

Complexities in Undocumented Student Identity: *From Masked to Unmasked*

ESTHER VILLEGAS-SANDOVAL, MA

COLLEGE OF THE CANYONS

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT WEEK OF ACTION: OCTOBER 2020

Before we begin ...

- ❖ Managing one's identity is a process and it is *complex*.
 - Identities are not static and can evolve or change.
 - Identity, or aspects of it, can be performed.
 - Identities and our “performances” can change. (Holland et al 1998).
 - The answer to “how do undocumented students manage (portray) their identity?” is a complex one with various factors involved – human behavior is complex and impacted by various forces.



Introduction Continued

- ❖ Experiences & identities within our undocumented community can be diverse.
- ❖ Undocumented individuals, as children, are typically warned of the dangers of disclosing their status for protection.
- ❖ Some students are unaware of their undocumented statuses. Some youth are not told they are undocumented until they approach high school graduation or their late teens.

Differences within Undocumented Students

The experiences of undocumented youth can be diverse and individuals can lead different lives:

❖ **Differences include:** age of arrival, fluency in English, ethnic/racial diversity, state of residence and even social class.

However ...

❖ Experiences with “illegality” or **liminal legality** This can unite individuals and lead to similar patterns for identity or behavior.

What do we know?

According to Migration Policy Institute:

- 11.3 million undocumented immigrants live in the United States (2016).
- About 98,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools every year; an increase from the previous 65,000 estimated (2019).
- As of January 31, 2019, 680,000 individuals held DACA status.
- Overall, high school graduation has increased.
 - About 66% of undocumented students complete high school.
 - Children who come to the United States at the age of 6, or older, have higher high school drop out rates.

Review of Legislation

Plyler v. Doe (1982): any child, regardless of their immigration status, cannot be denied free public education in grades kindergarten to 12th.

Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA): any individual who is not lawfully present in the United States cannot be eligible for any postsecondary education benefit – including in-state tuition – on the basis of residency.

AB 540 (2001): legislation which allows undocumented youth who meet certain criteria to be eligible for in-state tuition at California colleges and universities based on attendance not residency.

California Dream Act (AB 130 and AB 131): Grants access to non-state funded scholarships and state funded financial aid.

Review of Legislation

Federal DREAM Act (Development, Relief, Education Act for Alien Minors): provides/d a pathway for residency and citizenship.

DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals): provides (provided) temporary employment authorization and relief from deportation. Began in 2012 under the Obama Administration and was rescinded in 2017 under the Trump Administration; for now, only renewals are allowed.

American Dream and Promise Act of 2019 (H.R. 6): Contains and combines the newest version of the DREAM Act (H.R. 2820) and is waiting for Senate approval.*

Effects of DACA

- ❖ DACA has improved the economic conditions and mental health of undocumented immigrants who are eligible/enrolled.
- ❖ DACA does not lift the barriers to education or educational investment
- ❖ Indirectly motivates work over educational investments.



Why Review Legislation?

Legislation can impact:

- political climate
- opportunities (or the lack of)
- Helps us better understand experiences and put things into context.

Legislation also:

- Shapes labels

Undocumented Stigma & Stereotypes

- Research suggest that undocumented students confront stigmas that present or label them as: job takers, criminal, an economic drain, abusers of “the system” and even uneducated and deficient.
- Stigma can both discourage and encourage individuals to come out.
- Awareness of stigma can create **fear**.

Complexities and Negating Stigma

- ❖ Individuals do not always accept or internalize stigmas. Why?
- ❖ However, we can still be impacted by stigmas we do not internalize or adhere to.



- ❖ Negating a stigma or embracing an identity *does not* shield or protect us from institutionalized oppression or disadvantage.
- ❖ Ramifications and limitations of their legal status exist. Ultimately, those embedded practices of discrimination are a reality.

Examples?



Fear

- ❖ Feelings of fear can also encourage or discourage undocumented individuals from coming out.
- ❖ At the same, some students reject fear and come out.
- ❖ Overcoming fear can give individuals a sense of agency or control that being undocumented “seems to take away.”

- ❖ Living with fear can be fluid – fear is a spectrum.

Afraid ↔ Unafraid

Identity:

Can exist in a *spectrum*:

From **Passing** (also known as active concealment: hiding, “wearing the mask”)


To ...

Being **Explicitly Out** (also known as direct disclosure: being “Undocumented and Unafraid/ Proud
“DREAMer”



Justino Mora #AbolishICE #CloseTheC... ▼

@JustinoMora1



I took a DNA test, and it turns out
I'm 100% undocumented, unafraid,
unapologetic, and chingon!

11:53 AM · 20 Sep 19 · [Twitter for Android](#)

Passing & Concealment: “Wearing The Mask”

- ❖ Some contexts are empowering and others are constraining.
- ❖ External forces like social structure and laws influence how identity is shaped, understood, and projected.
- ❖ Our willingness to come out can be impacted by past experiences of coming out.

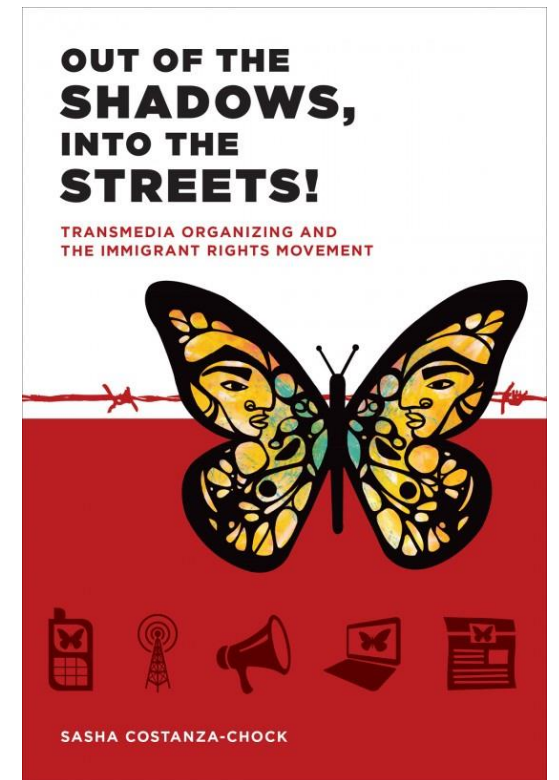
Warning!



- ❖ We should not perceive or frame disclosure as “good” and passing/concealment as “bad” – we should keep in mind that either forms of identity management can be *functional* for individuals.
- ❖ Disclosure might facilitate feelings of empowerment, individual agency, access to resources and more.
- ❖ Concealment might provide protection or the perception of protection.

Undocumented Closet

- ❖ Undocumented students “come out” and being undocumented can be or feel like a secret.
- ❖ Coming out involves losing and overcoming fear



Coming Out: A Cost-Benefit Analysis

- ❖ Coming out is a *choice* and often a *product* of a cost-benefit analysis.
 - ❖ There are risks and benefits associated with disclosing one's legal status.
 - ❖ Risk is first identified.
-
- ❖ Coming out can be empowering!

Audience: Who do we come out to?

A student shares:

“ ... (I come out) to my friends, to my teachers, and most importantly coming out to myself. We must accept the fact that we're undocumented” (De la Torre and Germano 2014: 463).

Coming out to ourselves: Chang et al. (2017) also finds that individuals have a *self image* and not only do we tell others who we are, ***we also tell ourselves***.

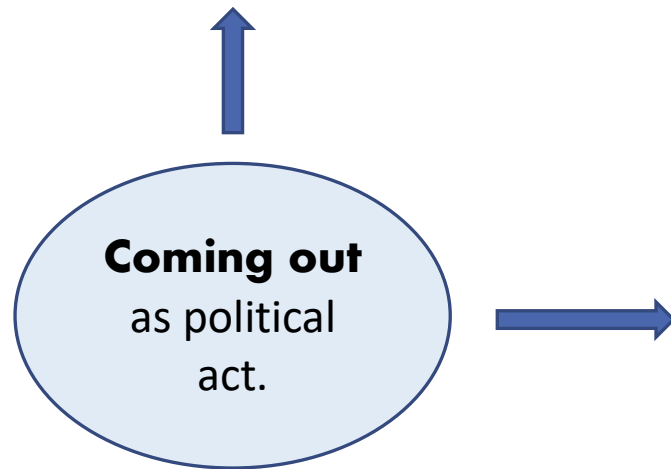
DREAMer: An Explicitly Out Identity

- ❖ DREAMers often emphasize their individual and collective achievements (often times educational) and the fact that they were mostly raised in the U.S.
 - ❖ The DREAMer identity involves taking risks and confronting fear.
-
- ❖ Labels like DREAMer can also help fight stigmatization.
 - ❖ Collective identity (DREAMers) can create solidarity and enable political action.
 - ❖ Someone can be out but not a “DREAMer”
 - ❖ Someone can self-identity as a “DREAMer” in one space and not another – identity is dynamic.



“Undocumented & Unafraid”: An Identity and Strategy

‘Undocumented & Unafraid’ is both a way of consciously existing and a “coming out campaign” (strategy).



Factors that Impact “Coming Out” – Disclosure Management

Disclosing legal status is based on several factors:

- ❖ Perceptions
- ❖ Overall anti-immigration sentiment
- ❖ Their own level of fear
- ❖ Community support
- ❖ Their own level of critical hope
- ❖ The amount of knowledge regarding their own rights
- ❖ Networking
- ❖ Ability to navigate different settings and institutions

*These are all considered a form of capital.

General Emotions and Emotional Consequences of Disclosure or Concealment

- ❖ Undocumented students can experience feelings of **pain, shame, anger, anxiety, depression, humiliation, and overall emotional distress.**
- ❖ They can also experience: **hope, courage, inspiration, and liberation.**
- ❖ Such data reminds us to consider the spectrum of experiences that can exist!! 😊

General Functions of Disclosure

Many feel that disclosure advances the needs of the collective:

- ❖ Bring attention to the larger undocumented community and their struggles.
- ❖ Humanize the larger undocumented community and their narratives.
- ❖ Create space and visibility.
- ❖ Helps combat negative stereotypes, stigma, and myths.
- ❖ Become agents of knowledge for other undocumented students and help them create new paths.

Personal Functions of Disclosure

Disclosing one's undocumented status can be helpful:

- ❖ Can allow students to access information, knowledge, or particular resources.
- ❖ Disclosing can also allow students to network with other undocumented students.
- ❖ The process of unpacking stigma and shame can be a source for personal empowerment.

Practical Tips for Staff, Friends, & Allies

- 1) Provide professional development to staff and professors to increase awareness.
- 2) Create and maintain peer support groups for students.
- 3) Be aware of external service providers and resources and link students to them.
- 4) Don't make assumptions about their lived experiences or identities: they are complex
- 5) Don't "out" someone: maintaining privacy is important for many.
- 6) Be trustworthy and empathetic so students can disclose important information and reach necessary resources.

Resources in the Community

1. COC's Student Health & Wellness Center:
<https://www.canyons.edu/student-services/health/index.php>
2. 211*: <https://www.211la.org/search-resources> & <https://www.211la.org/immigration>
3. CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Right): <https://www.chirla.org/>
4. ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), Antelope Valley Chapter:
<https://www.aclusocal.org/en/chapters/antelope-valley-chapter>
5. [COC's Dreamers Together Taskforce website](#):

*Can provide or locate mental health services.

Resources to Review



1. **Log onto** California Community Colleges' Vision Resource Center and complete the following two modules: **Supporting Undocumented Students** and **Trauma-Informed Care** @ <https://visionresourcecenter.cccco.edu/>
2. **Review** being “Undocu-Friendly” at a an institutional and individual level: 10 Ways to Support Undocumented Students: https://immigrantsrising.org/wp-content/uploads/Immigrants-Rising_Top-10-Ways-to-Support-Undocumented-Students.pdf
3. **Visit** College of the Canyons' Dreamers Together Home Page: <https://www.canyons.edu/student-services/enrollmentservices/dreamers/index.php>
4. **Read** Important Points for Allies: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NKpWjSeqEpAIYrS4qS2S22xKFb3FsetyszyXJC7jjXY/edit?usp=sharing>

This information is relevant to many student populations – veterans, LGBTQI+, students with invisible disabilities, etc.

Following these practices make us better practitioners. Our goal is to reach equity for ALL students.

