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**Out of the Shadows:
Undocumented Latino College Students**

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This paper analyzes how “undocumented” students make sense of school, schooling, and their social standing in the U.S. Based on two years of ethnographic research with 20 undocumented Mexican immigrant college students in California, this study examines the factors that have led these students to abandon their state of “social invisibility” and participate in higher education. The study finds that undocumented students decide to seek a higher education in an attempt to improve their chances for upward social mobility and incorporation into mainstream U.S. society. They also see schools as safety zones and schooling as a mechanism of assimilation. This paper further explores how segmented assimilation theory can be utilized to understand the processes by which these students’ assimilate into mainstream U.S. society. Lastly, the paper considers how assimilation theory can be expanded to better understand and depict the divergent paths of immigrant incorporation in the U.S.

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Introduction

Upon arriving in the United States, Mexican immigrant students face myriad obstacles, problems, and educational needs. In addition to dealing with the emotional stress associated with adjusting to a new physical and social environment, as students, they must cope with the need to learn English and adapt to new cultural norms and expectations. They are also confronted with problems like poverty, high residential mobility, broken ties with family and communities in their native countries, and the loss of social support networks (Duran & Weffer 1992). Immigrant students are also likely to face inadequate and unequal educational opportunities, and those without legal status are more likely to drop out of school and not pursue higher education.

In spite of these obstacles, some “undocumented”¹ students make it into college and earn a degree. This is especially striking when one considers the relatively low rates of completed schooling among the Latino population as a whole.² What are the reasons that explain the decision by some undocumented Mexican immigrant students to pursue higher education, while others (undocumented and documented immigrants, as well as U.S.-born Latinos) do not? What

¹ This term is used to describe an individual who does not possess legal documentation that identifies him or her as a permanent resident or citizen of the U.S.

² A recently published report by the National Research Council (2006) asserts that Latinos/Hispanics “are distinguished by their historically low levels of completed schooling, currently completing less formal schooling than any other demographic group” in the United States (p. 81). Within Latino subgroups, disparities in educational attainment exist most notably between native U.S.-born and foreign born Latinos. The National Research Council (2006) reports: “On average, foreign-born Hispanics of working age complete 2.5 years less formal schooling than their U.S.-born compatriots, with negligible differences between men and women” (p. 81). Mexicans have the lowest educational level of any Hispanic subgroup, and, according to the National Research Council, “the gap in completed schooling between the foreign and native born is larger for Mexicans than for Hispanics of other nationalities. This number grew from 3 years in 1980 to 4.4 years in 2000, “owing to substantial educational advances among the U.S-born rather than declining attainment of recent immigrants” (p. 82). Furthermore, recent Mexican immigrants “who arrived as teenagers have non-enrollment rates over 40%, but Mexican youths who arrived as very young children show only moderately high rates of school attrition...” (Hirschman 2001, p. 322). Other studies show that recent immigrants actually do better academically than U.S.-born Latinos (Rumbaut 1990, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995, Valenzuela 1999, Velez & Griego-Jones 1997).

are the protective factors that allow some students to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of obtaining a college degree? These are the central questions that guide this study.

I explore these questions by first reviewing the historical and contemporary context that has produced the anti-immigrant climate undocumented students face in the U.S. today and the ways in which several key immigration policies and laws have helped to shape this context. I follow this historical overview with a description of the different methodological tools utilized by this study to document the daily struggles of undocumented students. Third, I present excerpts of students' stories which illustrate the complexities of their daily experiences as undocumented Mexican immigrant students and their incorporation into U.S. society. Fourth, I discuss segmented assimilation theory, its usefulness for explaining the experiences of the students profiled in this study, as well as its shortcomings. I conclude with a proposal for how assimilation theory can be enhanced and best utilized to help explain the experiences of undocumented students.

The words and experiences of participants in this study demonstrate the complex circumstances and different situations that enable some undocumented students to pursue a college degree. They also show how students, whose lack of legal status places them at risk of arrest and deportation, can effectively negotiate and avoid the various obstacles that all too frequently push Latinos out of schools and institutions of higher education. These stories not only challenge the dominant belief that Latinos, and more specifically Mexicanas/os, do not value education, but they prove that the experiences of undocumented students are far more complex than what can be explained through dichotomous typologies of success and failure adopted by assimilation models.

Through this paper, I hope to challenge this prevailing dichotomy and present instead a more complex understanding of how undocumented students who come from rural backgrounds understand schools, schooling, and their social position within U.S. society. I also propose an alternative way of viewing student persistence – one that recognizes the possibility of multiple pathways to higher education and as a result, multiple processes of community incorporation. Finally, in addition to revealing shortcomings in the literature on Latino youth achievement this paper proposes additional factors, including the importance of legal status, that must be considered when developing theories that seek to explain Latino youth achievement and assimilation.

Research Context: Living in Times of Anti-immigrant Hysteria

The anti-immigrant climate in which undocumented students currently live and the obstacles they face are products of immigrant social stratification created by the state and its policies throughout U.S. history. Before turning to a discussion about why undocumented students decide to pursue higher education and how they are managing to be successful within academia, I will discuss the role of the state and its laws and policies in barring some immigrants from moving up the social ladder. Reviewing past events around immigration reform is imperative for understanding the political and social forces that have paved the way for different forms of restrictive immigration laws and policies that in turn fuel the current anti-immigrant climate.

Historically, Mexico-U.S. relations have been based on co-dependency and have been full of tensions and contradictions. The issue of immigration is the best example of these dynamics. On the one hand, the U.S. has historically depended on Mexico's cheap labor supply

and, at many times, has encouraged immigration (both legal and illegal). On the other hand, the influx of Mexican immigrants into U.S. territory has been viewed as a problem and threat to U.S. sovereignty (Huntington 2004), especially during times when the U.S. economy has become fragile. It is important to point out that “Mexican immigrants” were created after the annexation of Mexican territory by the U.S. after the Treaty of Guadalupe of 1848³, which resulted from the Mexican-American War. Later, Mexican immigration was initiated by U.S. growers and railroad companies who sent recruiters into the interior of Mexico to hire needed workers. According to Portes and Rumbaut (2006), by “1916, five or six weekly trains full of Mexican workers hired by agents were being run from Laredo to Los Angeles” (p.14). The temporary arrival of thousands of Mexicans to the U.S. during World War I and World War II was crucial to maintaining low labor costs in the agricultural sector of the U.S. economy. Immigrants were also recruited through guest worker programs such as the *Bracero Program* (1942-64) which allowed nearly 4.6 million Mexican migrant laborers to enter the U.S. legally to join a temporary labor force (Gelletly 2004, p. 50). Due to the need for cheap labor, Mexican immigration to “*El Norte*” was not a pressing issue in U.S. law and policy until well into the 20th century when it became regulated.

Nativist arguments against Mexicans emerged in the mid 1920s. “Every year since the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act⁴, a national debate to exclude Mexicans resurfaced with added vigor” (Acuna 2004, p.209). After the stock market crash of 1929, the United States was at the brink of bankruptcy and its rising unemployment rates gave rise to nativist sentiments

³ This ratified treaty drew the boundary between Mexico and the United States at the Rio Grande and the Gila River. As a result, Mexico ceded almost half of its territory to the United States in return for \$15 million. The U.S. also agreed to settle more than \$3,000,000 in claims made by U.S. citizens against Mexico.

⁴ Otherwise known as the “Johnson Reed Act,” this was the first United States federal law that established temporary quotas based on 2 percent of the foreign-born population in 1890, and mandated the secretaries of labor, state, and commerce to determine quotas on the basis of national origins by 1927. Additionally, it excluded Japanese immigrants and placed numerical restrictions on immigration from countries in the Western Hemisphere (Ngai 2004).

against Mexicans who were filling the need for cheap labor. Historically, there has been a strong correlation between anti-immigrant sentiment and economic anxiety, particularly around unemployment rates, and “[a]s in every economic downturn in U.S. history, the ugly head of racist nativism revealed itself,” this time through policies such as “Operation Wetback” (Acuna 2004, p.208).

In the mid 1950’s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) launched “Operation Wetback” which led to the roundup and deportation or repatriation of thousands of Mexicans (including some U.S. citizens). This “massive enforcement effort aimed at apprehending and deporting undocumented agricultural workers from the southwest, especially south Texas and southern California” was part of a national reaction against Mexican illegal immigration (Ngai 2004, p.154).

In 1964 the Bracero Program was terminated. This was due in part to the fact that American agribusiness had become far less dependent upon imported contract labor. Ngai (2004) explains, “The mechanization of sugar beets in western states and cotton, the chief crop drawing braceros in Texas, Arizona, and parts of California, were mechanized by the early 1960s. This was followed by the mechanization of tomato-harvesting in California where the majority of braceros were employed after 1961” (p. 166). While mechanization reduced the need for cheap labor, it did not eliminate it. Ngai (2004) states that after the Bracero Program ended, the exploitation of undocumented labor increased.

As the number of immigrants grew during the 1970s and ‘80s, so did the creation of new restrictive policies. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) which not only expanded funding for militarization and enforcement of the U.S. border, but it also penalized employers who knowingly hired undocumented immigrants. Its aim was

ultimately to reduce illegal immigration by making it harder for undocumented immigrants to obtain employment. During this time the U.S. economy was experiencing a prolonged recession and immigrants were again, blamed as the cause of the economic downturn. The influx of immigrants was viewed as an invasion that resulted in wage depression and high unemployment rates. Consequently, the recession was also used to justify additional spending on border enforcement by claiming that tighter borders offered one solution to the country's economic ills (Dunn 1995).

In spite of these restrictive measures, Mexican immigration, including "illegal" immigration, has continued its steady climb. Immigration scholar Douglas Massey (2005) claims that during the 1980s, border control was framed by U.S. politicians as an issue of 'national security' and that illegal migration was portrayed as an 'alien invasion.' Drawing on Andreas (2000), Massey (2002) states that between 1986 and 1996, Congress and the President undertook a remarkable series of restrictive actions to reassure citizens that they were working hard to "regain control" of the Mexico-U.S. border. For example, in 1994 concerns about undocumented immigrants using and abusing social services and the reactionary backlash against immigrants and growing diversity led to the development and passage of Propositions 187, 209, and 227 in California. Proposition 187, which sought to deny undocumented immigrants access to government services (including education, medical and social services) was later struck down by federal judges as unconstitutional. However, Proposition 209, which banned affirmative action in public institutions, including the University of California's admissions policies, and Proposition 227, which banned bilingual education in California public schools, managed to pass and ultimately saw enforcement.

Anti-immigrant sentiments and hostility against this population did not end at the border. Instead they bled and continue to bleed into every vein of U.S. society where Latino immigrants reside. Recent laws and initiatives⁵ continue to target and criminalize “undocumented” or “illegal aliens,” as they are called, forcing them into hiding and into low-level service sector jobs. Consequently, immigrants without legal papers experience and undergo many obstacles that prevent them from incorporation into mainstream America and achieving economic stability. Given the current anti-immigrant climate, it has not been possible for Congress to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill, and it is unlikely that efforts to pass reforms that would offer protections and assistance to undocumented immigrants will succeed anytime soon. Three notable examples of proposed reforms are: the California Real ID Act –SB60, which would allow undocumented immigrants to apply for and obtain drivers licenses in California; the California Dream Act, which would grant college and university students access to state financial aid; and the National Dream Act, which would grant these students the opportunity for legalization and ultimately citizenship through education or military service.

Methods

Research Site

In this paper I examine the experiences of young undocumented Mexican immigrants who reside in the Bay Area. The study’s primary site is Napa County which is located approximately one hour north of San Francisco, California. Napa County was selected due to its

⁵ For example, Proposition 200 in Arizona, which was approved by 56 percent of voters on November 2, 2004, requires Arizona residents to prove their U.S. citizenship before registering to vote or applying for government services and forces government workers to report an undocumented immigrant trying to get services like welfare or food stamps. More recently, Members of Congress put forth HR 4437, otherwise known as the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, which would make undocumented individuals felons. Furthermore, HR 4437 would make anyone known to “assist” an individual without documentation liable for criminal penalties and five years in prison.

high density of Mexican rural immigrants who come from major sending states in Western Mexico (eg. Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas). Napa County is also a Bay Area tourist destination renowned for its wine industry which plays an important role in the agricultural economy of not only the state but the nation. Immigrants can easily blend into the service sector or informal economy in this geographical area. However, while this “social invisibility” provides some protection for many immigrants, some choose to abandon the “shadows” in order to obtain a college education. Thus, in addition to Napa Valley, the site of this research includes the Bay Area, as the majority of the students interviewed transferred to major universities in this area.

Participant Demographics, Recruitment and Sampling

Participants included 20 undocumented female and male students and (post graduate) professionals between the ages of 18 and 35. All participants were residents of Napa Valley. Five of the 20 were undocumented Mexican high school seniors who resided in Napa County and planned to begin college after graduation; five were undocumented Mexican junior college students who lived in Napa County and were enrolled at Napa Valley College; five were Bay Area undocumented Mexican immigrant students who were in the process of completing and or had successfully completed a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Master’s degree or Ph.D.); and five were professionals or post graduates who were undocumented as students. All students arrived in the U.S either as infants or as young teenagers.

Only young undocumented Mexican students who migrated from rural areas of Mexico or whose parents came from these areas were recruited to participate in this study. I chose to study this population for three reasons. First, as a Mexican woman who comes from a small “rancho” (i.e village/town) on the outskirts of Zamora, Michoacán, I know that my educational

and assimilation experiences differed greatly from those who immigrate directly from Mexican cities. My lack of specific “urban skills” and specific knowledge related to education put me at a disadvantage throughout my educational career. In order to understand better how these disadvantages shape the educational and assimilation experiences of undocumented students, I chose to focus my study on this population only. Second, large segments of Mexico’s peasant population have been displaced as a consequence of U.S. foreign policy and pressure from the U.S. to modernize parts of Mexico. In spite of this trend, Chicano scholarship has a distinctly urban emphasis (Gonzalez & Fernandez 2003, p. xi). I hope to refocus scholarly attention on the experiences of rural Mexicanos/as. Third, I chose immigrant students from rural backgrounds as the focus of this study because they, like their parents, lack the resources that have allowed other recent groups of newcomers to the U.S. to thrive. Rumbaut and Portes (2001) write, “On average, adult immigrants have only a few years of schooling, limited urban skills, and little or no knowledge of English” and lack the web of “organizations and social practices that have allowed specific groups to utilize traditional culture to help children achieve” (p. 57).

I used a snowball sampling method to recruit participants for this study, which included asking college academic counselors and other community contacts to recommend students to contact. In order to get a more complete representation of these students’ experiences within higher education, I also used purposive sampling to recruit participants who were at different levels of the academic trajectory.

Data Collection

I conducted informal and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and shadowing during two years (2006-2008) of field work in Napa County, Berkeley, Davis, Sacramento, and San Francisco. These data gathering methods proved to be effective tools for

researching and documenting how undocumented students understand and make sense of their social position and educational journey. Combining different forms of interviews and observations allowed me to obtain a broad understanding of how undocumented students perceive and think about schools, schooling, and their own social standing within their community and the larger U.S. society. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish and “Spanglish” as I am a bilingual immigrant originally from rural Michoacán, Mexico, and I have lived in Napa County for over twenty years. Formal interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Information about the participants’ experiences living in Mexico prior to their arrival in the U.S. was also gathered through these interviews. Semi-structured interviews were effective in gathering information about family origin, family composition, family values and additional genealogical information. This information was useful for probing possible transnational links and ties which might factor into participants’ decisions to return to their native country once they complete their education.

Furthermore, shadowing and participant observation allowed me to participate in the lives of the students in this study while maintaining a professional distance that allowed for adequate observation and recording of data. Through these methods I was able to experience the different levels of engagement and participation of students in school activities and the larger community. I was able to recognize patterns over time and to record detailed observations.

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis presented in this paper uses triangulation and the theory-driven approach of the extended case method. “Triangulation,” as Fetterman (1998) states, “is at the heart of ethnographic validity” (p. 93). In this study, I use triangulation to test one source of information against another in order to strip away alternative explanations. For example, I used

triangulation not only to verify student claims about how they view schools but also to discern the roles students play in their schools and larger communities. Triangulation not only improved the quality of the data, but also contributed to the accuracy of the ethnographic findings.

Lichterman (2002) writes that the theory driven project “aims to address a theory, rather than to elucidate a substantive topic or field site with perhaps several theories” (p. 122). I adopt a similar approach here: A central aim of this study is to challenge the adequacy of segmented assimilation theory for explaining the experiences of undocumented students. Finally, this project adopts an extended case method which, following Burawoy (1998), seeks to “extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory” (p. 5). The extended case method allows the researcher to highlight everyday processes – the “how” – just as field driven participant observation does. Researchers who use the extended case method seek to learn “‘how’ institutional forces, social and cultural structures, shape action into our particular field sites” (Lichterman 2002, p. 123). In this study I analyzed undocumented students’ perceptions and understandings of schools, schooling, and their social standing. I did this not to develop a general theory about their perceptions, but instead to theorize better how institutional forces enable or constrain the collective views that this group affirms. This method was also useful in finding anomalies within the data that were inconsistent with the corresponding theoretical lens – in this case segmented assimilation theory (Zhou 1997).

Mexican Immigrant Student Incorporation and Segmented Assimilation

Segmented assimilation theory offers a framework for understanding the process by which the children of immigrants become incorporated into the system of stratification in the host society and the different outcomes of this process (Zhou 1999, p. 1). It proposes three possible outcomes for second generation immigrants: “One of them replicates the time-honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle class; a second leads straight into the opposite direction to permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass; still a third associates rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity” (Portes & Zhou 1993, p.82).

According to segmented assimilation theory, undocumented students pursuing a higher education would mainly fall within the first option – acculturation and integration into the white middle class – because they are doing everything necessary to become part of mainstream America and to advance their socio-economic status. Theoretically, undocumented students who obtain a higher education will gain entry into the middle class by using their degree to secure a professional position. However, the possibility of pursuing a professional career is in jeopardy if they have not yet become legal permanent residents by the time they graduate. Without this legal status, they will be denied the opportunity to work within their professional fields and instead will be forced to re-join the underclass of undocumented individuals in the service sector.

Segmented assimilation theory is most relevant for those who are legally in the U.S. It does not take into account the role of the state in either incorporating or excluding certain groups of immigrants. I, like Roger Waldinger (2003), argue that in a

contemporary world internal boundaries aren’t simply defined by ethnicity as sociology of assimilation insists, but instead, the crucial categorical memberships also derived from the political organization of the contemporary migration regime. Thus, the coercive power of the American state is kept busily working,

affecting dissimilation by keeping the world out and creating distinctions among residents of different types to be sure the United States is also accepting lots of foreigners and turning them into Americans (p. 12).

Undocumented students in higher education are an anomaly within the framework offered by segmented assimilation theory, given that they are being discriminated against and prevented from being fully incorporated into mainstream America through the institutional mechanisms of the American state. In order to get a full understanding of how different groups of immigrants assimilate into the U.S., we need to consider the role played by the state in either preventing or encouraging assimilation. Segmented assimilation theory as it stands today fails to account for the role played by the state in dictating divergent outcomes to different immigrants depending upon their legal statuses.

Persistence and Motivations

When discussing their motives, undocumented students mentioned multiple benefits they hoped would come from pursuing a higher education. The three primary benefits undocumented students identified were: socio-economic upward mobility, obtaining professional jobs, and most importantly, an opportunity for legalization. Laly explains,

I am just trying to get a better life and do what the government wants all immigrants to do...to assimilate, be educated, to have good jobs, and to pay good taxes because most immigrants like us have bad, low paying jobs that don't really pay that much taxes because they don't earn that much. [. . .] hopefully this will also help me in the future to get my papers.

-Laly,⁶ female, 18 years old

A major myth perpetuated by the U.S. mainstream media, among other sources, is that Mexican Americans, particularly those with low socio-economic status, do not value education.

⁶ All names used for students are pseudonyms.

As a consequence, the myth asserts, these children experience poor academic achievement (Valencia & Black 2002). Challenging this myth are undocumented Mexican students and their families for whom education is highly important not just for personal and professional growth, but for obtaining a “better life”:

I want to study to be a nurse because I like helping people and they make good money. [. . .] my mom has gone through a lot and I want to help her. I don't want her to always be worrying about money

-Gigi, female, 19 years old

For Laly, Gigi and other students interviewed in this study, obtaining a better life includes both financial stability, which will bring a certain level of social and emotional stability, and being productive in something they are passionate about. They all currently face or have faced financial and economic hardship, which has convinced them that having an education will improve their economic and financial situation and/or prevent them or their family from having to face similar circumstances again. They speak about how they aspire to obtain better jobs than those they currently hold or have access to, emphasizing their dream of having a job they would enjoy doing as opposed to feeling “stuck” in a job they dislike or feel they have to do because they have no other alternatives.

It makes me feel bad to hear my uncles complaining about their jobs. They are not happy with what they do and I would hate to be in their shoes [brief laughter]. Well I guess I kinda am because I am a janitor and I really don't want to do that for the rest of my life. I want to be able to go to work and be excited and happy to be doing what I am doing. I don't want to have to be part of those conversations where all they do is talk about how much they hate their jobs...

-Serio, male, 20 years old

A benefit these students see in obtaining a higher education, regardless of their legal status, is that they will be able to earn more money while in school than what a non-student immigrant would otherwise earn. For example, China is studying to be a nurse and is a Certified

Nurse Assistant (CNA) currently working at a rest home. In her view, she would never have obtained this job without declaring that she was currently an RN student, and she would not be earning as much as she is earning as a CNA if she did not have the little education she already has. She explains,

I would most likely be working at a fast food restaurant somewhere or at some winery where they pay a lot less than what I make as a CNA and as someone who is working on her Nursing degree.

-China, female, 25 years old

Additionally, many undocumented students have their hopes set on the National Dream Act and see education as the vehicle that will allow them to achieve their career goals and improve their socio-economic status. Some hope the legislation will pass because they have nothing on file with Homeland Security that shows they reside in this country, and they are interested in becoming permanent residents. In most cases, they have had to remain invisible because they do not qualify under any approved immigration category that will grant them the opportunity to obtain a green card.

We already talked to a couple of lawyers and they all say that the only way that I can become legal is if I submit a petition under...like...uhhmmm...based on the time or like...uhmm...number of years I have lived here. But they all say it is not likely that I will qualify because there isn't really any category favoring Mexicans right now and none of my parents are either permanent residents or citizens.

-Guero, male, 23 years old

For some, the only option is to continue with their education while they wait for the National Dream Act to pass. Once the National Dream Act passes, they will be eligible to apply for legal permanent residency in the U.S. Thus, these students view obtaining legalization as one of the greatest benefits that may come from pursuing a higher education. In order for undocumented students to qualify for immigration relief under the DREAM Act, they must have been brought to the U.S. more than five years ago when he or she was 15 years old or younger

and they must be able to demonstrate good moral character. In the Senate version, the student must also be under 30 years old on the date the DREAM Act is signed into law. Under the DREAM Act, once a student graduates from high school, he or she would be permitted to apply for conditional status, which would authorize him or her up to six years of legal residence. During the six-year period, the student would be required to graduate from a two-year college, complete at least two years toward a four-year degree, or serve in the U.S. military for at least two years. Permanent residence would be granted at the end of the six-year period if the student has met these requirements and has continued to maintain good moral character (NILC 2007). Gordis describes the hopeful outlook many undocumented students share with regard to the passage of the National Dream Act:

I know that sooner or later the government is going to see that we are deserving of our papers because we are hardworking people that want to succeed and help this country...even though I wasn't born here, I still consider this my home. My whole family is here. I grew up here... This is all I know, I have never been back to Mexico since I was brought here when I was eight.

-Gordis, female, 23 years old

Some students are already in the process of obtaining legal status, but they too hope that the Dream Act passes soon, and thereby reduce the time it will take for them to become permanent residents. Most of the students in this study have waited between ten and twelve years for a response from the government, and others are still waiting. According to Rosaura Segura (2008), an immigration specialist, the typical wait is between twelve and fifteen years for those who do not turn 18 before the priority date – otherwise, they are looking at a 20 to 25 year waiting period before they are granted their residency if neither of their parents are citizens of the U.S. The only other options are to file under “domestic abuse victims” (i.e. “asylees”) or to marry a U.S. citizen. These students believe that the number of Mexicans in this country and

their many contributions will ultimately force the U.S. government to provide some kind of comprehensive immigration reform. They just hope and pray that the Dream Act is part of that reform.

Even those who recognize that they may never be granted legal permanent residence status or U.S. citizenship see value in pursuing a higher education. As Serio explains, even if he gets deported, as an educated individual with a professional degree he is still likely to find a decent job in Mexico – a job that would otherwise be unattainable to people without an education.

I know that even if I get deported back to Mexico, I will be educated and in better shape than if I wasn't. I would probably be able to find a good job down there because of the education I am getting and also because I am bilingual. My dad always tells me that the education I receive will follow me wherever I go and that it is something no one can take away from me.

-Serio, male, 20 years old

All participants in this study recognize the importance of obtaining a higher college education and the financial benefits that this is likely to bring to them, whether in the U.S. or Mexico. They all gave examples of how everyone they see who is financially stable or successful has some form of college education. They noted how those who are struggling financially either never finished high school or barely finished but did not pursue a college education. Most important, however, is that all participants of this study view schools and schooling as vehicles that will aid them in either obtaining legal status if pending legislation passes or in speeding up the process they have already embarked on to become a permanent resident.

My home is here, this [the U.S.] is the only place I know, I have no memories or recollection of my *rancho* [village] back in Mexico. As a two-year old, *¿tú qué crees que pueda recordar?...¡Nada!* [What do you think I can remember?...Nothing!]

-Chapis, female, 19 years old

In addition to improving their socio-economic status, obtaining legal status, and securing a good paying professional job, a fourth factor that motivates some of these students is to prove that they are productive members of society and not the criminals anti-immigrant people perceive them to be. Undocumented students view the U.S. as their home and also continue to see it as other immigrants have historically viewed it – as the land of opportunity. They all want to become educated, productive members of society, not only for personal reasons, but also to “show other people who dislike immigrants that [they] are not criminals, that [they] are normal young individuals who only want to work hard and live a normal life” (Laly, female, 18 years old). They want to be able to prove that they are productive members of society who only wish to become legal and fully incorporated into mainstream America. As Polla explains,

We want to be able to take advantage of the great opportunities this country has to offer. We want to be educated and be able to have the right to vote and to have a say on what goes on in this country, because right now it seems like everyone else is almost deciding for us. We want to be able to participate in May 1 marches [boycott and immigrant rights marches in 2006] as legal people who have knowledge and a voice—not as immigrants who are considered uneducated, voiceless, and always hiding in the shadows. We want to be able to prove that we have skills and are smart. That we can be leaders and serve as the leaders of this country we consider our home. Even now, without legal papers and with our low paying jobs and all, we are making great contributions to this country like no other group of immigrants have...

-Polla, female, 30 years old

Confronting Obstacles through Agency and Social Networks

It is something I have to think about every day, it is something that whether I like it or not dictates many things in my life. Even in little things like where to go look for a job, going clubbing and not having an ID, or simply driving....I have to worry about check points or getting pulled over, that is why I drive like an old lady....It's funny, but anytime I go out with my friends we might leave at the same time to go somewhere, but I am always the last one to get there because I drive so cautious.

-Laly, female, 18 years old

Undocumented students face myriad obstacles when it comes to school and schooling. They not only have to worry about learning the language and making sure they pass the rest of their general education requirements, but they also have to deal with daily struggles that for many of us are simple and insignificant.

For example, finding a way to get to school is something many of us do not think about very often because we drive and or have easy access to transportation. However, many of these students have to think about this and “say a prayer” every morning before they walk out the door. Most perform their daily ritual of making the sign of the cross, as devout Catholics do, the minute they jump in their cars. They ask God not only to protect them from getting involved in an automobile accident, but also to protect them from getting pulled over or running into a police or ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) check point along their way:

I just ask God to watch over me. He knows I am not trying to cheat the law. He knows I have to *por necesidad no por gusto* [due to necessity not want], because believe me, I am always super scared to be driving, especially when I see a police car behind me, I start shaking so bad and then I just start praying.

-Chiquilina, female, 20 years old

For most of these students, schools have provided them with the opportunity to expand their social capital and form ties and friendships that help to “shield” them from the legalities that threaten their freedom, such as ending up in jail for driving without a license or not holding a valid ID. Many have made friends at school who are now aware of their situation and provide transportation for them.

Schools can also be a source of stress for these students. Finding a way to pay for tuition, fees, and books is a struggle these college students face every semester. Because of their legal status, these students are barred from receiving any financial aid. In addition, their undocumented status forces them into low paying service sector jobs. All participants in this

study hold one or more part-time or full-time jobs. This places an additional burden on these students, as they are forced to juggle multiple jobs, academic work, and domestic responsibilities.

Schools serve as spaces where strong alliances and connections can be formed with other individuals who may, in different ways, aid them through their academic journey. In Jalisqueña's case, school friends offered her financial support:

I feel really good and lucky to know that I have met good friends here at the college. They are always there to help me in any way that they can. Like in finding a job or for example, this semester all the [Latino higher education student organization] club members, which happen to be all my friends, got together and decided that the money we had gathered through participating in some events was going to be given to me so that I could pay for my classes and books for this semester....It wasn't enough, so some also gave from their pockets and one even asked her parents to help me and they paid for my tuition.

-Jalisqueña, female, 20 years old

These students also enjoy considerable emotional support from their friends at school and often state that they could not imagine their life without school or their friends.

I probably would have no friends and I probably wouldn't go out very much since that is who I go out with. My life would be depressing and boring, I probably wouldn't even have goals. For me, I get my motivation from my friends at school. They are always cheering me on and telling me I can do it and I also learn a lot from them about different careers and stuff.

-Gigi, female, 19 years old

These students not only receive considerable support from friends and family, but they are also grateful to have the opportunity to attend school, especially since back in their native, rural Mexico, public education ends at sixth grade (Valenzuela 1999). While these students also have criticisms of American schools, their sense of gratitude and privilege tend to mute those criticisms. Guero states,

I am grateful and thank God that I somehow have the opportunity to go to college because I am sure there is lots of other people that also don't have papers and

wish they could attend. In college I have had the opportunity to meet people in the same situation that I am in and with the same goal of getting educated. I know that if I was just working, I would probably only know undocumented immigrants whose goal was just to earn money to pay their bills here (the U.S.) and send money back to Mexico.

-Guero, male, 23 years old

Schools as Sites of Safety and Civic Engagement

[B]esides learning what I need to learn for school and my classes, when I come to school it is the only time I also have to hang out with my friends, like in between classes, you know.

-Laly, female, 18 years old

Obtaining a degree is not the only reward that can accompany the pursuit of an academic career. These students also recognize that schools and schooling offer them a space in which to expand their social capital by building social networks and a space that fosters a feeling of “normality.” Many of these students, such as Laly, find that school and home are the only two places where they feel “safe” and “normal”:

When I am at home or at school I feel like a normal young person. I don't worry about watching my back to see if *la migra* is anywhere around. I feel like in those two places I don't...like...I don't feel like I am doing anything wrong or like I am not supposed to be there. At home...well...it is my house and everyone knows my legal status even though we don't really talk about it much and at school, well, I forget that I am undocumented and just focus on doing my work, doing it well, and getting good grades just like any other normal student...

-Laly, female, 18 years old

Fear often pushes undocumented immigrants into the “shadows” and away from many community events. They avoid being highly active and visible within their communities and shy away from anything that might highlight their presence for fear of getting caught by ICE. As a result, they become isolated from the larger community. Schools serve as spaces where these

students can create or plug into pockets or “safety zones” where they are able to share their stories and their daily struggles without feeling judged.

The fear of being judged, reported to ICE, and “caught” and deported is a pressing fear in these students’ minds. Polls show that just over half of all Hispanic adults in the U.S. worry that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported. Nearly two-thirds say the failure of Congress to enact an immigration reform bill has made life more difficult for all Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center 2007). Many of these students carry with them a pocket phone book or a list of phone numbers in their cell phones that they can call if they get “caught” and deported. Most have talked this through with their families and have developed a plan for whom they will call, where they will go, and how they will get back to the U.S.

Additionally, schools serve as a place where undocumented students “recharge [their] batteries.” It is a place where they find friendships and motivation, and oftentimes it is a place where they find people who care about them without caring about their legal situation. In her study of Mexican immigrant students, Angela Valenzuela writes that Mexican immigrant students will tend to care more about their classes and schooling if they find that their professors care about them (1999). My informants also identified the caring they receive as an important factor in their desire to do well in school. Lola explains,

Here [at Napa Valley College] I found counselors and professors that really care about me and not my papers. They see that I am a hard worker and that I want to do well in life. They are always here to help me in whatever I need. They are always keeping me informed of scholarships and laws that are out there that could help me. Like for example, thanks to my college counselor, I found out I could come to college and he helped me fill out all the paperwork...and then sometimes I have had to explain to my teachers that I won't be able to afford my books till later in the semester, and they always give me copies of the readings or let me borrow the books while I save enough money to buy my own.

-Lola, female, 20 years old

Schools also provide opportunities for undocumented students to become active within the larger community by participating in different academic clubs and student organizations. Because of their student status, students like Princhipecha believe that if an immigration raid were to happen at a community event, they would be less likely to be targeted by ICE than immigrants who are not students:

Being in college allows me to uhmm...the opportunity to join clubs through which I can participate in school and other community activities that I know I would not participate in if I was just doing the regular undocumented Mexican thing. I know other people who don't come to college and they are afraid to participate in community events because they think that someone might ask them for their papers or something.

-Princhipecha, female, 22 years old

Through an array of clubs and organizations such as ASB (Associated Student Body), CHA (Club Hispano Americano), SRB (Students Rompiendo Barreras), RISE (Rising Immigrant Scholars Through Education) and other university-based clubs and organizations at UC Davis, UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco, UCLA, and Stanford, undocumented students become highly active within the school environment. They use these activities as “shields” that help to facilitate their participation in larger community activities which in turn fosters a feeling of membership in the American mainstream.

Clubs not only help students become integrated into the life of the college and community, they also act as encouragements for staying enrolled in college. As Tinto (1975, 1993) suggests, the more students feel they are part of the college context, the more likely they will be to stay.

Conclusion

Immigration reform dominates contemporary political debates, but undocumented Mexican students pursuing a higher education are not willing to wait for it. They are not willing to put their academic careers on hold for something that might take decades to achieve. Instead, they have chosen to step out of the shadows, risking deportation, in order to advance their educational goals. Hope and the opportunity for social upward mobility are two major reasons that explain why these students take such risk.

Undocumented students hope that by obtaining a higher education, they will ultimately be granted a path to legalization that will allow them to become fully incorporated into mainstream America. Also, for these students, schools and schooling function as mechanisms not only for becoming legalized, but for achieving social upward mobility. Contrary to the myth that Latinos do not value education, these students are not only willing to risk deportation to get an education, but they see the benefits of obtaining a higher education even if they do end up getting deported.

These students also utilize and conceptualize a variety of protective factors that allow them to overcome barriers that stand in the way and truncate many students' dreams of pursuing and obtaining a college degree. For example, they utilize and conceptualize schools as "safety zones" that help them cope with their legal status and also "shield" them from the obstacles they have to deal with on a daily basis. Their "illegality" does not prevent them from participating in activities that foster a feeling of U.S. membership. Instead, scholastic mechanisms, such as clubs, facilitate the involvement of undocumented students within college and community life.

The fact that these students use schools as a means for participating within the larger community also reflects how they view the U.S. These students view this country as their

homeland and place of permanent residency. The only thing keeping them from fully being incorporated as citizens of this country is their legal status – an ascribed characteristic given by the state. Gigi and Guerrero both offer powerful expressions of these sentiments:

My mom brought me here to have a better life...I want to be a normal [American] person you know. I don't want to feel like I am different. I don't want to be another uneducated illegal Mexican in the states, *Quiero ser alguien importante, quiero ser una persona educada y pues asi poder alcanzar el famoso sueno Americano* [I want to be someone important, I want to be an educated person and that way be able to reach the famous American Dream].

-Gigi, female, 19 years old

I am doing what many U.S. citizens are not even doing. I have never gotten in trouble with the law, I have excelled in school and have received numerous awards that show my potential and hard work, I am now getting close to reaching my career goals...What else does the government want to see?...All I can say to people who think us immigrants shouldn't be here is...give us the opportunity, don't cut our wings off before we can fly...

-Guerrero, male, 23 years old

By illuminating the struggles, motivations and successes of undocumented students, and the critical role that higher education plays in their lives, this paper contributes to our understanding of immigrant incorporation trajectories. It also sheds light on an area that is not accounted for in current discussions of immigrant incorporation and assimilation and in segmented assimilation theory, especially. Segmented assimilation theory is by far the only theoretical framework that comes close to providing an explanation of the varying educational achievement levels and of the divergent paths immigrant youth take when transitioning into the receiving society. Unfortunately, those segmented assimilation studies that do include undocumented students in their sample do not analyze the effects of undocumented status on these youths' educational trajectories (Portes, 1996; Fernandez-Kelley & Curran, 2001). In addition, segmented assimilation theory does not fully account for the role of the state in restricting the assimilation of immigrants who lack legal status.

Instead of the multi-tiered and linear model of assimilation offered by segmented assimilation theorists, I propose that we recast this model in the form of a three dimensional sphere – what I call “*La Esfera De La Vida del Imigrante en los Estados Unidos*” (i.e. “*The sphere of U.S. immigrant life*”). (See Figure 1.) This sphere represents U.S. society and contains two “pipelines” through which immigrants enter – one for documented immigrant flows and the other for undocumented immigrants.

Figure 1 contains two pipelines because the traveling experiences and mode of entry of documented and undocumented immigrants and the reception they encounter when they set foot upon American soil differ greatly. While documented immigrants enter the U.S. through traditional legal routes such as airports or border entry points, undocumented immigrants typically do so by traversing dangerous terrain – a journey that can often lead to death. Additionally, immediately upon arrival in the U.S., documented immigrants are welcomed by flight attendants and federal immigration officers, whereas undocumented immigrants are hidden by “coyotes” (smugglers) who transport them to different points along their journey until they reach their final destination in the U.S. where they are received by family or friends.

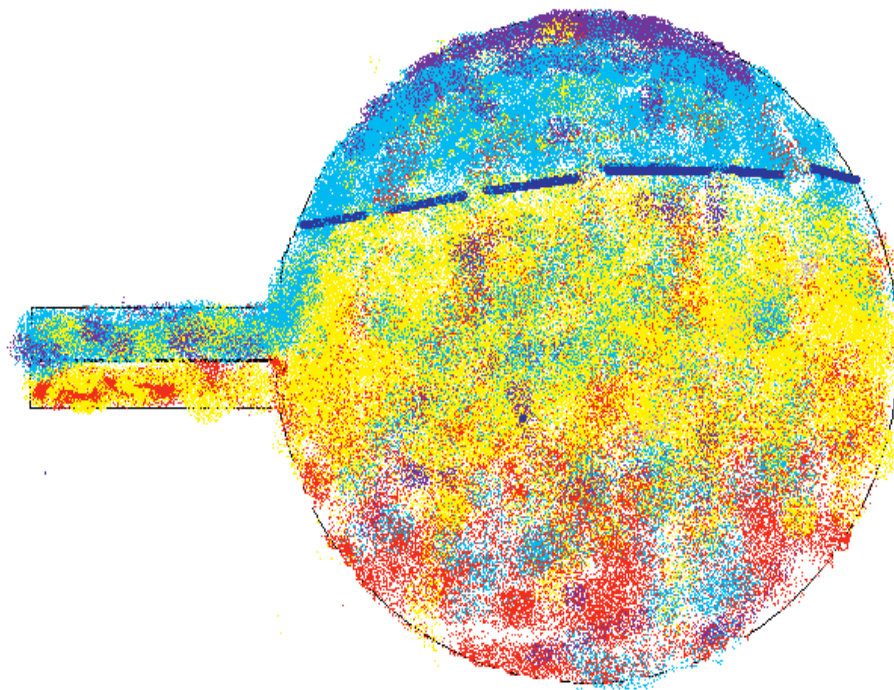
According to segmented assimilation theory, after arriving in the U.S. immigrants are slowly subdivided into different segments. These include the three segments outlined by Portes and Zhou (1993) (acculturation and integration into the white middle class, “permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass,” and rapid economic advancement while preserving the immigrant community’s “values and tight solidarity” [p. 82]), and a fourth segment – assimilation into America’s upper class. The segment each immigrant will ultimately fall into largely depends on the context of reception, which Portes and Rumbaut define to include racial stratification, spatial segregation, and government policies (2001). I argue that the role of the

state and its stringent policies that prevent undocumented students from fully assimilating and joining the middle and upper classes of American society must also be included in how we conceptualize the immigrant's context of reception.

In contrast to Portes and Zhou's (1993) one dimensional model of segmented assimilation, I propose a multidimensional model represented by the sphere above, in which the four segments blur into one another with no clear delineation of where each segment begins or ends. Individuals may enter a specific segment of American society, but they also move in or out of these segments depending on their individual circumstances at specific points in time and the array of factors that affect the upward (or downward) social mobility of immigrants.

My model also designates the role of the state, which has been underemphasized and underdeveloped in previous models of segmented assimilation. The dashed line represents the powerful role played by the state as both a gatekeeper and a filter. The state permits those who hold the proper U.S. documentation (permanent residents or naturalized citizens) to advance into the white middle and upper classes, and it obstructs those who do not. Emphasizing the role played by the state in shaping immigrant assimilation exposes the fact that no matter how hard an undocumented immigrant works, as long as his or her legal status remains static, he or she will never be fully integrated into the American white middle or upper classes. This is the case for undocumented students in higher education who seek to follow what Portes and Zhou (1993) describe as the "time-honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle class." Without legal status, even after obtaining a college degree these students are unable to fully participating in mainstream white middle-class professional American jobs and institutions. By denying legal status to undocumented immigrant students, the state effectively blocks their integration into the middle or upper sectors of American society.

**Figure 1: “La Esfera de La Vida del Inmigrante en Los Estados Unidos”
 (“The Sphere of U.S Immigrant Life”)**



Within the Sphere:

Purple = upper class

Blue = “growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle class”

Yellow = “rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity”

Red = “permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass”

Within the pipelines:

Purple, blue, and yellow = upper and middle class immigrants

Yellow and red = middle and lower class immigrants

Dashed line: the state and its stringent immigration policies

NOTE: The pipeline that is predominantly blue and purple represents legal entry into the U.S. (The yellow within this predominantly blue and purple pipeline represents middle and upper class undocumented immigrants who pay “coyotes” higher prices to enter through legal checkpoints.) The pipeline below it, which is a mixture of red and yellow represents illegal entry into the U.S. The dashed line represents the state and its restrictive immigrant policies. The specks of red and yellow within the predominantly blue and purple area above the dashed line represent educated professional immigrants who have become permanent residents or naturalized citizens and have managed to assimilate into the top strata of U.S. society. The mixture of purple, blue, yellow, and red colors below the dashed line represents the co-existence of those who at one point belonged to the top strata of society but for some reason have “moved down” and joined undocumented immigrants within the middle and lower classes of the U.S. social structure.

Segmented assimilation theory offers an idealized, simplified, and one-dimensional model of assimilation. It must be modified to be useful as a framework for explaining and illuminating the divergent outcomes of immigrant incorporation, especially those experienced by undocumented immigrants in the U.S. As this paper demonstrates, the experiences of undocumented students are far more complex than what can be explained through dichotomous typologies of success and failure adopted by assimilation models. Indeed, it is imperative that other factors such as the role of the state and its stringent policies are emphasized and fully taken into account when discussing the assimilation or lack thereof of immigrants in the U.S. It is my hope that by recasting segmented assimilation as both multidimensional and mediated by the state, scholars, politicians, policy makers, citizens and residents of the U.S. will better understand and respond to the complexities of the lived experiences of underrepresented minorities within the U.S., including those of undocumented students in higher education. Finally, I hope to provide individuals who are not already aware of and are not sensitive to the daily struggles faced by undocumented immigrants, a small but significant window into the everyday struggles these students face and the austere and unequal terrain on which these students are expected to perform but nevertheless succeed in reaching their academic goals.

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