Negotiating Identity Development Among Undocumented Immigrant College Students: A Grounded Theory Study

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This qualitative study explored the identity development process of 11 undocumented college students living in the United States, focusing on how undocumented college students negotiate the interplay of acculturation, ethnic identity, and educational and career pursuits. A semistructured interview protocol was used and data analysis was iterative, consistent with grounded theory methodology. Four major themes emerged from the data: (a) “sewn with two threads” describes the salience of bicultural identity; (b) enhancement of positive attributes as a result of documentation struggles; (c) challenging reflections, addressing the ways in which documentation status challenges one’s perception of oneself and the world; and (d) identity formation as an ongoing negotiation, capturing the long-term shifts in understanding of status implications and emotional response to this understanding. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for educators, counseling psychologists, and career counselors. Suggestions regarding how mental health professionals can educate and empower undocumented immigrant youth are presented.

Keywords: undocumented immigrants, identity development, acculturation

The diversity of the immigrant population in the United States varies greatly beyond country of origin with respect to, among others, race and ethnicity, educational status, and age of migration (Birman, Weinstein, Chan, & Beehler, 2007; Chen & Park-Taylor, 2006). As a group, undocumented immigrant youth are often invisible within the broader immigrant community and overlooked within the mental health literature (Sullivan & Rehm, 2005). The term undocumented immigrant youth refers to immigrant youth who, without the benefit of legal documents, enter the United States with family members, or with the intent to reunite with family members (Fong, 2007). These youth, particularly if they arrive in the United States before completing high school, come into contact with American culture through participation in the public education system. However, their legal status often complicates their acculturation process. The population of undocumented youth, as of now, remains largely overlooked within the psychology and education literature in general for a number of reasons. First, researchers have faced challenges to understanding the emotional and psychological effects of being undocumented, including a fear of confining in others as well as pain associated with the experience of living in the shadows (Aroian, 1993; Chavez, 1998; Sullivan & Rehm, 2005). Additional obstacles to understanding the experience of undocumented immigrants include language barriers and the great variation of experiences within this group as a function of variables such as country of origin, class, education, occupation, and presence of support networks (Suárez-Orozco, 2007).

A notable addition to the literature is the recent publication of the book, We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream by Pérez (2009). Pérez, as a developmental psychologist, described 20 undocumented immigrant Latino students’ developmental and educational experiences in the U.S. educational system. His portrayal of these undocumented immigrant youth is consistent with a central assumption of the social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2000) in the vocational psychology literature. Central to SCCT is the belief that an individual’s sociocultural context sheds light on the complex interactional process between the individual and the contextual factors that ultimately affects one’s career pursuits. In accordance with SCCT, undocumented immigrant students are often confronted with actual and perceived barriers to their educational and career aspirations, and their assessment of their capacity to overcome such barriers leads to varying reactions and outcomes in the educational and career domains. Our research study was thus similarly premised by the assumption that one’s personal and career identity development is negotiated in anticipation of and in response to cultural and contextual factors. We specifically focused on how undocumented immigrant students’ identity, as manifested in the educational and career domains, develops over time as they confront actual and perceived barriers to their educational and career aspirations. If contextual factors are central to the complex interactions between the individual and the context and, by extension, impact career selection and outcomes (Ponterotto, Rivera, & Sueyoshi, 2000), a rich understanding of undocumented immigrant college students’ academic experiences could not be achieved without careful attention to the context—social, political, and cultural. Below, we reviewed, summarized, and highlighted the relevant contextual and cultural factors.
In the current social and political context in the United States, the legislation most relevant to undocumented students is the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (henceforth referred to as the DREAM Act). The DREAM Act is a component of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 (Batalova & Fix, 2006). If passed, this law would grant temporary documentation to undocumented youth who arrived in the United States prior to age 16, provided that they graduate from high school or obtain their GED. In June 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy was announced by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to grant a temporary reprieve from deportation for undocumented immigrant youth who meet similar criteria (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012). Even if an estimated 1.7 million eligible undocumented immigrants nationwide eventually receive temporary legal status, their long-term opportunities in the United States remain limited. Against this social and political context, undocumented youth face greater poverty than their adult counterparts according to the Pew Hispanic Center (Passel, 2005), and have higher school dropout rates and lower college attendance rates than their legal immigrant counterparts (Abrego, 2006). These statistics are driven by risk factors such as crowded living conditions, little or no health insurance, and linguistic isolation (Abrego, 2006; Sullivan & Rehm, 2005). Other factors, such as legislation preventing undocumented youth from applying for financial aid or attending college, also significantly affect undocumented immigrant students’ academic experiences in high school and limit opportunities for college education (Sullivan & Rehm, 2005). Even if undocumented youth eventually go on to attend college, they face restricted vocational opportunities upon graduation (Gonzales, 2007).

From a multicultural perspective, all immigrants, regardless of documentation status, experience psychological stress—or acculturative stress—when presented with both threats and opportunities to their cultural and individual identity upon arriving in a new country (Williams & Berry, 1991). The process of adapting to the unfamiliar customs of a new culture often involves changes in values, behaviors, identity, and knowledge. Socioeconomic status, length of time in the host country, availability of parents and peer support, and the sociopolitical context of the receiving community were found to have a significant effect on the acculturation experience of immigrants (e.g., Kazemipur & Hulli, 2001). First-generation immigrants, including the category of 1.5-generation immigrants represented in this study, experience more stress in this acculturation process, or acculturative stress, than do second- and third-generation immigrants (Yeh et al., 2003). Moreover, immigrants who migrate in adolescence or early adulthood are at greater risk for adjustment difficulties than are older individuals (Wong, Lam, Yan, & Hung, 2004). Acculturative stress has been associated with poor mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Crockett et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2007), feelings of marginality and alienation, increased psychosomatic symptoms, identity confusion, and poor health outcomes (Williams & Berry, 1991). The interplay of race and ethnicity with legal status presents additional and unique challenges for undocumented immigrant youth in their educational pursuits. In Contreras’s (2009) study on undocumented Latino college students, for example, the participants reported that their past experiences of prejudice and discrimination complicated their campus life, resulting in their unwillingness to seek advisement or support for academic and financial issues.

During adolescence and early adulthood, undocumented immigrant youth must navigate the identity formation stage of life span development. As immigrants negotiate their acculturative process, they also face challenges to their ethnic identity. Ethnic identity refers to a dynamic and multidimensional construct that includes identification of oneself as a member of a particular ethnic group, positive evaluation of and involvement in the group, preference for the group, sense of belonging, and involvement in group activities (Cokley, 2007). Exposure to discrimination can trigger the exploration of racial and ethnic identity (Ponterotto & Park-Taylor, 2007). Undocumented youth experience numerous discriminatory encounters as a group and individually, as they are faced with the task of reconciling their sense of belonging to their ethnic group with exclusionary and discriminatory messages from the greater community (Sullivan & Rehm, 2005). A positive sense of ethnic identity serves a protective or buffering role, particularly for racial and ethnic minority members (Perreira, Harris, & Lee, 2006). Perhaps this is because it requires a sense of connection to and identification with one’s ethnic group as well as the maintenance of a critical consciousness regarding discrimination (Quintana, 2007).

In summary, for undocumented immigrant youth arriving in the United States as children or adolescents, they are engaged in the American educational system, but often face greater barriers to their educational achievement and vocational success than do their documented peers. Despite these daunting challenges, some undocumented immigrant students succeed in college. The majority of undocumented students, particularly if they receive temporary reprieve from deportation, will likely remain in the United States beyond high school graduation (Passel, 2005). Current policies prohibiting educational achievement of undocumented students inevitably lead to premature disengagement from educational pursuits (Abrego, 2006), and the repercussions of premature educational disengagement resonate throughout society. Therefore, it is of vital importance that we gain a better understanding of the experience of undocumented immigrant students in the United States in order to prevent such disengagement.

The purpose of this study was thus twofold. First, given that existing research focuses on the legal challenges and risks associated with being undocumented, we explored how cultural and contextual factors affect the process within which undocumented immigrant college students navigate their educational and career pursuits. Second, we aimed to understand the dynamic relationship between career identity and ethnic identity formation in undocumented immigrant college students. By understanding how they make sense of their college and social environment and respond to their cultural and contextual challenges, we as counseling psychologists serve as social justice advocates to inform the public and give voice to this powerless marginalized group of individuals in society.

Method

Research Paradigm and Inquiry Strategy

The data were analyzed using a version of grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to
capture the complexities of subjective experience to facilitate the development of a broader knowledge base. Grounded theory methodology involves an inductive process in which the researcher is guided by the analysis of data to develop an understanding of phenomena grounded in empirical observation. Although grounded theory research spans a range of paradigmatic perspectives from postpositivist ideology to constructivist and critical ideology (Creswell, 2007), Ponterotto (2005) placed it within a constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm. Unlike positivist and postpositivist ideologies, which suggest that researcher and participant are separate entities that do not impact one another, constructivism recognizes that reality is understood subjectively, and meaning is created through the interactions between researcher and participant. It should be noted that in this study, our grounded theory analysis adhered to constructivism (i.e., the coconstruction of meaning between researcher and participant) and critical ideology (i.e., reality was mediated by power and political contexts) with respect to ontology (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007; Ponterotto, 2002, 2005) for several reasons.

First, the most distinguishing aspect of grounded theory and, in fact, the “hallmark” (Fassinger, 2005, p. 157) of the approach, is the dynamic process through which eventually and ideally a fully articulated substantive theory is generated based on the researcher’s immersion in the data. Constructivism accepts that multiple realities exist and can be elucidated through researcher and participant interactions. Therefore, although reality for undocumented immigrant students is shaped by political factors and oppression, the constructivist paradigm guides the present study whereby the participants are the experts on their lived experience. The participants in our study are undocumented immigrants, who face significant barriers and legal risks in the social context. As such, in addition to constructivism, our research paradigm is informed by critical ideology, which presupposes that the construction of reality occurs within a social and historical context in which power relationships play a large role. Second, the grounded theory method is well tailored to a multicultural perspective in that it seeks to understand participants by examining how members of marginalized groups in society derive meaning from their experiences. Our chosen research inquiries and methodology are thus consistent with counseling psychology’s recent social justice aims (Morrow, 2005). Fassinger contends that not only is the grounded theory approach a “methodological exemplar” (p. 165) of the scientist-practitioner model through its integration of theory and practice throughout, but it also facilitates the potential for counseling psychologists-as-advocates. By allowing for a greater understanding of urgent contemporary issues, such as the implication of documentation status on the career and personal identity development of undocumented students, it enables the enlightened researcher to disseminate this knowledge to others where it may facilitate change.

Participants

A purposive sample consisted of 11 English-speaking undocumented college students who would be eligible to have their legal status adjusted in accordance with the criteria of the DREAM Act. Participants all came to the United States as children (prior to the age of 16) from Mexico, Central and Latin America, South Korea, and Poland and attended American academic institutions at the time of the interview, save one participant who had graduated from an American college less than 1 year prior to participation. Table 1 includes demographic and contextual information about each participant. Theoretical saturation occurred following the 10th interview. At that time, one additional participant, the 11th participant, was recruited, and no new dimensions or relationships emerged from data analysis of this interview.

Data Sources

Demographic form. In order to conserve time on the day of the interview and ensure that participants fit inclusion criteria, all participants completed a brief demographic form and submitted it to the first author electronically or through regular mail prior to the interview. This form elicited information regarding the participants’ age, country of origin, method of immigration (e.g., tourist visa, border crossing), length of time in the United States, and family constitution both in the United States as well as in the participants’ country of origin.

Interviews. Following a multidisciplinary review of the literature on immigrants in general, and undocumented youth in particular, a semistructured interview protocol (see the Appendix) was developed. Five sets of questions were developed to focus on aspects of identity development highlighted in acculturation and ethnic identity development literature. Final interview questions addressed undocumented students’ experience in relation to the following domains: adjustment to life in the United States, negotiation of self-perception and relationships with others in light of immigration status, the impact of immigration status on educational/career-related pursuits, and expectations for the future in light of participants’ immigration status.

Questions were developed temporally as well as according to topic (e.g., acculturation). After initial questions were developed, the protocol was distributed to three individuals within the community of undocumented immigrants in order to ensure that interview questions addressed issues relevant to the identity development of undocumented immigrant students. All individuals were personally knowledgeable about issues related to undocumented immigrant students. Feedback included confirmation that the domains addressed were relevant to the identity development of undocumented immigrant students, as well as recommendations for changes to the protocol.

Transcription. Participants used pseudonyms, and all interviews, ranging from 70 to 100 min in length, were audietape and transcribed. Transcriptions were sent to participants who were encouraged to make relevant changes or additions and delete any responses they did not want included in the final analyses. Eight participants remained in contact with the first author following the interview; three reported that they did not want to make any changes to the transcripts, and five made changes that included elaborations on original responses. Analyses were conducted using the edited versions of transcripts when available. Participant comments, changes, and elaborations were also included in all analyses.

Field notes, reflexive journals, and other artifacts. A contributing factor to the rigor of a qualitative study is the diversity or variety of data being analyzed (Morrow, 2005). In addition to interview transcripts, data included e-mailed notes sent by interview participants and memos written by the first author.
The first author also initiated new relationships with individuals established networks with individuals at city and state universities. The first author, a White female U.S. citizen with a doctorate in counseling psychology, was responsible for recruiting and selecting participants as well as conducting all interviews. She had previously taken an advanced doctoral-level qualitative and quantitative research methods course and conducted a qualitative research study using grounded theory methodology. She explored her own privilege, including that of “American citizen,” throughout the course of her doctoral studies. She conducted the analyses for this research study under the guidance of the second author, an Asian American faculty member in counseling psychology who is a naturalized citizen in the United States. He has expertise in qualitative research methods—having taught both qualitative and quantitative research methods courses as well as conducted and supervised qualitative research studies. As an immigrant himself, he believes in the importance of offering assistance to immigrants, legal or otherwise, in order to facilitate their successful adjustment to living in the United States.

**Procedure**

**Data collection.** Recruitment of participants occurred through established networks with individuals at city and state universities. The first author also initiated new relationships with individuals

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym, (age), country of origin, and educational status</th>
<th>Background information</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jennifer (23), Colombia, College Senior</td>
<td>Jennifer was 16 years old when she arrived in the U.S. with her mother; her father was already here. Jennifer has already received her associate’s degree and is majoring in industrial psychology. She lives in New York and is selective with whom she shares her status.</td>
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<td>Pepe (21), Colombia, College Junior</td>
<td>Pepe came to the U.S. with his mother and sister when he was 13 years old. His brother and father remain in Colombia; he has not seen either of them for 8 years. Pepe recently received an associate’s degree and is pursuing his bachelor’s degree in New York. He would like to practice law. He is selective with whom he shares his status.</td>
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<td>Cindy (29), Trinidad, College Graduate</td>
<td>Cindy came to the U.S. with her mother and 3 older brothers when she was 8 years old. She lives in New York and recently received her bachelor’s degree in business administration. She was an economics major, and her career goal is to be a credit analyst. Her friends and employer know that she is undocumented.</td>
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<td>Anmita (23), Colombia, College Senior</td>
<td>Anmita came to the U.S. with her family for her own lifesaving medical treatment. She and her family members overstayed their visas during the course of this treatment. She now lives in Texas and received her associate’s degree in applied science in audio recording technology. Anmita is a college senior pursuing a bachelor’s in media production. She is a member of student organizations at her college related to immigrant rights.</td>
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<td>Josenotpedro (21), Mexico, College Junior</td>
<td>Josenotpedro is the youngest of 10 children. He crossed the Mexican border with several family members when he was 4 years old. He studies political science and business foundations in Texas. His career goals include practicing international law in the public arena. Josenotpedro actively advocates for immigrant student rights through his college at the state and federal levels.</td>
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<td>Adry (20), Mexico, College Senior</td>
<td>Adry came to the U.S. with her mother when she was 4 years old. Her sister was born here. Adry grew up in a single-parent household, and the majority of her extended family remains in Mexico. Adry is a psychology major who hopes to continue her studies in graduate school. She lives in Texas; none of her friends know she is undocumented.</td>
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<td>Victoria (21), Mexico, College Student</td>
<td>Victoria is an only child. After her parents’ business failed, she crossed the Mexican border with her mother when she was 10 years old. She was reunited with her father in Illinois, and she currently resides there with her parents. Victoria completed 3 years of a college degree in music education and has aspirations to someday pursue her graduate studies; she is currently not enrolled in college because of financial issues. Only her closest friends know she is undocumented.</td>
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<td>Coco (24), South Korea, College Senior</td>
<td>Coco came to the U.S. with her parents when she was 5 years old. Her younger sister was born here. Coco has been 1-credit shy of her bachelor’s degree in psychology for 2 years. She hopes to pursue graduate education and is currently doing unpaid research in New York. Her friends and her mentor are aware that she is undocumented.</td>
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<td>Nancy (22), Mexico, College Senior</td>
<td>Nancy crossed the Mexican border with her mother when she was 3 months old. She is an only child raised in a single-parent household and was unaware of her status until her senior year of high school. Nancy is a sociology major accepted to a master’s program in education. She lives in California and is a member of a campus support and advocacy group for undocumented immigrant students. She is vocal about sharing her status with others, and her story has been featured on a national news station.</td>
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<td>Stiven (22), Poland, College Senior</td>
<td>Stiven came to the U.S. when he was 14 years old and was reunited with his mother in New York. His extended family remains in Poland. Stiven obtained his associate’s degree and is a political science major at a senior college in New York. Stiven is selective with whom he shares his status.</td>
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<td>Weronika (20), Poland, College Sophomore</td>
<td>Weronika came to the U.S. when she was 12 years old. She currently lives in New York with her mother and brother. Weronika is pursuing her associate’s degree and hopes to obtain bachelor’s and master’s degrees in fine arts. Her friends know that she is undocumented.</td>
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following each interview, and the journal she kept throughout the data collection and analysis process. This process of note-taking allowed the researcher to keep a record of salient ideas emerging from the data collection and analysis, to record method-related decisions, and to become aware of researcher biases (Rennie, 1998). These communications and memos contributed to the development of, and revisions to, categories based on participant support or rebuttal of themes.

**Researchers-as-Instruments and Bracketing Biases**

The first author, a White female U.S. citizen with a doctorate in counseling psychology, was responsible for recruiting and selecting participants as well as conducting all interviews. She had previously taken an advanced doctoral-level qualitative and quantitative research methods course and conducted a qualitative research study using grounded theory methodology. She explored
and organizations concerned with immigration issues in general, and immigrant students in particular. Information about the research project and requirements for participation were dispersed through these networks and relationships. Prospective participants then contacted the first author for additional information. Additionally, one participant was recruited via snowball sampling. Participants were informed of their right to participate in the study and to withdraw at any time. Because participants were undocumented immigrants, layers of protection were enacted in the recruiting process and throughout data collection and analysis in a number of ways. In order to establish trust, participants were recruited through organizations that catered to immigrant populations. The participants used pseudonyms throughout the research process. Finally, they were given a copy of the preliminary findings as well as opportunities to delete information they did not want shared.

Data analysis. In accordance with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) and Fassinger's (2005) description of grounded theory research and analyses, data analysis began with the first interview and proceeded according to the constructivist paradigm where reality is elucidated through the interaction between researcher and participant. The first author immersed herself in the data, conducting all interviews, transcriptions, and initial analyses. Data analysis began with immersion in the whole data “unit” (henceforth referred to as the interview or transcription). Each interview was then coded, where the raw data was converted into words or phrases that captured the meaning of the data unit at the conceptual level. This level of analysis is referred to as open coding (Fassinger, 2005). Given the purpose of the study, special attention was given to the psychological phenomena being described. After initial analyses were conducted, the second author collaborated with the primary author to understand the function of each piece of each interview (i.e., open codes) and identify relationships within (i.e., axial codes), and finally between, interviews (i.e., selective codes). This process was iterative and continued with each subsequent interview. Once saturation occurred, the final stage of analysis involved the generation of a theory depicting the interrelationships between themes and codes.

Credibility checks. Consistent with previous grounded theory research studies (cf. Daly & Mallinckrodt, 2009; Ward, 2005), several levels of credibility checks were imposed in our study to ensure the rigor of scientific findings (Morrow, 2005). First, participant checking contributed to data triangulation and increased the accuracy of the findings. Participants were asked questions at the end of the interview to check that the responses were thorough. Continued input from participants was also sought when they received a copy of the interview transcript and again when they were provided with a preliminary summary of the findings of the study. Inclusion of participant input in the analysis process also ensured good ethical practices by providing participants with opportunities to remove information they did not want shared. Next, triangulation of data was used to increase authenticity and credibility of findings by the use of field notes and reflexive journals along with interview data. Third, in order to address researcher reflexivity and dependability, the authors bracketed their biases prior to beginning the research process. In addition, the second author provided feedback regarding the creation of categories and the subsequent data analyses for a period of approximately 6 months. This procedure of investigator triangulation limits the potential bias that may occur when data are analyzed by a single researcher.

Results

The transcripts were analyzed and yielded 36 open categories and 12 axial categories across four selective categories. Table 2 lists the categories that represent the theory of identity development among undocumented immigrant students. The following section is organized as a function of selective categories with axial categories described as subsections. Undocumented immigrant students’ identity development is an ongoing process influenced by the interactions between home and host cultures. At different times, and often due to external factors (e.g., approaching educational transitions such as graduation), it offers opportunities for growth (i.e., retaining optimism regarding legal status) as well as struggle (i.e., ingraining stereotypes related to undocumented immigrants).

Sewn With Two Threads (Selective)

As children and minors coming to the United States after birth but before adulthood, the participants reported that their sense of cultural and ethnic identity comes from both home culture (country of origin) as well as host culture (United States). Depending on age of arrival in the United States, home culture influences are more often derived indirectly from memories of home or through experiences with older family members who retain cultural traditions and values. American cultural influences come from interactions with American peers and immersion in American culture through inclusion in the public school system. Participants reported that they were impacted to some extent by both cultures. To illustrate this idea, Annita described: “I am Colombian, but because I have been sewn with a thread of Colombian and American culture, I also identify myself as American.”

Acculturation/enculturation (axial). Not surprisingly, based on available existing research, all but one participant reported that their cultural and ethnic identity development arose as a result of the interaction between home and host cultural influences. Although participants reported that they began to embrace American values (e.g., independence) and appreciate the educational opportunities available in the United States, they often reported a simultaneous need to maintain ties to their immigrant communities. These ties were often maintained by seeking out friendships with other members of their cultural or ethnic group and by upholding cultural values and traditions. Josenotpedro spoke of his early childhood experiences navigating both the traditional Mexican culture in his home as the youngest of 10 children and the greater Chicano culture in his “liberal” Texas city:

In the earlier years, it was very hard learning the ins and outs of the Chicano culture here in Texas and then having in my house—living this life as an authentic Mexican family... learning how to resolve those different points of view.

Another aspect of the acculturation/enculturation process occurred when participants embraced American values (acculturation) without retaining important aspects of their home culture (enculturation). In these cases, participants’ relayed an active disengagement from their home culture. Sometimes this disengage-
ment was related to participants’ desire to disassociate themselves with stereotypes related to their ethnic communities or home culture. Victoria, for example, said about her home culture, “Sometimes I don’t like my culture. I really don’t, especially when I see women always being submissive to the male.”

**Benefits in belonging to two worlds (axial).** This code describes the benefits reported by participants stemming from their experience negotiating between home and host cultures. Participants reported an ability to understand different points of view, and expressed a sense of connection between themselves and other marginalized individuals. As Josenotpedro remarked, his experience of being a member of a marginalized group in the United States helped him to better recognize the struggles of other marginalized individuals in their fight for legitimacy:

I think the fact that I grew up here and was in school here, it has allowed me to be more in contact with groups that are different than me… The gay community, all of these different, these marginalized groups. And you learn that essentially we are all connected in the fight for equality and opportunity, and the fight for legitimacy.

Weronika, whose art is inspired by homeless men and women, made a connection between her desire to bring homeless people “out of the shadows” and her own desire to be recognized and counted.

Once participants demonstrated their ability to successfully navigate one hurdle, be it educational, financial, social, or otherwise, they reported an improved belief in their abilities to be successful in other venues. Stiven believed that his successful navigation of the challenges he has faced as a result of being undocumented will translate to future success in overcoming anything else he may face in life, “I can go to any country and I know I’ll survive… There was a lot of situations where I didn’t know what to do and I found a way around it.”

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<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Selective, Axial, and Open Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Axial</td>
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<td>I. Sewn with Two Threads</td>
<td>A. Acculturation/Enculturation</td>
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<td>B. Benefits in Belonging to Two Worlds</td>
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<td>C. Tension Points within the Family Structure</td>
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<td>II. Enhancement of Positive Attributes through Addressing Documentation Struggles</td>
<td>D. Developing Personal Qualities with Respect to Counteracting Barriers</td>
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<td>E. Recognizing the Interconnectedness Between Groups</td>
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<td>F. Activating Cognitive Control Over One’s Experience</td>
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<td>H. Using Defense Mechanisms as Coping Strategies</td>
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<td>I. Intrapersonal Conflict Related to Being Undocumented</td>
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<td>IV. Identity Formation as an Ongoing Negotiation</td>
<td>J. Moving “From One Playground to the Next”</td>
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<td>K. Experiencing Ongoing “Border Crossings”</td>
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<td>L. The Transitory Nature of Emotional Reactions to Being Undocumented</td>
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Tension points within the family structure (axial). Following the initial years of adjustments that participants reported after their move to the United States (e.g., English language acquisition, climate changes, adjusting to cultural diversity), the greatest source of tension between home and host cultural values played out in the participants’ homes and between family members. Some participants reported that parents, who were once more vocal and active in determining their educational and career paths, eventually relinquished their roles to accommodate their children’s independent plans. Coco, in accordance with her father’s wishes, began college as an accounting major. She later followed her personal interests and switched her major to psychology. In her interview, she shared how this change profoundly infiltrated her family’s structure. Cindy articulated a similar experience, recalling changes that arose in her immediate family following their move and her exposure to the American education system. “Moving to America really created a wedge. And thinking things over now I realized that what separated us was school.”

For individuals who moved to the United States as children and adolescents, older family members were often the primary source of cultural influence. The young children of immigrant parents, however, experience unique exposure to American culture and cultural values through their inclusion in the public school system. At times, these American values (e.g., individualism) are in direct conflict with traditional cultural values (e.g., collectivism), and as such, they present a source of potential strain between children and their family members. In other circumstances, immigrant children with greater exposure to American language and values sometimes begrudgingly become cultural and language brokers for other family members. Victoria spoke about her experience of having adult responsibilities from the young age of 13 when she said, “I have to do all the translations for my parents . . . I take care of the financial problems. We need to call the bank? I do that. We need to call the phone company? I do that.” Coco expressed her dismay about having this role:

> Every time the mail comes, I have to translate for my dad. So that’s something that I really dread . . . I’m obligated to . . . I know English better than them, so it’s just a given that anywhere they have to go, anything they have to do—I’m always with them . . . Even today I have to go to the dentist with my mom to translate for her.

Participants described the conflict between their immersion in American culture and the cultural values of their immigrant family as a source of acculturative tension or stress. Coco described the process by which her values and interests developed in contrast to the Asian values her parents espoused:

> Most of my friends were born here, in the U.S. And I don’t see any differences between them being born here, opposed to my other friends born in other countries. Our interactions aren’t different . . . our interests are usually the same because we watch the same things on TV, the media affects us the same, we listen to the same news.

Although these immigrant children more easily incorporate the dominant culture’s values into their cultural identity, older family members lack these types of immersion experiences and instead hold onto the traditional values of the home culture.

Enhancement of Positive Attributes Through Addressing Documentation Struggles (Selective)

By attending college in spite of their documentation status, the participants in this study have already demonstrated that their personal qualities include an aptitude for educational success. Yet throughout their experiences in the United States, and despite the obstacles they faced, participants continued to develop their existing skills and gain additional benefits. Most participants attributed this growth to their efforts to attain the same educational success as their documented counterparts. In general, this recognition was related to the belief voiced by several participants that, “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” In addition to inspiring themselves, participants also broadened their worldview to incorporate people from other cultures and life experiences, particularly others from marginalized groups.

Developing personal qualities with respect to countering barriers (axial). This code represents the ways in which participants have derived strength from challenges pertaining to their immigration status, developed the ability to be resourceful in independently navigating the American educational system, remained positive and optimistic that their struggles will end with personal and career-related success, and persevered in striving for educational achievement despite the many hurdles they have to clear along the way. Upon recollection, Jennifer said, “I was remembering those times of struggles and I was thinking . . . I have to be proud of myself. And I’m looking forward to various things to come,” indicating that her past accomplishments bolster her ability to overcome future obstacles. Other participants described their belief that experiences being undocumented made them better people. As Adry stated, “I feel like I’m so much more mature, in valuing things and being appreciative of what I have and not taking much for granted.”

Despite the many struggles facing undocumented immigrant youth, the participants in this study retained their optimism that, through changes in legislation or pursuing other options, they would be able to adjust their status. In many cases, participants reported that this optimism kept them motivated to go to college and even pursue graduate school opportunities. Nancy, who was accepted into Ivy League graduate schools but who settled on a state school for financial reasons said, “Something is going to change, and I’d rather have an education than no education . . . I have a feeling the DREAM Act, not a feeling—I know it’s going to pass.”

All participants described their persistence and perseverance in overcoming obstacles, particularly those related to educational success. In addition, participants believed that academic success would prepare them for future career pursuits. This led them to seek out further educational opportunities. Participants’ mounting successes, in turn, served to reinforce their perseverance. Adry articulated the relationship between success and renewed energy to continue fighting: “I can’t have a negative attitude and say, ‘No, I quit today. I’m got going to do it anymore.’ Because I’ve gotten so far that it would be so stupid of me to quit.”

Recognizing the interconnectedness between groups (axial). Many participants attributed their personal growth to addressing challenges related to their immigration experiences. All participants reported that their home countries were more racially and ethnically homogeneous than the United States and that since their
arrival in America, they have benefitted from their experiences with diversity. Specifically, these experiences served to broaden their worldview and highlighted the interconnectedness between themselves and the greater communities of which they are a part. At the same time that the world expanded with their exposure to American culture, it metaphorically became smaller as participants recognized connections between their struggles and the struggles and experiences of others. This code manifested in participants’ empathic attitude toward other marginalized groups and their efforts to contribute to the immigrant community in a variety of ways. Pepe, whose educational aspirations include becoming a lawyer, expressed his desire to help all disenfranchised “others” by saying, “That’s one of the reasons I want to study law because I want to promote or ferment the message of equality and dignity for [people from] other cultures.”

**Activating cognitive control over one’s experience (axial).** Finally, participants’ ability to derive new meaning from their experiences positively affected their self-perceptions. The three main ways that participants were able to achieve this was through reframing their experience, taking action to have their needs met, and challenging stereotypes. Rather than accepting the role of victim or focusing on the negative aspects of being undocumented, the participants in this study actively reframed their experiences in a more positive light and gave meaning to their many challenges. Weronika began her interview saying, “I’ll start with the conclusion I guess, because it wasn’t—because all the benefits I could get from here—but looking back, I learned a lot from the experience.” Although she went on to articulate her many struggles, she continued returning to her initial conclusion: that she had benefited from her experiences.

By recognizing the uniqueness of their situations—rather than focusing on the ways that their status had inhibited them—participants were able to bolster their energy and ability to persevere. Jennifer acknowledged this when she said, “My status—being undocumented and going to college—I think, is something that not everyone can make.” Other participants spoke of the potential roles of actions (e.g., lobbying) and career-related goals aimed at empowering and supporting other undocumented immigrants lead them to reconcile the potential mal effects related to being undocumented.

Finally, some participants considered themselves representatives of their ethnic and racial groups, and as such, they recognized their responsibility to counteract negative stereotypes of their ethnic communities as well as stereotypes of undocumented immigrants. Nancy said that her efforts to break stereotypes have been helpful to her. She stated, “I feel like I represent Latinos everywhere, when I ask a question or when I answer something, like I feel like I can’t just say B.S. in class because then the stereotypes are perpetuated, and I feel like it’s my job to, to break that.”

**Challenging Reflections (Selective).** In contrast to the opportunities for growth that many participants reported as a by-product of their status, all participants also described ways in which their status negatively impacted their identity development. This theme represents the ways in which undocumented status impacted the participants’ views of themselves and the world. The three axial codes for this theme address how participants have internalized their experiences and used defense mechanisms self-protectively. It also aims to capture the intrapersonal impact of being undocumented.

**Internalization of negative external experiences (axial).** External experiences, such as finding out one is not eligible for an internship or program, or being the target of discrimination and marginalization, often cause intense psychological reactions and shame. Some participants suggested that they used their immigration status, and not their personal achievements or individual characteristics, to define themselves. Cindy reported, “I have to wonder if I’m using the immigration status to define myself.” This theme aims to capture the different ways in which negative experiences related to undocumented status are internalized.

Constricted vocational or educational opportunities that are outside participants’ control also cause emotional reactions. Instead of blaming external forces that limit their opportunities, some participants blamed themselves. Jennifer expressed her experience of wavering between self-blame and recognizing that her legal status is outside her locus of control when she said, “I feel bad about myself because I see that some people are doing—are working in their field and I haven’t done it yet. It takes my self-esteem down... Sometimes I feel that it is my fault and other times it just feels like life is not fair.”

Other participants reflected on the ways in which their early experiences of hearing people stereotype undocumented immigrants became ingrained. Josenoteprolo reflected on how he continues to navigate the effects of his experiences with overt discrimination. He said, “Even as kids we understand what’s going on. We don’t have great control of it, but everything that happens stays with us, and these are things that we have to reconcile.”

Contrary to their experiences of inclusion within the public school system, participants in this study reported their feelings of voicelessness and invisibility upon entering adulthood. Voicelessness was often related to fear and vulnerability as well as shame. Pepe said, “I like freedom of speech. Unfortunately we, us, undocumented immigrants... have this fear, this omen, that if you express yourself that you’re going to be kicked out of the country.”

**Using defense mechanisms as strategies (axial).** Avoiding thoughts about being undocumented was very common among participants. Many described that in order to function successfully, they had to avoid thinking about the implications of being undocumented. The only participant who did not express feelings of voicelessness and invisibility was Coco, and she reported being very successful in using defense mechanisms to avoid experiencing the emotional reactions related to being undocumented. Other participants, such as Victoria, said, “I try to just push it away, I don’t think about it.”

Another defense against the emotional realization that arose when participants thought about their own situations was the displacement of negative emotions onto others. Many participants reported feelings of jealousy and anger toward others who were privy to the opportunities and privilege that comes along with being an American citizen. These defense mechanisms enabled participants to lead “normal” lives as students and helped them to refrain from internalizing their negative experiences. Adry expressed such feelings when she said:
Identity Formation as an Ongoing Negotiation

Identity formation is always in flux and is impacted by both internal and external experiences. As adulthood and exclusion from American society loom, undocumented immigrant students must make sense of their experience and begin to take action to counteract the contradictory social messages they have received (e.g., they do not exist). External events, which can be either momentous (e.g., high school graduation) or subtle (e.g., a negative comment about undocumented immigrants made by a classmate), often interacted with participants’ state of mind, prompting emotional experiences. Participants reported that their reactions to external events fluctuated over time and were affected by their current emotional state.

Moving “from one playground to the next” (axial). As minors, when they arrived in the United States, participants’ acculturation and enculturation experiences differed significantly from their parents and older siblings whose identities were formed within the context of the home culture. Participants described an early sense of blissful innocence regarding their inclusion in American culture. They commented on a lack of awareness that they were “different.” Pepe said, “At first I didn’t see any distinction. I mean, everyone was equal, everyone was studying.” Victoria said,

I did not know that there was ‘legals’ and ‘illegals’—I did not know there was a difference. To me, everyone was here and we all live here, we are from here. That was my understanding of it. Till then, when I was categorized.

This blissful innocence, however, left participants feeling unprepared to contend with the limitations and obstacles associated with being undocumented. Pepe said, “The reality is totally different once you experience those things that we have to experience, because of the lack of documents.” Nancy stated, “I didn’t think it was going to be that big of a deal. I really didn’t.”

Experiencing ongoing “border crossings” (axial). At one point, all participants crossed the border to enter the United States. However, experiences and transitions since that initial border crossing have led to additional metaphorical “crossings” at different stages throughout their lives. Experiences of exclusion from opportunities available to their documented counterparts began in junior high and high school as peers began applying for jobs, obtaining driver’s licenses, traveling, and researching college opportunities. For the participants, it seemed as though once a hurdle is successfully navigated, another is waiting behind it. Annita described:

I really started feeling it when I was graduating high school because I didn’t know at that time that I could apply to college. I kind of got into a slump in my senior year of high school. I was really depressed and I didn’t really want to go to college. As I’ve been in college, it’s just kind of hit me harder as each year goes by because it’s getting closer to—it’s just getting, I feel more pressure now. I can’t be in college much longer. I mean, if I go on to graduate school, that’ll be 2 more years, but even then.

The decision to “give voice” to their experience was another metaphorical type of crossing, and many participants had begun to take action to have their voices heard. For some participants, such as Adry, participating in this study was a first attempt at having their voices heard by someone outside their immediate community. In completing a demographic form prior to participating in this study, Victoria expressed her desire to have her voice heard. She wrote,

I decided to take part in this study because it is extremely important for my voice to be heard. It is important that people know how this can affect someone mentally and emotionally, but yet that someone is willing to risk everything to obtain their dream.

For others, these efforts included joining campus groups related to immigration issues and advocating for immigration reform on a broader level.

The transitory nature of emotional reactions to being undocumented (axial). Although each participant had different educational, social, and familial experiences, they all described a
general progression of their identity development in light of their documentation status. This progression involved an initial “shattering” of educational and career-related hopes and dreams, and a rebuilding process. All participants spoke about the transitory nature of their experience, and many commented on the ways in which their emotional experience fluctuated on a regular basis. In a general sense, these changes occurred gradually as participants integrated their growing awareness of the ways in which their documentation status impacted their career and educational opportunities with their emotional reactions to these limitations. As participants “came to terms” with restrictions and pursued different venues for meeting their educational, career-related, and personal needs, they reported that their emotional states were tempered somewhat as well. However, in concert with the slow-moving global shift from intense emotional reactions to being undocumented to tempered reactions, participants reported experiencing ongoing fluctuations in emotional experiences. One of the participants described how her emotional experience sometimes fluctuates on a daily basis. In ongoing correspondence with the first author, Cindy wrote, “If I am especially frustrated, it’s hard to gauge my progress or the distance I have traveled. If my mood is good, the journey seems manageable.”

Discussion

The grounded theory of identity development for undocumented immigrant youth, which was developed from the results of this study, indicate that, for this population, career and personal identity formation is a multifaceted process that is impacted by the influences of home and host cultural factors. Their current stage of identity formation at the time of the interview represented the ongoing negotiation between these value systems. Participants described how their identity developed as they negotiated between their initial understanding of the social and cultural messages they received regarding their status and the personal meaning they gave to their positive and negative experiences as students in the United States. The participants reported that throughout this process, there were opportunities for growth as well as constriction, and they stated that their categorization as undocumented immigrants impacted their view of self and others. Positive and negative experiences throughout personal and educational development often had reciprocal influences on participants.

Sewn With Two Threads

This selective code came from the words of one participant and serves to capture the ways in which this group of 1.5-generation immigrants’ identity develops as a result of experiences with home and host cultures. “Sewn with two threads” captures the benefits and potential struggles associated with cultural factors that play in personal and career identity development. The findings of the current study echo some of the results of existing research on the acculturation and ethnic identity experiences of the 1.5 generation (Gonzales-Berry, Mendoza, & Plaza, 2006), namely that identity is constructed as a result of the dual influences of home and host cultures. Exposure to home culture occurs through early memories, older family members, or continuing home cultural practices in the United States, whereas exposure to American values is the result of interactions with peers and American cultural practices through participation in the American educational system.

Although previous research indicates that optimal acculturation experiences occur as a result of the dual processes of acculturation and enculturation (e.g., Farver, Bhadha, & Narang, 2002), participants in this study were all able to achieve notable educational outcomes despite the fact that some participants reported that they did not embrace aspects of American culture (acculturation), or retain ties to their home culture (enculturation). For these participants, it is likely that personal factors (e.g., resilience) contributed to their ability to clear hurdles to educational achievement that previous research has connected with negative acculturation experiences.

Additionally, previous research has identified so many negative outcomes that are associated with acculturative stress and the continuous adjustments acculturation requires (e.g., Crockett et al., 2007). However, the results of this study indicate that the experience of negotiating home and host cultures provided opportunities for participants to increase their ability to adapt to a variety of experiences, and also to empathize more deeply with other marginalized people.

Enhancement of Positive Attributes Through Addressing Documentation Struggles

Perhaps the category of findings most relevant to the field of counseling psychology—given its emphasis on strength and resilience—was the fact that, despite the negative outcomes associated with documentation-related struggles, participants described a variety of ways in which their existing positive attributes were enhanced in response to meeting and addressing these struggles. This selective code describes some of the personal qualities and characteristics present in the group of undocumented immigrants who are able to attend college despite multiple barriers. This code also goes beyond identifying the qualities present among participants at their time of college enrollment by capturing how existing personal qualities continue to develop, and how participants view their personal growth beyond the realm of career development.

The findings of this study also reflected previous research regarding the positive effects of exercising cognitive control over one’s acculturation experience (e.g., Crockett et al., 2007). Participants in this study reframed their experience in a positive light, took action to have their emotional and physical needs met, and actively challenged the negative stereotypes with which they were confronted. These findings suggest that action, rather than complacency, can impact acculturation outcomes in a positive way.

Additionally, as most existing literature focuses on the negative outcomes associated with being undocumented (e.g., Chavez, 1998), the findings of this study offer an alternative outcome—namely, that successfully addressing various aspects of being undocumented facilitates opportunities for growth and a sense of personal success. This is particularly relevant for counseling psychologists and educators who work with undocumented immigrant youth because by focusing on previous success and accomplishments, undocumented immigrant youth may find the encouragement needed to remain engaged in educational pursuits and enjoy the buffering effects that these future accomplishments may have on potentially negative outcomes (e.g., dropping out of high school). These findings are consistent with a small body of existing literature that suggest that migrating to a new country provides opportunities for growth as immigrants confront their experiences.
with resilience, and enjoy the personal growth associated with their struggles (Yeh, Kim, Pituc, & Atkins, 2008). The undocumented students in this study derived energy from overcoming obstacles, learned to be resourceful in a variety of situations, and maintained their ability to persevere in the face of numerous immigration-related hurdles.

**Challenging Reflections**

In light of existing literature describing the multitude of ways that experiences with stigmatization and marginalization are associated with decreases in self-perception and other negative mental health outcomes (Sullivan & Rehm, 2005), the findings of the current study were consistent in terms of highlighting the negative ways in which being undocumented impacts one’s perception of the self. This selective code encompasses the processes of internalizing the experience of being undocumented, actively using defense mechanisms to protect against blaming the self for external negative experiences, and the intrapersonal conflict related to the experience of being undocumented. This code, which captures some of the risks regarding mental health outcomes and self-perception, also suggests that regardless of the intrapersonal conflict associated with undocumented status, participants’ ability to use healthy defense mechanisms served to buffer the internalization of negative external experiences. Although participants faced barriers and hurdles to educational and interpersonal inclusion in the United States, they were able to achieve educational and, in many cases, personal success as well.

**Identity Formation as an Ongoing Negotiation**

Just as acculturation and identity development are dynamic processes that change over time, the process of identity formation for undocumented immigrant youth is an ongoing negotiation as well. Coming to the United States as children protected the participants to some extent from the harsh realities of the restrictions they would face in pursuit of their educational and professional goals. As their peers began applying for after-school jobs, obtaining driver’s licenses, and preparing for post-high school educational ventures, these milestones served to introduce undocumented students to the notion of exclusion. Each of these milestones brings a greater sense of awareness and understanding, and accompanying emotional experiences. The initial awareness of exclusion generally precipitated a “shattering” of hopes. With time, participants then made efforts toward rebuilding educational- and career-related dreams. These emotional reactions include more pervasive changes over the course of a college career, as well as rapidly fluctuating emotional reactions that may occur throughout the course of a single day.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings from this study. First, participants were self-selected and therefore were willing and motivated to share their experience. As a result, there may be a similarity with respect to personal factors that are significantly different from the group of undocumented students who choose not to speak about their experiences. Second, recruitment focus for this study was on undocumented immigrant students who have experienced previous educational success or have educational aspirations despite facing certain barriers. These individuals likely differ in significant ways as compared with their peers who do not go to college, and, as a consequence, our findings may not be transferable to undocumented immigrant youth who were unable to complete high school or pursue higher education.

**Implications**

The findings from this study provide a context from which to understand the impact of documentation status on career and personal identity development. For counseling psychologists, career counselors, guidance counselors, educators, and policy makers, this context can inform interventions on the micro and systemic level. On the microlevel, counseling psychologists should work in remediation efforts to counteract mental health problems that arise as a result of social oppression by going beyond conventional ideas of psychotherapy, including educating themselves regarding educational opportunities and financial assistance, and disseminating this information among the students they work with. This is especially necessary given that undocumented students may otherwise be unaware of their rights and opportunities, or afraid to seek out such information themselves.

The findings of the current study also echo the potential for pervasive shame, decreased self-worth, stigmatization, and depression among undocumented immigrants. Mental health professionals working with these individuals should be especially vigilant in recognizing these reactions to being undocumented, and intervening in appropriate ways to alleviate negative psychological outcomes. Specifically, counseling psychologists and career counselors should help undocumented students identify and develop personal qualities such as resilience, resourcefulness, and perseverance. By helping these individuals reframe their experience, they can identify previous accomplishments and empower themselves. Additionally, mental health professionals can provide their clients with the opportunity to share their story and have their voice heard while exploring and challenging stereotypes. A counseling group, for instance, may be created to encourage undocumented immigrant students to recognize their shared resilience, demonstrated in continuously overcoming educational, psychological, and social barriers against a challenging, if not harsh, social backdrop (Chen, Budianto, & Wong, 2010; Chen, Wong, & Budianto, 2010).

Educators can also apply the findings from the current study to their work with undocumented immigrant students. Because this population is especially at risk for premature educational disengagement often related to the perception of limited post-high school opportunities, an effort should be made to inform undocumented immigrants of their rights and prospects. In order to accomplish this, educators should familiarize themselves with the policies and opportunities available to undocumented immigrants on the state and federal level. Additionally, educators should be aware of psychological reactions related to being undocumented, and should refer students exhibiting signs of depression to an appropriate counselor.

The findings of the current study call counseling psychologists to action at the systemic level as well in the role of advocate and...
change agent (Goodman et al., 2004). Just as the individual counseling psychologist adjusts his or her role in the context of therapy on the basis of the needs of his or her clients, counseling psychologists must collectively expand their roles to meet the needs of the greater communities they serve (Atkinson, Thompson, & Grant, 1993). There already exist examples of social justice work in the psychological community involving efforts to give voice, share power, and facilitate consciousness-raising, many existing for oppressed groups within immigrant communities. Therefore, a logical extension of our professional roles is to give voice to undocumented individuals beyond the therapy hour. This study is one example of an effort aimed at giving voice to undocumented immigrant students. Sharing the results at a conference, or through publication, are additional methods aimed at reaching wider audiences.

The findings of this study provide support for existing psychological theories such as SCCT (Lent et al., 1994, 2000), and introduced new concepts as well. Our findings are in alignment with SCCT’s view that that cultural (e.g., home and host), contextual (e.g., barriers), and personal (e.g., resilience) factors all impact the career and personal identity development of undocumented immigrant students. As expected, external factors, such as the legal, financial, and interpersonal barriers present in the lives of undocumented immigrant students, can serve to negatively impact career and personal identity development. Additionally, the findings of this study highlight the importance of the personal qualities and characteristics present in this group of undocumented immigrants who were able to attend college despite the multiple barriers they face. Furthermore, these findings also describe the evolution of how personal characteristics develop through continuous exposure to cultural and contextual factors.

The current study also supports the view that identity is constructed as a result of the dual influence of home and host cultures (Gonzales-Berry et al., 2006), and it attributes a major source of acculturative stress to tension regarding completing cultural values within the family system (Birman et al., 2007). Some researchers (e.g., Yeh et al., 2003) relate this tension to the acculturation gap that develops due to varying degrees of exposure to American culture and values. This study highlights the importance of personal qualities and characteristics in overcoming barriers to career development while simultaneously enhancing the participants’ overall sense of well-being. The current findings suggest that another source of tension comes from the restructuring of roles, such as when undocumented immigrant youth must act as culture and language brokers for parents and older family members.

Previous research suggests that cognitive control has a positive impact on one’s overall acculturation experience and can even moderate the effects of acculturative stress on depression and anxiety (Crockett et al., 2007). These findings corroborate previous research suggesting that action can impact acculturative outcomes in a positive way. Although documentation status can have a negative impact on self-perception, the successful application of defense mechanisms and activation of cognitive control can counteract negative feelings related to being undocumented, lead to the development of a more positive self-image, and buffer against negative effects of acculturative stress such as depression and anxiety.

Future research using qualitative methods with this population might include focusing on the process of identity development for undocumented immigrant youth who have not completed high school or pursued post-high school degrees, or with undocumented immigrants who do not disclose their status to others. Researchers may also want to focus on undocumented immigrants who have completed college or graduate degrees several years earlier in order to compare how extended periods of time without being able to apply one’s skill set to professional endeavors impacts identity formation. Once ample qualitative research has revealed more about the experience of undocumented immigrants, quantitative methods can be used to explore more specific venues (i.e., applicability of existing theoretical frameworks with this population).

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IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS


(Appendix follows)
Appendix

Interview Protocol

Negotiating Identity Development: The Story of Undocumented Immigrant Youth

The first set of questions is about your experience shortly after arriving in the U.S.
1. In general, what has life been like for you since coming to the U.S.?
   • What about life in the U.S. is similar to life in your home country? How is it different?
   • How does your quality of life in the U.S. compare with your quality of life you had in your home country?
   • What have your educational experiences been like? How have you been treated by classmates/teachers? How do you find the American school system (e.g., challenging)? Why?
   • What has it been like for you to interact with peers who were born in the U.S.? To interact with immigrants? Interacting with immigrant peers from your country of origin?
2. How, if at all, has your relationship with family members changed since your arrival in the U.S.?
   • Please describe any adjustments that were made with family members after periods of separation.
   • What roles and responsibilities do you have in your family (that differ from the roles and responsibilities you had in your country of origin)?
   • The next questions are about how your identity has developed in light of your immigration status.
3. When did you first recognize your status as an undocumented immigrant?
   • What was your initial understanding about your status? First reactions to it?
   • How has your understanding evolved over time?
   • How have you responded to your understanding of your immigration status?
4. How, if at all, has your legal status affected your view of yourself and others?
   • How have you interpreted messages from others? (peers, the media, teachers, etc.)
   • The next questions are about education and career.
5. What are some high/low points educationally/career-related?
   • How have they impacted your educational and career choices/pursuits?
   • What impact (if any) do you feel these experiences have on your career and identity development?
6. What made you decide to attend/complete college (e.g., people, experiences, economic factors)?
   • What role does your racial/ethnic group have on your educational/career goals? Other groups (e.g., gender, religious, sexual orientation, etc.)?
   • How do your personal qualities (i.e., interests, values, skills) impact your educational/career goals?
   • How has your immigration status impacted your educational pursuits?
   • How have others (friends, parents, relatives) responded to your educational goals?
   • The next set of questions ask for your present reflections on your overall experience in the U.S.
7. How has your actual experience in the U.S. differed (if at all) from the expectation you had prior to coming here?
   • How have you changed as a person as a result of your experience in the U.S.?
   • To what do you attribute those changes?
8. How does your experience as an undocumented immigrant compare with the experience of other undocumented immigrants?
   • How do you account for the difference?
   • The final set of questions is about the future.
9. In light of your status, what hopes and fears do you have about your future?
10. What thoughts does your family have about your future?
11. Is there anything else about your experience that we have not covered in this interview that you feel is important for me (others) to know?