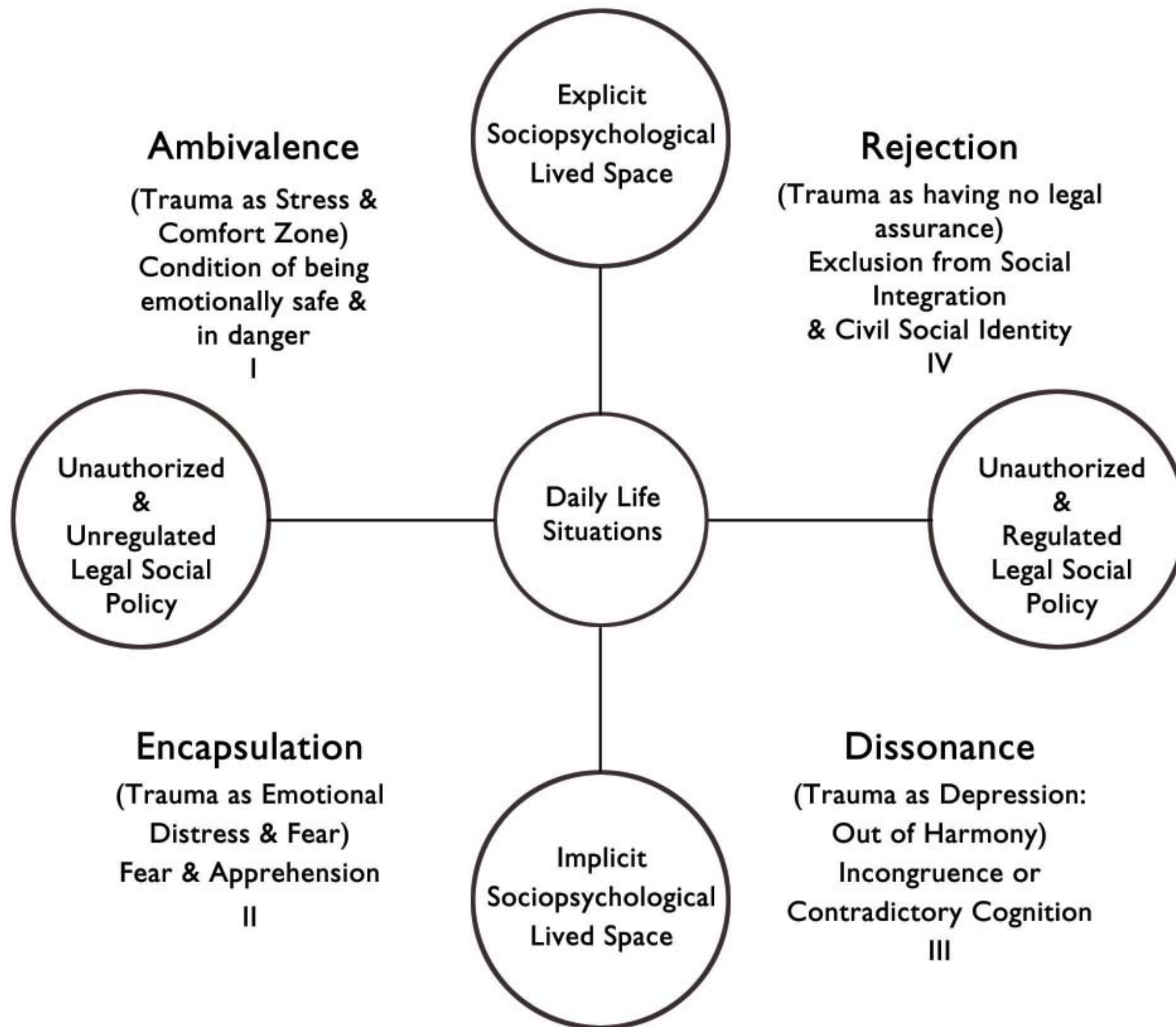
The support and resistance toward accessing higher education for UCA students can be seen in the conditions placed upon them by states in our nation. Since 2001, 11 states have passed laws that allow undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition in public universities in their state of residence (California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin) under the criteria that they need to have attended for at least three years and graduated from a high school in their state of residence. This has created uproar in many American communities who see such laws as pandering to undocumented students. Against such access, since 2006, Arizona, Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Missouri, and Oklahoma, North and South Carolina, have voted against in-state tuition for undocumented students or banning undocumented students from attending (Díaz et al., 2010; Frum, 2007). More recent studies of UCA students have begun to document the path and challenges faced by these students, specifically with regard to college persistence (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2011), their resiliency (Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortez, 2009), their struggle for opportunity (Pérez-Huber, Malagón, & Solórzano, 2009), and their struggle for human dignity and equality (Rincón, 2008).

Framework for Framing the Experiences of Undocumented College Students

To examine the pressures and social-psychological forces that shape the daily-lived experiences and negotiated spaces of UCA students pursuing higher education, a conceptual framework developed by the authors is provided. The framework in Figure 1 emerged from our work with K-12 Southwest school districts near the Mexican border, viewing and experiencing the daily presence of the Border Patrol in border communities, through our engagement in higher education institutions and direct interaction with college-aged undocumented students in our courses. Also supporting the framework is critical theory (Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 1997) that is concerned with issues of power, justice, and specifically diverse forms of oppression. Critical theory as "a perspective searches for new theoretical insights and interconnected ways of understanding power and oppression and the way they shape everyday life and human experience" (Kincholoe, 2008, p. 49). In the context of one's legal status in a global economy the struggle of contesting one's residency is both a political, psychological, and social struggle (Aronowitz, 2003). Figure 1 illustrates two dimensions and four quadrants that allows one to reflect on how undocumented college students navigate their lived spaces on a daily basis. The first dimension (vertical) consists of explicit and implicit modes of behavior—behaviors that are seen by others who interact with the individual (explicit) and behaviors that are not see by others (implicit). The second dimension (horizontal) is the legal status of the individual or the unauthorized status of the person living in the United States. The legal dimension is expressed from a legal continuum—at one end are unauthorized and unregulated social policies where the individual is able to negotiate his/her lived space by being very familiar with his/her surroundings. At the other end are unauthorized and regulated social policies, where the individual in public spaces runs the risk of being apprehended for not having legal documentation.

To examine the lived spaces of undocumented youth/students living in the U.S., the framework offers four quadrants of analysis. In the first quadrant (unauthorized and unregulated legal social policy and explicit lived space) the UCA student experiences ambivalence and incomprehension, a state of living in a part of the community where s/he feels familiar and has a high degree of awareness of civic behavior while understanding his/her legal status and interacting in low risk social activities that are part of the daily social dynamics of the community. While experiencing a sense of "zone of comfort" in the community, the undocumented youth/student nevertheless has the constant worry or trauma of not being "legal" and living under stress. Involvement in church activities or family gatherings at a park are enjoyed but not without the fear of legal ramifications. S/he lives in a space of ambivalence (Miao, Esses, & Bell, 2000).

Figure 1. Framework for understanding the lived spaces of unauthorized youth



Under the *second quadrant* (unauthorized and unregulated legal social policy and implicit lived space) the undocumented youth experiences encapsulation, a state of constant fear only known to him/her or an intimate other. The UCA student is constantly aware and on the lookout and negotiating the lived spaces that offer him/her a sense of control. Trauma under quadrant II is expressed as an emotional distress. Teachers and peers are unaware of a student's legal status in an implicit lived space. Therefore, a school fieldtrip designed to be educational and fun can elicit feelings of fear and apprehension in the unauthorized student as legal and physical barriers may be present. S/he lives in a space of encapsulation (Clark, Aaron, & Beck, 2009).

Under *quadrant III* (unauthorized and regulated legal social policy and implicit lived space) the undocumented youth experiences dissonance, a state of living in trauma and out of harmony within the community and within the self. The inability to share the legal status with others creates conflict, a feeling of helplessness, and depression. A simple college night out with friends to establishments that require a driver's license for identification becomes an emotional test for unauthorized individuals. S/he lives in a space of dissonance (Goldsmith, Barlow, & Freyd, 2004).

Under *quadrant IV* (unauthorized and regulated legal social policy and explicit lived space) the undocumented youth experiences rejection, a state of living outside of the community where he/she feels excluded from civic participation. In this quadrant, the individual suffers the trauma of having no legal assurance and exclusion from

social integration and civil social identity. Not being able to take part in the political process during this historic period serves as an example of such exclusion from social and civic integration. S/he lives in a space of rejection (Pehrson, Brown, & Zagefka, 2009).

Methodological Approach

Qualitative mixed methods were used in ascertaining the concerns and issues faced by UCA students (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Specifically a three-phase approach was taken. The first phase consisted of submitting an Institutional Research Board (IRB) proposal to a CSU university to identify a pool of UCA students enrolled in the community college and/or the CSU systems of California. Upon receiving IRB approval that involved participant consent, recruitment process, structured interview processes, protocols on data collection, a pool of over 30 candidates were identified and four were selected, by years in the U.S. and level of college, for this exploratory study. All were from Mexico, using fictitious names, they consisted of one male (Roque) and three females (María, Brenda, and Norma), two attending a community college and two in a four-year college (CSU). All four entered the U.S. unauthorized between the ages of 2 to 5 years old. The second phase consisted of using case study methodology that included semi-structured interviews, personal autobiographies, and face-to-face meetings. The four UCA students were invited to participate in an open-ended discussion using a focus group approach on their lived experiences as undocumented college-aged students. The focus group lasted three-hours and was recorded with their permission. The third phase was an interactive process of data analysis consisting of data content analysis, data display, data coding, data reduction, and generation of themes and thematic interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Themes were identified and shared with the UCA students for accuracy and content validity.

Examining the Experiences of Unauthorized College-Aged Students

Four salient themes were derived from the interviews and focus group discussion, with each pointing to a social-psychological force that shape the daily-lived experiences of UCA students. These themes were: Identity and Membership, Micro-Aggressions, Trauma, and Structural Violence. In some direct or indirect form the themes correlated with all of the four concepts that described the psychological feelings of the participants as they described how they navigate their regulated and unregulated lived space, namely living in Ambivalence, Encapsulation, Dissonance, and Rejection. A brief discussion of each of the four salient themes, as expressed by the four UCA students, provides a glimpse of their identified thematic tensions (ambivalence, encapsulation, dissonance, rejection) that they negotiate on a daily basis:

Theme one: The identity and membership theme emerged as the inability to have legal documents to have access to services or entry into facilities and preventing deportation. For example, consider not having any legal form of identification that grants access to travel, credit or simply driving from point A to B. The impact of not having a driver's license goes far beyond not being able to drive a vehicle. In a culture were a driver's license has become consistent with identity, to be denied one is to live in constant worry of how to access services and entry into institutions.

Maria tells of her ordeal with identity and belonging after experiencing a traumatizing event that involved the police department.

> I had never been treated like a criminal. This incident was a huge wakeup call for me. Yes, I did come to this country illegally but I was never treated like I was. For the first time in my life, I felt what it's like to be seen different in someone else's eyes because I was not born in the United States.

While Maria negotiated her legal status throughout her life it was a specific episode with police and the lack of a driver's license that made her confront the reality of regulated social policy and the issue of identity. Travel and driving have become heavily politicized in the United States in recent years with numerous

states denying the unauthorized population a driver's license and installing check points on the road. The issues of legality and identity can have more perverse effects. Brenda commented of the recurrent reminder of her legal status and identity at work by her boss:

> I decided to confront the owner one day and ask him why I was not getting paid all the hours that I had worked. He replied, "You have no right to tell me what to pay you because you are an illegal immigrant and if you don't like it I can fire you." I felt so terrible that day and I went home crying, but I did not let my mom see me or know why I was crying.

Membership was not only described at the macro-level as having no voice in society, but also at the micro-level. The impact of not having a legal document prevents UCA students from a fundamental component of the American economy such as applying for a job, obtaining credit, having a passport to travel, or simply accessing a gym membership. While the denial of membership to a gym might appear to some as insignificant it has a direct limitation on one's access to institutions or organizations (encapsulation). Such rejection, however, goes beyond the seeking of fitness. Membership denial to a gym based on the lack of valid forms of identification transcends into the realms of inclusive and exclusionary policy in a society (Passel, 2005). In other words, who can become a member of a group, and how can the privilege of membership be proven resides in one's ability to have legal identification. In the United States a social security number or the preferred form of identification of membership is a requirement that UCA students do not possess. In the case of Roque, he states:

> I was able to get a part-time job when I graduated high school. The interview was one of the most nerve racking situations I have ever been in since I had no legal documentation. While I worked I was always scared to mess up on the job in any way, because I thought that would be enough reason to review my background and possibly discover that I'm illegal. Fortunately I was able to work and save] money for college.

Theme two: Micro-aggressions are psychological, social, political, economic acts that go unrecognized by the general public. UCA student alertness is a constant preoccupation at every hour of the day given one's unauthorized status in the United States. Being on the alert is not without consequences. The reality of living always vigilant of their surroundings, negotiating acts of disrespect and aggression, adapting to restrictions by legal conditions, and negotiating the conflict produced by their legal status generates trauma, fear, and emotional stress (dissonance, rejection). To respond to the daily psychological trauma (ambivalence, encapsulation, dissonance, rejection) Latino UCA students create an array of coping skills that positively or negatively confronts complex situations produced by their unauthorized status. Brenda personalizes the issues of micro-aggressions in her own social circle. She survives by being silent while enduring the emotional pain.

> All my life I have heard people use words that caused me to feel uncomfortable and have reduced my humanity. At work for example, when I worked at a restaurant or even with the family members of my ex-boyfriend I would hear people use the word "wetback" when they talked about Mexican immigrants. I felt anger but also helpless unable to say anything.

Norma comments on the fear of living in what to her amounts to living in a militarized zone.

> Going to the store becomes a stressful situation as we see the constant presence of the border patrol around our community and even the knowing that on the trolley there are cameras documenting passengers. passengers. My mother often comes home paralyzed with fear of being apprehended. My mother constantly reminds us to be vigilant, to be on the alert, and to know the streets and routes that we need to travel.

Prejudice and fear permeate Norma's family as they seek to live and work in their ethnically and linguistically diverse community.

Theme three: Trauma, described as living always wary of one's surroundings, can be emotionally draining and psychologically distressing (Clark et al., 2009). Various types of psychological trauma impact how undocumented youth negotiate their daily-lived situations. Trauma is defined from a psychological perspective as the feeling of fear, stress, depression, exclusion and apprehension as a result of having unauthorized legal status (Goldsmith et al., 2004).

In the case of Norma, apprehension, deportation, and family separation by immigration authorities generated conditions of trauma or posttraumatic disorder syndrome. Norma recalls the emotional depression she suffered when her mother was taken to a women's prison. Norma's grades in college dropped, as did her overall health when ICE arrested her mother. She recounts.

> In January of 2007 my mother received a letter from the district attorney's office stating she was being charged with three felonies because she used false documentation to obtain a job. Thereafter a series of never-ending court appearances proceeded. We had to get a lawyer, who ended up taking advantage of us. He did nothing to help my mother instead his actions landed her in jail one more time, but this time for nearly a month in late August of this year. It has been a horrible nightmare.

The participants in the focus group expressed how they all had been impacted emotionally by their legal status in the United States. At one time or another all have experienced the fear of being apprehended and deported. Two had vivid memories of crossing the border (ages 4 and 5) and of loved ones being apprehended. Deportation for them would mean the end of all their hard work, dreams and aspirations. It would mean the separation from their family and forceful adaptation to a country that while they were born there, they know little about.

Structural violence as a theme was expressed as facing institutional barriers that limit the opportunity to fully participate and access their education. Brenda lamented the labeling of her legal status:

> Every where I go, anything I see and everything I do, is controlled by being illegal in the United States. On television, in the streets and even in my dreams that word "Illegal" terrorizes me, even in a college class or in high school with my counselor the word is mentioned, I feel as if there was something wrong with me, as if I was guilty always guilty of something I had no control over.

In the case of Maria, she tells about her anxiety and anger in living in a very conservative community where the simple act of seeking an apartment is directly attached to legal status.

> A few months ago we could not find a place to live. We reside in a city that has a policy that requires proof of legal residency in order to rent an apartment. I will never forget my mother crying not knowing where we would live.

Despite the many obstacles and tensions faced by UCA students, their personal fears, sense of belonging, identity, and the psychological and social traumas, one finds them resilient and unwilling to be denied their future and very determined to succeed. They understand the value of higher education and are hopeful that the laws of this country will allow them to live out of the shadows of the law. Waiting for change, UCA students navigate the parameters constructed by the legal and explicit and implicit lived space dimensions of society. The constant navigation of lived spaces creates experiences that correlate with feelings of ambivalence, encapsulation, dissonance, and rejection.

Conclusions

In synthesis, the Jacobo and Ochoa conceptual framework (see Figure 1) is useful to examine the lived spaces of UCA students and as a tool to analyze the explicit and implicit lived spaces of UCA Latino students living in the United States. This conceptual framework highlights how they negotiate their tensions as illustrated by the four themes derived from interviews and dialogue in this exploratory study, namely: Identity and Membership, Micro-

Aggressions, and Structural Violence. The voices of UCA students reminds us that under federal policy they have a right to access a free public K-12 education, yet, once they reach college age they are abandoned by the public educational system (Passel, 2005). Given the size of the undocumented immigrant population in the United States, now estimated to number some 11 million (Passel & Cohn, 2009) a significant public policy debate exists that centers on (1) whether undocumented students should be entitled to attend public postsecondary institutions, (2) whether they should be eligible for resident or in-state tuition, (3) who should have the authority to determine this, and (4) what are the economic and social returns from investing in undocumented immigrants' higher education.

Frum (2007) further asserts that passage of the federal DREAM Act is the best solution currently on the table, since it would allow access to federal student loans and enable eligible students to obtain legal permanent residence. Yet, the reality is that neither higher education nor immigration policies are made in a political vacuum, and what may be good in the long term from a public policy perspective may not be possible as a political position due to the politics of the next election cycle. Lastly, Rincón (2008) points to the ideological challenges of educational access by proposing that collectively we reframe the debate on the rights of undocumented immigrants from a lens focused on economics and assimilation to one that emphasizes the struggle for human dignity and equality. Such dialogue may help close the deep ideological divides in the existing immigration debate and advance educational policies that reduce inequality in our nation.

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