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Christopher Heinrich
Evolving Identities, Shaping
Connection: The Effects of
Narrative-Sharing Spaces on
Undocumented Latino Students

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was undertaken to explore the ways in which undocumented Latino students navigate and shift personal identity, notions of group solidarity and political consciousness upon “coming out” as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces that specifically ask them to reflect on their citizenship status in the company of other undocumented young people. The study aims to help guide the social work community in developing further support for undocumented youth.

The study sample comprises nine undocumented Latino students from the San Francisco Bay Area, ages 20 – 24. Data was collected through in-depth, in-person interviews that focused on participants’ experiences of coming out as undocumented and sharing stories with undocumented peers.

The major findings of the research included the fact that the processes of coming out as undocumented and continuing to share stories with peers have supported the following: positive emotional development; identity expansion and integration; increased sense of personal voice and purpose; and growth in interpersonal and community supports. The findings encourage the social work community to create narrative-sharing spaces for and with undocumented youth, using this study’s participants’ voices to imagine best practices.

**EVOLVING IDENTITIES, SHAPING CONNECTION:
THE EFFECTS OF NARRATIVE-SHARING SPACES ON
UNDOCUMENTED LATINO STUDENTS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to offer a platform for undocumented immigrant young people to safely give voice to their often invisible experiences; and second, to use those voices to imagine further opportunities for empowerment and social change work. Specifically, this research aims to explore how “coming out” as undocumented and sharing life stories with other members of the undocumented community may or may not affect undocumented students. Interview participants included current undocumented Latino students who have been a part of a space wherein they have been encouraged to share life stories related to their citizenship status and undocumented identity with other undocumented students. This “space” could be a workshop, organization or club meeting, or other event that explicitly asked for participants to reflect on and share their experiences of being undocumented. With these intentions and parameters in mind, my overarching research question for this qualitative methods study is: What are the effects of coming out as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces on the identity formation, empowerment and/or political consciousness of undocumented Latino students?

A brief discussion of our contemporary society points to the importance of this research and its relevance to clinical social work practice. At this point in American history, the federal government invests an enormous amount of resources to the detention and removal of millions of undocumented immigrants, and exclusionary anti-immigrant language floods many of our

political debates. These realities create an atmosphere of fear wherein many undocumented youth are silenced, disenfranchised and uncertain about their futures.

In framing the impact of this climate on this study's target population, let us look to a staggeringly grim statement: evidence consistently points to the fact that the effects of undocumented status on development are negative. According to a landmark article recently released by the Harvard Educational Review, Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, & Teranishi (2011) develop a framework that elucidates the risks undocumented youth face with regards to "lower educational performance, economic stagnation, blocked mobility and ambiguous belonging" (p. 461). Roberto Gonzales (2011), one of the nation's most prominent scholars on undocumented youth, used data from 150 interviews to conclude that this population becomes especially vulnerable to socioemotional and developmental risks as they transition into an "illegal" adulthood. Yet despite such bleak projections for their eventual trajectories, undocumented youth continue to demonstrate that they have incredible potential to be successful, significant contributors to the richness of the American cultural landscape and political economy (Alarcón, 2011; Gonzales, 2008; Huber, 2009).

With so much at stake for the futures of our country's one million undocumented children, it is crucial for the social work community to engage with undocumented immigrant communities in conversations about mental health and individual and community empowerment. Through these relationships, we can learn important lessons that can help our profession to better serve the needs of a population that, though powerfully involved in society, continues to reside at its margins and remain invisible. As we fight for pro-immigrant legislation to make its way through the system, we must find ways to empower undocumented children and young adults to reclaim their stories and become self- and community-advocates. Studies that illuminate the

health and socioemotional development of undocumented youth and young adults, especially with regards to how they support one another while navigating unsupportive systems, are urgently needed (Cooc & Oh, 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). The current study aims to help fill this gap.

Be it through psychotherapy or community organizing, the process of reclaiming and redefining a narrative allows us to confidently assert new, refreshed identities; thus, a potential avenue for facilitating empowerment work entails creating spaces that encourage narrative production and storytelling. For undocumented youth, participation in such a space may involve reclaiming identity and sharing stories as counter-narratives to what has been unfairly ascribed to them by those powers that label them “illegal”. My hypothesis is that the ability to connect with other undocumented peers in a space that encourages narrative-sharing promotes empowerment, solidarity and political consciousness within the undocumented community. I hope that by using an analysis of the real effects of these spaces on undocumented young people, the social work community may be better able to determine the means through which to engage in empowerment work.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Proceeding thoughtfully, I continue with a brief review of critical race theory (CRT) and LatCrit, emphasizing how these scholastic frameworks underpin this research. I then explore the ways in which marginalized communities build strength in order to engage in resistance against domination and imagine social change work. From there, I make a case for the importance of storytelling and counter-narrative production vis-à-vis the theories and studies introduced in the previous sections. Finally, we end this chapter with a review of literature that justifies the idea that the process of narrative-sharing has a unique ability to shape and empower participants on an individual level.

CRT and LatCrit Framework

Born as an academic discipline in the mid 1980s, CRT encompasses a scholastic movement that endeavors to critically examine the intersections of race, law and power as they exist within society, institutions, communities and the lives of individuals. One of CRT's main goals is to expose the realities of white supremacy, thus challenging it in an effort to make room for the validation of undervalued ways of experiencing and making sense of the world. CRT examines the ways in which U.S. society privileges a "Eurocentric perspective founded on covert and overt assumptions regarding white superiority, territorial expansion and 'American' democratic ideals such as meritocracy, objectivity and individuality" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 11). LatCrit furthers this discussion by consciously incorporating issues of immigration status

and language, as well as additional facets of ethnicity and culture that can be left out of CRT, thus better articulating the specific experiences of Latinos (Huber, 2009; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

One of the most important methods of effectively utilizing CRT is in recognizing the significance of experiential knowledge; specifically, analyzing the experiential knowledge of People of Color in order to build a fuller assessment of society and work toward change (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Looking to some of the most important literary works of the 20th Century, it is understood that marginalized folks naturally possess a uniquely meaningful manner of viewing reality. Long before CRT entered the national discourse, W.E.B. DuBois's (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk* coined the term "double consciousness" to refer to the positioning of Black Americans as from a place wherein they simultaneously understand their own self-awareness as well as the ways in which others perceive them based on their racial heritage and markings. Similarly, undocumented young people grow up having to consider their own sense of identity as an undocumented person in the United States in relation to how they may be characterized by the media, politics and citizens who may harbor some sort of resentment toward the presence of undocumented people in this country. As we determine the implications of double consciousness with the help of bell hooks's (1990) "marginality as a site of resistance", it is clear that the pain of oppression "nourishes one's capacity to resist" (p. 341). Those living with a sense of double consciousness acquire a valuable and potentially radical cultural consciousness.

Building Cultural Capital and Citizenship

To better understand double consciousness and its potential power as relevant to the undocumented community, it is imperative to provide a picture of the cultural context within

which the undocumented community lives. The political and legal complexities of this issue are very hot and contemporary; but as officials sort through the details of immigration reform, real people experience the implications of the debate in their daily lives. De Genova (2005) argues that in the past decade in the United States we have seen an intensified form of xenophobia and U.S. nativism, that is “distinguished by a pronounced anti-immigrant racism disproportionately directed against Mexicans...due to the hegemonic conflation of ‘Mexicans’ with ‘illegal aliens’” (p. 206). In a similar vein, Huber (2009) asserts the following:

[The] framing of undocumented Latina/o immigrants as “criminals” strips undocumented communities of their humanity, making illogical arguments for exclusion plausible and widely acceptable...This framing limits the understanding of undocumented immigration to a ‘crime’ and can potentially constrain the agency of undocumented immigrants, their allies, and advocates to counter these negative portrayals. (pp. 723-4)

Under systems of oppression, socioemotional development can be complicated by factors from the societal level. Coronado, Cortés, Pérez, & Ramos (2010) sum up the effect that demonization and marginalization have on the undocumented student population:

The socioemotional development of an undocumented Latina and Latino immigrant college student not only is affected by typical environmental factors such as poverty, violence, lack of resources, and discrimination that affect a large percentage of low-income minority children, but these individuals also are scorned by extra layers of systemic barriers that prevent them from enjoying all of the social and financial benefits that society has in place for legalized individuals and American citizens. (p. 38)

Living under such oppressive societal dynamics compels undocumented folks to consider their lives in ways that remain invisible to those in dominant social locations. In her critique of

the limited nature of cultural capital theory, Tara Yosso (2005) uses a CRT framework to demonstrate how Communities of Color nurture community cultural wealth in order to survive and resist oppression. These communities develop community cultural wealth through the following forms of capital: aspirational capital; linguistic capital; familial capital; social capital; navigational capital; and resistant capital. In essence, this framework provides a way to make meaning out of the ways in which Students of Color and undocumented students in general develop cultural capital out of the experience of marginalization (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). This, in turn, speaks to the lesson put forth earlier through DuBois (1903) and bell hooks (1990) that marginalization plants the seeds of double consciousness and resistance.

The accumulation of community cultural wealth and thus cultural capital allows for marginalized communities to build and strengthen cultural citizenship. According to Silvestrini (1997), as cited in Benmayor (2002), cultural citizenship refers to “the ways people organize their values, their beliefs about their rights, and their practices based on their sense of cultural belonging rather than on their formal status as citizens of a nation” (p. 98). A small body of literature exists that focuses specifically on the educational narratives of undocumented students, pointing to the strength of this community’s cultural citizenship (Abrego, 2008; Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2010; Huber 2009). Because of the legal barriers that the undocumented community faces, an adamant sense of cultural citizenship may be especially empowering and can be a key tool in strides toward inclusion.

Third Space

Another way that marginalized folks navigate identity and develop new perspectives is through the creation of third spaces. The concept of “third space” refers to something that exists between the “first space” of home and community and the “second space” of more formalized

institutions such as work or school (Moje et al., 2004). An example of a third space that undocumented students may create could be a support group on a college campus. Third spaces become important grounds for imagining fresh identities, especially when the ideologies and practices of second spaces oppress the first space of home experiences.

The theorist who developed third space, Homi Bhabha (1994), asserts that these spaces can expand ways knowing, thus supporting marginalized communities in resisting domination by oppressive structures. In other words, instead of having to choose to either assimilate or rebel completely, a person can exist in this third space in between; therefore, potential for the creation of fresh cultural identities flourishes. A third space is essentially a counter space that allows participants to negotiate the multiple realities within which they function, and hybrid identities emerge from this process (Bhabha, 1994; Pérez, 1999).

Resistance

Resistance theorists highlight the ways in which individuals create meaning out of their struggles with and navigation through structural oppression. Delgado Bernal (1997) conducted a study on Chicana resistance in a school setting, offering four different categories of resistance: reactionary; self-defeating; conformist; and transformational. According to Solórzano & Delgado Bernal (2001), most resistance research focuses on the self-defeating category. Self-defeating resistance involves actions or behaviors that may be rooted in a critique of the larger system, but ultimately re-create oppressive conditions. The type of resistance that offers the most potential for social change, transformational resistance, involves “an awareness and critique of [one’s] oppressive conditions and structures of domination and must be at least somewhat motivated by a sense of social justice” (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 319).

Firm ideas of cultural citizenship and the creation of counter spaces both facilitate this type of transformational resistance. Leisy Abrego (2008), a legal scholar, interviewed undocumented students and examined their mobilization around the passing of California's AB 540 law, which allows qualifying undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at California's public institutions of higher education. She details how undocumented students have legitimized their narratives over time through the passage of CA AB 540: "increased confidence, coupled with [the] more socially acceptable label [of AB 540], has allowed undocumented students to identify themselves publicly in an effort to find others who share their status" (p. 727). This process of transformational resistance showcases one way in which undocumented students have legitimized their cultural citizenship through aspirational and navigational capital.

In their study on how Latino students respond to racial microaggressions on college campuses, Solórzano, Ceja, Smith, & Yosso (2009) found that these students develop and participate in counter spaces in which they find support and discuss ways to navigate both worlds of school and home. In another study, Amy Lee (2011) found that despite struggling with difficult challenges, students succeeded by leveraging their community cultural wealth and identifying third spaces in which to participate.

According to the literature, this younger generation of undocumented folks seems to have been able to harness cultural citizenship and use counter spaces in a way that their parents have not (Abrego, 2011; Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2012; Seif, 2011). Abrego (2011) used her data from the 2008 study and compared it to interview data from 28 undocumented respondents who immigrated to the United States later in life than the students she had interviewed in the legal study. For older adults, narratives of the border crossing are laden with ambiguities and uncertainties in time and space reference, pointing to the lack of control so often inherent in

displacement (De Fina 2003b); however, those who crossed the border at a younger age have tended to develop the tools necessary for community mobilization (Abrego, 2011).

Abrego (2011) asserts that this younger generation “were often too young to participate in the decision to migrate, do not recall details of the migration journey, and occupy legitimized spaces in the United States as students in educational settings where they are safe from ICE raids and deportation” (p. 363); thus, these students’ more forcefully reject a marginalized status and make claims to recognition (Abrego 2008; Abrego 2011). They have also used third spaces and support from each other to develop a strong sense of Mexican cultural identity alongside a process of acculturation to American culture, creating new ways to define what it means to be “American” (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 20120; Seif, 2011). These examples of transformational resistance further affirm the power that exists at the margins.

The Importance of Storytelling

The act of storytelling and listening to narratives can potentially work toward transformational resistance: students participate in a third space by coming together to share knowledge and emotional experiences, transmitting cultural citizenship. Storytelling is a respected way of developing new ways of understanding according to the CRT tradition in that it allows the speaker to reclaim identity (Alarcón, 2011; Carter-Black, 2007; Delgado, 1989; Flores, 2003; Freire, 1973). Operating from this framework, the process of counter-narrative production and storytelling allows for undocumented young people to claim their own space within a discourse that so desperately needs authentic voices.

With such a punitive narrative against the undocumented population, counter-narrative storytelling becomes an important educational and/or empowering experiential tool. As articulated by William Flores (2003), “Without the ability to express themselves, excluded

groups have no ability to ‘belong’ except on someone else's terms, that is, from the perspective of the dominant culture” (p. 93). The process of storytelling through written, spoken or performed word allows for a creative, personalized and intimate re-imagining of oppression (Bell & Roberts, 2010). The act of storytelling through counter-narratives in safe, productive spaces allows for difficult topics, that would otherwise appear to be an unfortunate part of life, to become embodied experiences that can be more objectively understood and changed (Carter-Black, 2007; Roberts, 2005; Thompson, 1997). Alarcón, Cruz, Jackson, Prieto, & Rodriguez-Arroyo (2011) so eloquently point out that “to read and listen to these stories is to commit to another kind of understanding – one of solidarity – of the challenges of language and assimilation, of gender and race and the violence of patriarchy, of the experiences of being treated as an ‘alien’ in one’s own country” (p. 370).

Shaping Identity Through Narrative-Sharing

Telling stories connects the individual to the collective experience, thus deepening our appreciation for each other’s experiences, opening our minds in an empowering way (Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Greene, 1995). Famed philosopher and educator Paolo Freire (1973) explains the fact that those who are oppressed can only begin their struggle toward justice once they have truly grasped an understanding of themselves in relation to their oppression. In a similar vein, Cornel West (1993) writes that a critical consciousness arises out of a “new self-perception in which persons no longer view themselves as objects of history, but rather as subjects of history” (p. 134). Through storytelling and sharing counter-narratives, marginalized folks are able to share and express authentic life histories, reinventing their own political consciousness.

According to Richard Delgado (1989):

[Stories] can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. They enrich imagination and teach that by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone. Counterstories can quicken and engage conscience. Their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways in which more conventional discourse cannot. (pp. 2414-2415)

But before they can begin to engage in narrative-sharing processes, undocumented folks must first confront an added burden of invisibility. In order to truly express him or herself and grow through narrative-sharing, an undocumented person must first come out to others as undocumented, as this identity is not one that can be seen or easily inferred. With this dynamic in mind, it may be useful to draw from literature that explores the effects of the coming out, and thus narrative-sharing, process on LGBTQ folks. Although these identities are different, perhaps undocumented people experience similar feelings and emotions surrounding coming out as do members of the LGBTQ community.

Quantitative empirical studies have explored the ways in which LGBTQ folks rate stress levels and growth in certain dimensions pre and post coming out for the first times (Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2011; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). These studies have found that those LGBTQ people who have strong ties to a larger LGBTQ community experience lowered levels of internalized homophobia than those who do not have that community. It has also been concluded that the coming out process facilitates a perceived growth in authenticity/honesty, biopsychosocial well being, personal sexual minority identity, sense of belonging and collective identity (Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). In analyzing open ended essays of LGBTQ people, Jason Orne (2011) asserts that LGBTQ people engage in a process that goes

from identity development to identity management. He calls the outcome “strategic outness”, wherein LGBTQ folks engage in the following: use strategies to manage who knows about their identities; have multiple motivations for controlling this information; and strongly take into account the role of various social relationships in this decision-making process. These findings may speak to the dynamics of the coming out processes of undocumented youth.

Other authors center theoretical discussions around the ways in which individuals construct their personal narratives. Although often related to issues of race and oppression, these theories are not necessarily based around goals of empowerment; instead, these researchers concentrate on the actual formation of identity through narrative and vice-versa. Michael Bamberg (2011) gives more credit to individual agency in forming narratives that reflect a self-identity, whereas Anna De Fina (2003a) insists that individuals within a certain group tend to negotiate identities through interactions, constantly constructing and reflecting notions of self and other. Bamberg (2011) discusses the notion of “self” quite often, stating that one of a speaker’s main goals is to differentiate herself. This assertion diverges sharply from De Fina (2003a) and Teun A. van Dijk (1998), who make more efforts to show how members of groups share representations of self and use each other to co-construct narratives.

Bamberg’s (2011) ideas reflect typically Western notions of self and identity, valuing individualism and differentiation. Moreover, he does not take into account the impact of society on the individual. De Fina (2003a) specifically addresses the narrative shaping of Latino immigrants, a group that is oppressed; therefore, it makes sense that individuals would be more invested in constructing a mutually beneficial narrative. The emphasis on either the self or the self in relation to others reflects a common difference between narrative theorists. Kenneth Gergen & Mary Gergen (2006) state a middle ground between these two extremes: “orientations

that locate the source of narrative within social relationships, but see them as incorporated into the personal functioning of the individual” (p. 119).

Just as social relationships affect narrative creation, social relationships affect the formation of self-identity. Erik Erikson (1982) uses the socioemotional development framework to explain the ways in which our individual selves develop in relation to what we get or do not get out of our interpersonal relationships with others at various points throughout the life course; the dynamics of these relationships may lead to an individual’s sense of trust, control in the world or sense of belonging. Santrock (1997) asserts that the socioemotional process “involves changes in the individual’s relationships with other people, changes in emotions, and changes in personality” (p. 19).

Summary

In consideration of the theoretical literature and amalgam of iconic activists’ voices, there exists a clear consensus that marginalized communities can engage in counter-narrative production and storytelling as a way to reclaim identity and empower their movements. The fact that marginalized folks are forced to deal with oppressive barriers as they undergo a process of self-formation further suggests the importance of engaging with critical consciousness and other people within third spaces in order to develop new perspectives and strengthen voices so they can be heard with force in society.

Empirical literature that can be used to reinforce these ideas is not as plentiful. Completed studies have spoken to the ways in which marginalized communities, and undocumented students in particular, develop strength and work toward social change through transformational resistance. The current study aims to bridge theory that supports the empowering qualities of narrative-sharing with the real experiences of undocumented students

who have participated in spaces that have offered the opportunity to express their experiences and cultivate cultural citizenship.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Research Design

Taking into account the existing literature, it was clear that the analysis of narratives would provide the best opportunity for inductive methods of developing meaningful results and discussion. I was curious to explore the ways in which undocumented Latino students use and build their narratives when specifically given the opportunity to engage with undocumented peers about their life histories and goals for the future. I also wanted to get a sense of how these students feel about the decisions they have to make in coming out, navigating identity and existing in the world. The purpose of this research is to gain knowledge about group processes as they relate to identity formation and growth in solidarity of an oppressed group within American society. Implications of the study may be used to imagine the ways in which community empowerment develops. My study asked the following question: What are the effects of coming out as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces on the identity formation, empowerment and/or political consciousness of undocumented Latino students?

In conducting this research I employed qualitative research methods. My work was exploratory in nature, and I used inductive methods to get a sense of the multiple ways in which coming out and participating in narrative-sharing spaces affects undocumented students. I conducted in-depth, English language individual interviews with nine undocumented Latino students. This approach allowed me to collect the most detailed, personalized accounts of

experiences possible, as the students, in essence, delivered their narratives to me. In terms of my personal perspective, I do believe that the opportunity to share lived histories with peers has incredible potential in helping one to integrate his or her own identity. I think this integration happens through the reactions of peers and their subsequent sharing of stories. When these individuals come from an oppressed group, I believe that these connections contribute greatly to empowerment and solidarity.

Sample

For my study, I recruited participants who identify as students who are undocumented Latino immigrants, aged 18-30. My sample universe consisted of college-age undocumented Latino students who have come out and participated in some type of narrative-sharing space; however, due to issues of geographic access, my study population included undocumented Latino college students who attend school in the San Francisco Bay Area. I chose to recruit students who were already out as undocumented to at least some of their peers, since the process of coming out and its effects on identity were important to my research question. Because my inclusion criteria were so strict, there were no further exclusion criteria.

In collecting my sample, I used multiple nonprobability sampling techniques, including: convenience sampling based on networks of students to which I had access; and snowball sampling through referrals I received through a core group of participants. I used my connections at a local Bay Area grassroots nonprofit that caters to the needs of undocumented students. This organization agreed to send out email blasts and allowed me access to their social media networks so that I could recruit. From this original sampling method, I corresponded with both potential participants and allies. These people were able to pass along my recruitment materials

throughout their own networks, allowing word-of-mouth sampling to extend word beyond the original organization with which I worked.

Because I conducted a qualitative study, I was more concerned about exploring a small number of students' experiences as deeply as possible than I was about representation or generalizability to the theoretical population. Based on my intended sampling methods and small number of participants, my study has inherent bias and thus may not be representative of undocumented Latino students as a whole. That said, I hope that data from my study will speak to the general processes of coming out and narrative-sharing and their effects on personal and group identity development.

I originally intended to collect a larger sample of at least 12 participants, which proved to be difficult for me. In the end, I only interviewed nine students. If I had had more time to recruit, I would have considered going through the IRB review board processes of various colleges and universities through the Bay Area so that I could have recruited on campuses. I believe that strategy would have allowed me to reach a broader population and thus collect more participants. If I had the financial means to offer compensation to participants, I believe I also would have been able to find more participants. Regardless of my recruitment methods, I do wonder about the safety concerns that members of the potential sample may have had about getting in touch with me and agreeing to participate. After all, this population faces significant legal barriers; the potential consequences of providing contact information to a stranger may not have been viewed as worth the benefit of participation.

Data Collection Methods

I collected limited demographic data, including gender, age, country of origin and academic institution. The main data I used in my analysis was qualitative data that I collected

through in-depth interviews with nine participants. These interviews allowed me to elicit rich narrative responses about the students' experiences of coming out and participating in narrative-sharing spaces.

When organizing my interviews, I responded to respondents by offering preferred time slots to schedule an interview based on a limited amount of options. While we were determining the best option for timing, we also discussed where might be a comfortable, neutral place to meet. Students were encouraged to select the location so that they felt safe. Interviews took place at various places, including: coffee shops; university lounges; homes; community spaces; and my office. At each interview, I made sure that the participant understood the informed consent form and signed it before we began.

During the interviews, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions related to their experiences of coming out and sharing stories with peers. The interviews lasted anywhere from 20 – 45 minutes, and I transcribed them all myself. The methodological weaknesses of my study are related to the fact that it is qualitative in nature. My sample was limited, both because it is a small sample size and because I targeted a very specific population within the undocumented community; therefore, my study is not representative of the sample universe. Its strengths include the fact that I gathered rich narratives from students regarding themes of empowerment and identity as a member of an oppressed group. These voices tell very strong, important stories from which the social work community can learn.

Data Analysis

My research project primarily required qualitative data analysis methods, including thematic analysis and the grounded theory method. I used descriptive statistics in order to describe my research sample; specifically, descriptive statistics allowed me to express the

demographic data – age, gender, country of origin and academic institution – of my participants. I did not use inferential statistics in my qualitative study, because the results are not generalizable; therefore, I avoided using my data to make statements about the larger population of undocumented Latino students.

The content analysis of my data entailed quantifying my qualitative data by coding for themes and patterns that became visible through the rich narratives that came out of the interviews. Through a process of open coding, I read the narratives critically, pulling out important quotes that point to areas of interest. As I began to see patterns in my thematic analysis, I coded the quotes based on the important points to which they spoke.

As I examined the narratives and themes, I also used axial coding in order to link codes together in way that tells a story. Specifically, I looked for the causal conditions of themes that arose, as well as the properties of these themes. As I used this grounded theory method, it was important to engage in a process of “constant comparison” in order to make sure I did not overlook anything from narratives through which I had already read. As differences between narratives arose, I was also sure to examine the properties of the causal conditions, as these properties tend to speak to the unique nature of each participant’s experiences.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which undocumented Latino students navigate and shift personal identity, notions of group solidarity and political consciousness upon coming out as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces that specifically ask them to reflect on their citizenship status. As there is a scarcity of research focusing on the unique experiences and needs of undocumented youth in this country, this study contributes to existing literature about this population. This study also hopes to develop ideas that may help the social work community to provide appropriate services to the undocumented young people who wish to be allowed to more fully and equally participate in American society.

This chapter presents data collected from interviews with nine undocumented Latino students. Demographic information was collected from each participant addressing their age, gender, country of origin and academic institution. The interview questions addressed themes related to the coming out process, emotional experience of both sharing and listening to life stories, the effects of the storytelling process on identity and a sense of connection, and the ways in which participants use each other as support. This chapter is divided into four broad sections based on the collected data, including: impact of the act of sharing narratives; impact of listening to narratives; navigating identity; and using voice to navigate group structures and systems. The final two sections are broken down further so as to guide the reader as efficiently as possible.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The study was comprised of nine undocumented students. All nine participants were born in Mexico and currently reside in California. Of the nine participants, three identified as men and six as women. Although recruitment for the study allowed for participants ages 18-30, the self-selected group of nine ranged in age from 20-24: one participant was 20; two were 21; four were 22; and two were 24. The breakdown of academic institution is as follows: three participants currently attend schools with the California Community Colleges system; three currently attend a school within the University of California system; one currently attends a school within the California State University system; one has a B.A. and is currently enrolled in community college; and one has a B.A. and is currently enrolled in a creative writing class while applying for graduate school.

Impact of the Act of Sharing Narratives

Upon beginning the interview, each participant was asked to identify the type of space in which they had been encouraged to share life stories with undocumented peers. Most participants named multiple spaces and thus continued through the interview with various narrative-sharing experiences in mind, as opposed to a single, unique event. The specific types of spaces identified included the following: an outreach team sponsored by a local non-profit (67%); a school club (55%); a community group (33%); a presentation that included student voices (22%); a political rally (11%); and a creative writing class sponsored by a local non-profit (11%).

All nine participants spoke about the fact that coming out as undocumented and continuing to share stories have affected their lives in positive ways. In this section, I detail the initial, mostly emotional and visceral, impacts of coming out and narrative-sharing. In later sections I use data to describe the evolution of identity, purpose and sense of belonging after these initial experiences. To understand this beginning shift, it is important to first detail the

ways in which these young people originally experienced the restrictive nature of their citizenship status, compounded by the burden of keeping it a secret. Eight (89%) participants said that they felt some sense of feeling alone or isolated before disclosing their citizenship status to anyone. Three (33%) participants expressed that they felt afraid, and three (33%) participants acknowledged that they harbored feelings of anger. Some other words and phrases that the participants used to name the feelings and emotions they felt most strongly before ever disclosing their citizenship status to anyone include: “left out”; “discouraged”; “fearful of judgment”; “entrapped”; “in hiding”; “unsafe”; “private”; “lost”; “stuck” and “dark period”.

A number of participants spoke in greater detail to the burden they felt – and still sometimes feel – before coming out as undocumented to someone. These burdens reflect a wide range of human experiences. Some of these comments included: “When people don’t know about your status, it’s like an entire web of lies that you have to create, and I’m personally a very honest person”; “Not being able to express yourself, like why you can’t get a license and things like that. I didn’t know how to act.”; and “You’re kind of like hiding and you don’t want anyone to know...I was completely lost”. One participant had to keep her undocumented identity a secret from the undocumented youth with whom she worked for an outreach job out of a need to protect her employer. In speaking to this dynamic, her words add a unique perspective to the burdens that undocumented youth may carry:

I was the MC for all these [advocacy] events, and really had to detach myself a lot verbally, emotionally, mentally from everything...It was very challenging for me, and I felt like I was betraying my community, my immigrant community, like I was being phony, I felt fake.

Upon coming out as undocumented and sharing life narratives, all nine participants acknowledged experiencing an emotional shift of some kind. Every participant described difficult emotions associated with these moments, the most common of which included feelings of vulnerability, fear and anxiety. One participant said, “the first time I opened up I cried about it, you feel this knot in your chest”. Another shared, “it was terrifying, I was anxious, I mean, I can’t tell you how scared I was”.

Beyond these initial visceral reactions, all nine participants defined general experiences of coming out and narrative-sharing as ultimately positive. In explaining their feelings about the process, participants used words such as “liberating”, “empowering”, “encouraging” and “therapeutic”. Each participant described his or her moments of sharing in uniquely personal ways; therefore, the reader will best understand this initial shift through some helpful quotes. One woman articulated a sense of letting down her defenses:

It was freeing in a sense that I didn’t have to lie anymore. I could start telling people who I really am. Like when you lie to people, you create that barrier where they can’t get to know you because they can’t get past that wall. That’s why it was incredibly freeing.

Another woman similarly shared, “When I did come out, it was really refreshing. It literally felt like I took off this mask that I was wearing my entire life.” One man spoke to the narrative-sharing process as one that has acted as a cathartic experience:

It’s a good way to release your emotions...I keep everything to myself, all of my emotions, everything that’s happened to me, I keep everything inside. And to be able to be given the time to be heard, to be listened, it’s a very rare moment, it’s a very special moment. It’s a time where you just can say whatever you want. It’s a good way to cope,

because all the emotions that I kept inside, I was finally able to release them and hopefully it's kind of like a healing process.

Impact of Listening to Narratives

Participation in narrative-sharing spaces entails a great deal of hearing other peoples' stories, and participants in this study spoke at length to the effects that listening to other undocumented students has had on them. Eight (89%) participants directly said that they felt more connected to their peers after participating in a narrative-sharing space. The most common theme that arose from the interviews was that, through listening to each other's stories, participants felt some type of special connection to other members of their particular narrative-sharing space. Seven (78%) participants spoke to this theme, and they described it in different ways. Three (33%) participants used the word "family" to express the bonds they felt with peers after listening to their stories. One woman said, "I think you feel like a sense of belonging in those groups, they become almost like your family. You're facing the same problems and you want something in common."

Five (55%) participants directly described this special connection in a way that spoke to the fact that they did not feel this type of connection with other people. Although these students have other supports in their lives, they felt as though understanding their peers' stories in an intimate way allowed them to feel more uniquely connected through shared experience. In talking about the friends she met through her narrative-sharing space, one woman said, "I'll just call them once to complain, and they'll understand and will just be there for me, which is different than calling the other friends I have...they can only pity you, and not really understand it". Another study participant described mutual participation in her narrative-sharing space as

follows: “For the first time, in a room full of undocumented people like me, I felt right, I just felt like I could be myself, and I could express things about my life that make up who I am”.

The second most common theme that came up in relation to listening to the stories of others was that this process facilitates a growing sense of strength and motivation among students. Six (67%) participants spoke to this theme, and four (44%) used the word “inspirational” to express how they have felt while listening. All of these participants spoke about strength and motivation in terms of gaining an increased drive to move forward; some of them meant that in a personal sense, while others referred to a growing desire to fight for the well being of undocumented youth movements as a whole. One woman discussed the encouragement she has felt from being part of a narrative-sharing space:

Hearing about how creative people have gotten despite the legal barriers that are in their way has just been motivation. It’s been really beautiful to know that even someone who’s faced as much adversity as we have, we still feel some sort of beauty and reason to get up in the morning and continue to do what we’re doing.

In a different vein, four (44%) participants talked about the experience of putting their struggles into perspective in relation to the struggles of other undocumented peers. All four of these participants described listening to difficult stories as a sort of reality check to their perceived level of suffering, and three (33%) of them related that to an increased level of self-empowerment. The clearest example of this dynamic comes from an interview with a woman who grew up fairly privileged:

There have definitely been times where I broke down and cried, because it was just so intense to hear all the different obstacles people had to jump through in addition to being undocumented – because a lot of times I felt like that WAS my struggle. I didn’t have to

provide for my family, my parents worked and made sure I could just go to school and play soccer and be as much a part of the community and be as normal as possible; whereas I feel like hearing other peoples' upbringings and how fast they had to grow up and the responsibilities they had to take on in addition to feeling marginalized has just been so, it's been a reality check, and it's been a really great perspective to hear, because I feel like for such a long time I felt like a victim because of my status.

Listening to their peers' narratives did not always inspire strength, motivation or empowerment. Two (22%) participants addressed the real anger they have felt during narrative-sharing processes, albeit for different reasons. One woman said that she was involved in a narrative-sharing space supposedly comprised of undocumented students, and one of the members complained about the restrictive nature of his resident status. In explaining her emotional reaction to this moment, she said, "it just pissed me off, because it's like, don't complain, you're getting there, like, you could have it a lot worse". Another study participant discussed his anger with regards to listening to stories of students who have had to quit school because of their status: "That makes me more angry, because it's like, they have so many dreams, but because of financial reasons, or they just don't wanna try, they just stop".

Navigating Identity

This section pulls data from the interviews to showcase some of the ways in which the study participants understand their changing personal identities. All nine participants acknowledged that their sense of personal identity had evolved in positive ways since coming out as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces. These changes have occurred, and continue to occur, in complex ways; the following paragraphs can only begin to reflect the sentiments expressed by the study participants.

Internalized oppression

One vital theme to address entails the ways in which participants relate to various forms of internalized oppression. Eight (89%) participants acknowledged that there are negative stereotypes of and stigmas against undocumented immigrants in the United States, and five (55%) participants spoke to ways in which they have internalized some of those messages. Out of this group, three (33%) participants talked about the intersection between their status and Mexican ethnicity, thus highlighting the issues of internalized racism with which they have struggled.

Each of the five participants who referred to internalized oppression described their experiences quite differently. One woman said:

I just associated everything negative with my status and with my ethnic heritage and culture. I just knew that like being Mexican wasn't necessarily equated with desirable traits or qualities. I didn't necessarily deny that I was Mexican, but I definitely downplayed it a lot.

Another woman referred more specifically to the dynamics of the internalized oppression she has felt as an undocumented person:

I've kinda been trained to think of like low profile, no interactions with the law, this has to be a secret cause it's not something right for people to do, you're doing something wrong. I've internalized this sense of criminalization, and I see myself as breaking the law in some aspects.

Although each of the five participants has had distinct internal struggles, all five of them referred to ways in which the process of coming out and participating in narrative-sharing spaces has helped them to deal with internalized oppression. Three (33%) of the participants

acknowledged having experienced these spaces as working to heal internalized oppression in one way or another. One of them said, “I used to feel ashamed about my status... You internalize it... So being able to be honest and come out with my status... it just made me realize that it’s not my fault... now I’m completely not ashamed.”

The other two (22%) participants acknowledged that coming out and participating in narrative-sharing spaces gave them fuel to turn their sense of internalized oppression into something productive. After speaking about the ways in which he used to feel more limited by his identity, one man said, “being undocumented, it does help me be more active in a way just to prove people wrong, to break stereotypes... if they say undocumented people can’t do this, next thing you know I’m gonna go and try that.”

Shaping a refreshed identity

All nine study participants talked about the effects of participating in narrative-sharing spaces as helping to integrate various parts of themselves, allowing them to construct fresh identities. Four (44%) participants addressed this theme through conversations about intersectionality of various social identities. Three (33%) of these participants talked about their experiences passing as white, growing up in privileged communities. As children and adolescents, these students struggled to find balance between intersecting identities that felt so disparate. One woman explained these feelings as follows:

For me it was always this burden I had to carry, because even though it was a kind of privilege to pass and to be treated better than someone who’s deemed undocumented, it also made me really alienated and it made people make a lot of assumptions about me, so growing up I didn’t have a community of people who understood what I was going through.

These three participants attributed some of their growth toward feeling more whole and accepted to the process of narrative-sharing with other undocumented students. Another participant shared that she once desired only to identify with “American culture” out of a fear that people would think she might be undocumented otherwise. In opening up to peers, she has been able to connect more deeply to and define her identity as a “Latina woman”.

On the other end of the spectrum, one participant described growing up in a disenfranchised community, “where drugs was around, guns was around, prostitution was around, late night partying was around”. He said that although he “lived this type of life” during adolescence, meeting other undocumented youth within a narrative-sharing space allowed him to begin to open up and change. This participant said, “I started seeing things differently, I started learning how to communicate with people more, just reaching out to them, opening up, talking things out, instead of going straight to violence”.

In another vein, three (33%) participants spoke about a shift in the ways in which they have come to understand how their undocumented status itself has shaped them for the better. One of these participants said she now takes pride in her status, because she sees it as having shaped her personality, her thought processes and the ways she relates to others. The other two participants explained that instead of seeing their status as negative, they understand it as a positive element that has pushed them to overcome challenges.

Here vs. there

The final major theme from the interviews that concerns navigating identity deals with the conflict between what it means to be Mexican and what it means to be American, what it means to be in Mexico and what it means to be in the United States. Six (67%) participants talked about this theme, and all of them said they feel more at home in the United States than in

Mexico. They feel disconnected from Mexico, yet they cannot fully connect to the United States. One man said that he is proud to be Mexican, but he does not think he would feel a sense of belonging if he were to move back; he wants to stay in the United States, but he wishes he could “just live a normal life” here.

A few of these students talked about the ways in which participation in narrative-sharing spaces has impacted this conflict. Quotes from two different participants eloquently describe this dynamic. The first illuminates a sense of connection:

Before I felt like I didn't correspond nowhere; like the saying says, “I'm not from here, but I'm not from there”, meaning I was raised here in my home country, I mean this country, my whole life, but I feel like the country doesn't want me here. But then if I go back to my country, don't nobody know me there and nobody want me there either, so where am I from? After joining [organization's name], just seeing a lot of students in the same position that I was in...I was like, naw you know, I feel your pain, cause I go through it too.

And the second gives a sense of the new ways in which students may navigate this identity conflict:

Now I'm really stepping out of that box and exploring what makes me, what I'm comfortable with. And really right now, I kind of feel like I'm a little bit one foot on each side, and maybe that's what it will be, and maybe not.

Using Voice

This section pulls data from the interviews to showcase some of the ways in which the study participants have navigated relationships, the world and their sense of purpose in consideration of their undocumented status. All nine participants expressed that they have used

their voice differently after coming out with their status and sharing narratives with peers. The following paragraphs make note of the instances when the use of self and voice changed after coming out and participating in narrative-sharing spaces.

Complexity of sharing

As described in the sections above, an undocumented citizenship status can have significant impacts on identity development. Eight (88%) study participants spoke to the idea that the process of coming out as undocumented and sharing stories with others changes dramatically depending on context. As noted previously, a number of students said that they share special connections with undocumented students with whom they have shared a narrative-sharing space. Many of these students also spoke the particular challenges entailed related to coming out to documented people: teachers, friends, community members and others. One participant pointed out:

When you talk to people who understand the issue, it's a lot better to communicate with them, because when you have other people who don't understand, they just kind of like question you: Why can't you do this? Or why can't you do that? They're not very understanding, even though they want to be. When you're with other undocumented students, they know exactly how you're feeling, and they know what you can say or what you cannot say to hurt them or to make them feel better or to uplift them.

At the same time, all nine participants noted that they have indeed had powerful experiences sharing narratives with documented people. During the interviews, every participant shared positive stories about times in their lives when they were surprised at the understanding, encouragement and support expressed by a documented person who they may have expected to have an opposite reaction. Some of the participants specifically detailed the ways in which trust

plays out in the coming out decision-making process. As one woman said, “I have to act like I’m not different and really figure out who can I trust to share this with, and how much can people actually do with this information to hurt me or not?”

Other participants spoke about the fact that they must think about and change the manner in which they frame their narratives depending on their audience in a given moment. Coming out to a teacher as a way to ask for help differed from coming out to an audience at a presentation; in this example, again, trust played a major role in comfort and the content of stories varied based on intention. One woman provided a description of the shift she experienced in being able to think about and frame narratives from before to after participating in a narrative-sharing space:

I think now I’m more conscious that I evaluate whether I wanna tell someone in that particular space or in that particular time and what would happen if I would tell that person... before coming out there was no processing, it was just like you don’t say anything, you don’t disclose it. And now it’s more like, okay, I can think about it, I can think about what would happen if I did say something to this person, and realizing that it’s up to me whether I wanna share that with someone. And I don’t owe anyone, that’s my freedom, to want to share it with someone. Really feeling that sense of empowerment I guess you could say.

Speaking to these feelings, three participants (33%) said that they have difficulty sharing narratives when a certain emotional component of the process is removed. One woman said that she shared the logistical implications of being undocumented during a presentation at her university; however, the setting’s intention did not allow her to explain the emotional and spiritual dynamics of her undocumented status. She described this experience as “weird”, feeling as though she had to “split [herself]”. Similarly, another participant explained that he often feels

as though opening up about his status serves to “educate about what an AB540 student is”, affecting his audience more than allowing him to get anything positive from the experience.

Finally, one student shared an important anecdote concerning how she exercises caution while participating in narrative-sharing spaces specifically geared toward processing undocumented identity. She explained that sometimes writing about or sharing certain experiences can open up or create emotional wounds. She said, “I don’t know if it’s gonna be therapeutic, I don’t know if it’s gonna open up another wound and not heal”. With this in mind, she pays special attention to her process and the moments when she feels as though it is safe to share certain things about her life and experiences.

Finding resources

Eight (88%) participants brought up the fact that coming out as undocumented and sharing stories helps to locate important resources they need to progress in life and complete their educations. Five (55%) participants said that the need to advocate for themselves determined their decision to come out to certain people or in certain situations. One man said, “I started realizing how important it is to actually tell people, because if you do, there’s doors that can open for you, and people actually wanna help you out”. Another man remembered hitting multiple roadblocks on his journey to try to begin a college education. He made the decision to come out as undocumented to a few people at that point and sought out organizations wherein he could participate in narrative-sharing spaces with other undocumented youth as a way to ask for help. He shared that this experience helped him to “open up” and “be more comfortable with the people”; he said that “the knowledge that [he’s] gained from these programs has changed who [he is] as a person today”.

Six (67%) participants detailed the ways in which they use relationships with other undocumented peers to look for resources and find ways to move forward in life. They spoke about coming together to share their needs in hopes that someone will refer them to appropriate resources, and they expressed how excited they feel to be able to do the same for others. A number of participants also discussed the ways they support each other academically or in applying to schools and programs, whether that entails brainstorming assignments or editing written work.

Higher purpose

All nine participants referred to feeling some sort of higher purpose post coming out as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces. Six (67%) participants talked about the impact narrative-sharing spaces have had on their participation in community empowerment efforts and civic engagement. One man has worked tirelessly to create a space on his college campus where undocumented students can feel safe and come to relax, find resources and show support for each other. Another participant shared that participation in narrative-sharing spaces helped her to find a new purpose after combating depression. She and her family were deported back to Mexico and upon coming back to the United States, she realized that her chances of ever legalizing may be slimmer. She spoke about joining undocumented peers in narrative-sharing and her subsequent involvement in political action:

It has changed my entire perspective and my life, and getting to know other students like me has made me see that even if I'm fighting for something that I won't benefit from, I'm fighting for something that all these other amazing people can benefit from.

Three (33%) of those six participants specifically attributed their motivation to engage with social movements to certain sociopolitical knowledge they gained from engaging in

narrative-sharing with other students and exploring identity. One woman said that she learned to identify the ways in which the media often blames individuals for their misfortune instead of taking into account the ways in which society or the criminal justice system affects them.

Another woman explained that listening to other students' stories has allowed her to "feel like [she's] a lot more in tuned to the subtle ways [undocumented youth] are kept in the margins".

Through gaining understanding and knowledge, she went on to say: "I feel like I've been able to inform my other circles as to their privilege and also the way that they can help and be involved". She also expressed that she sees similar dynamics between undocumented and queer identity and would like to continue to forge coalitions between these two marginalized groups.

Five (55%) participants explained that they feel as though it is important for them to step forward and put a face to what it means to be undocumented in this country. For them, coming out helps to educate the public and prove that stereotypes are just stereotypes. One student said that she feels a responsibility to help people understand the undocumented experience, considering coming out and sharing stories as a form of activism. Similarly, another participant shared: "I like sometimes when we have events and invite the community to share my story. I feel like it's good to put a face to it, so people can notice it's different from what TV portrays."

Four (44%) participants acknowledged that there are a considerable number of undocumented youth who have not been reached by recent social movements that may be relevant to their success and well being. These participants expressed a desire to expand the reach of current advocacy efforts so that more people can benefit. One woman, who grew up in a privileged community, shared, "I just hope to make connections and see how I can help out or be involved with the majority of undocumented students who don't get the same validation or who haven't gotten the same support or financial opportunities as I have". Another student, who grew

up in an often overlooked community, now engages in outreach efforts to deliver information to youth who he sees as at risk. He commented: “I feel like that’s what I wanna keep doing, keep giving back to the community that I grew up in, keep getting these kids educated enough so they can keep going off to college, something further than just high school”.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This qualitative study explores the ways in which undocumented Latino students navigate and shift personal identity, notions of group solidarity and political consciousness upon “coming out” as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces that specifically ask them to reflect on their citizenship status. A review of literature reveals a significant amount of theoretical and empirical materials that support various ideas about the potential effects of these types of spaces and processes: storytelling can facilitate a re-imagining of oppression; participation in narrative-sharing third spaces can nurture individual growth; and exchange of emotions and ideas can foster solidarity. The results of this study give further meaning to these assertions and can be used to expand the social work community’s understanding of potential ways to support undocumented youth with a social justice perspective.

Discussion of Findings and Literature

The fact that all of the nine participants identified coming out as undocumented and participating in narrative-sharing spaces as ultimately positive speaks to the emotional challenges associated with living within a societal context that acts to silence the undocumented experience. Certain language that is espoused in political forums and by individual people all over the country – such as the naming of undocumented people as “illegal” – serves to create a sense of criminalization and shame for those who identify as undocumented. In their invisibility, these participants felt “entrapped”, “lost”, “phony” and “unsafe”. More than half of them

acknowledged internalizing the negative messages about undocumented immigrants that seem to thrive in our current sociopolitical landscape. As stated in the literature, undocumented youth face many socioemotional and developmental risks (Gonzales, 2011; Huber, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Between the emotional baggage and internalized oppression this study's participants have been obliged to carry, it is easy to understand how undocumented young people similar to them may continue to struggle without intentional supports. From a social work ethics and social justice perspective, it is important to reflect on these themes and understand that the profession compels clinicians, advocates and organizers to work with undocumented people in combating these oppressions.

As supported by critical race theory, storytelling encourages marginalized folks to reclaim narratives that have been ascribed to them, recounting their lives from a place that values experiential knowledge (Alarcón, 2011; Carter-Black, 2007; Delgado, 1989; Flores, 2003; Freire, 1973). Although the process of counter-narrative production and storytelling may be situated as a hallmark of empowerment work, undocumented people face a barrier to engaging in this type of work that certain other marginalized groups do not necessarily encounter. Due to the invisible nature of being undocumented – citizenship status cannot be inferred by appearance or within interaction – undocumented folks must come out to others before or as they share stories related to that identity. It is not surprising that all nine study participants described moments of coming out as emotionally difficult considering varied public opinions on what it means to be undocumented as well as the potential repercussions they could face.

Stressful as it may have been to first come out – and continue coming out throughout life – participants described the process as “liberating” and “therapeutic”. Their experiences mirror the literature that focuses on the effects of the coming out process on LGBTQ folks. Those

studies looked at the ways in which coming out allowed LGBTQ people to heal internalized homophobia, develop a greater sense of belonging and feel a more integrated sense of personal identity (Cox et al., 2011; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). Results from the current study speak to parallel outcomes for the undocumented participants. It is fair to conclude that the act of giving voice to what has long been silenced and invisible leads to positive changes in human connection and emotional health.

That said, coming out continues to present challenges throughout life. Consistent with Orne's (2011) idea that LGBTQ people engage in a process of "identity management", 88% of the study participants described the ways in which coming out as undocumented and sharing stories with others changes depending on context. They spoke about the importance of trust as well as the process of framing narratives depending on audience. These realities of everyday existence illuminate certain aspects of the double consciousness that undocumented people possess as a result of navigating this society. One participant specifically alluded to the ways in which participation in narrative-sharing spaces has strengthened her double consciousness, saying that she has become more conscious of her choices regarding how, when and to whom to come out.

Since coming out as undocumented to others can frequently feel challenging and painful, it is important for spaces to exist wherein undocumented youth feel a sense of comfort. Once open to exploring this aspect of identity, third spaces that offer the opportunity for undocumented youth to come together and process their narratives become potentially revolutionary. According to the literature, third spaces promote participants' abilities to negotiate multiple realities and expand ways of knowing, thus allowing them to create refreshed identities (Babbha, 1994; Perez, 1999). Results from the current study support this notion. As detailed

previously, 67% of participants spoke about the ways in which they struggle to balance their identities as both Mexican and American. A number of them have used narrative-sharing third spaces to work through these internal conflicts, thus re-imagining their identities to include various components that at one point felt disparate.

As seen in the results of this study, integrating various aspects of identity through these third spaces extends to issues concerning intersectionality of citizenship status, race, class and gender. For example, those participants who identified as growing up with a privileged class status discussed the ways in which narrative-sharing third spaces allowed them to connect to their marginalized undocumented identity in ways they had not in the past. They spoke of how third spaces have given them the opportunity to feel connected to an identity they once rejected, thus allowing them to feel more fully themselves. Another example includes one woman who attributed participation in third spaces as helping her to connect to a Latina identity. And a man from a marginalized class background talked about the ways in which he found new ways of relating to people through these third spaces, distinct from how he operated in his home neighborhood. All of these examples of navigating intersectionality further express the ways in which undocumented students engage with their double consciousness, encouraged and strengthened by the very act of participating in narrative-sharing third spaces.

Although cultural capital can be built in multiple settings and in many ways, the results of this research point to the idea that participation in third spaces specifically can create opportunities for undocumented youth to develop the community cultural wealth and cultural capital necessary to engage in transformational resistance. Of the nine participants, 88% spoke to the fact that these spaces have helped them to learn about and seek out resources. They have accomplished this through supporting each other, holding onto visions for their futures, and

identifying people within and outside of the community who may be able to provide useful information. These results reflect the use of multiple forms of capital, notably aspirational, social and navigational, that Yosso (2005) asserts assist the development of community cultural wealth and thus cultural capital. The idea that individuals grow cultural capital and navigate identity through third spaces created specifically for their marginalized group is supported in the empirical literature (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2010; Lee, 2011; Solórzano et al., 2009).

Almost every participant in the current study also spoke to the fact that they have felt more connected to undocumented peers after participating in narrative-sharing third spaces. The theoretical literature speaks to the notion that sharing and listening to stories helps people to deepen their appreciation of others' experiences and develop a critical consciousness, thus facilitating a process in which participants engage empathy and imagination to construct liberated self-perception and empowered action (Delgado, 1989; Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Freire, 1973; Greene, 1995; West, 1993). The current study suggests that through connection, most participants in narrative-sharing third spaces felt special bonds with other undocumented students and drew strength and motivation from each other. Furthermore, through engaging with each other and expanding knowledge, all participants acknowledged some form of development in critical consciousness, a few of them directly citing this growth as in political consciousness. These findings are in line with literature that describes the construction of identity as influenced by interaction with others, especially those of a shared marginalized identity with whom an individual would invest in a mutually beneficial narrative (De Fina, 2003a; van Dijk, 1998). These effects of the third space lay the foundations for growth in solidarity among the undocumented students who participated in them.

Through cultivating cultural capital and enhancing double consciousness and solidarity within third spaces, the participants of this study have grown to take pride in their attempts at transformational resistance. These effects of narrative-sharing spaces allow undocumented youth to develop and feel a legitimate sense of cultural citizenship, a quality that enhances the ability to effectively resist domination (Benmayor, 2002). As in Abrego's (2008) legal study, the current study demonstrates that claims to cultural citizenship allow students to feel more comfortable asserting their voices publicly. By developing cultural citizenship at least partially within narrative-sharing third spaces, the current study's participants have become stronger agents of political change through resistance efforts: they step forward to put faces to what they have been labeled; they involve themselves in social movements; and they aim to inspire fellow undocumented young people.

Study Limitations

Although this study's results draw from rich, in-depth narratives, the sample size is quite small, and all nine participants were born in the same country and currently reside in the same metropolitan area of the United States. For these reasons, the study lacks generalizability and does not necessarily represent the experiences of the larger population of undocumented Latino students in this country. The nature of qualitative research using interviews, however, does typically allow for more personalized accounts than, say, a survey that can be distributed more broadly; therefore, the value of this study lies in the fact that it uses very detailed individual narratives.

Another limitation to this study rests in the fact that there are infinite factors that influence development in identity formation, group solidarity and political consciousness. Participants were consistently asked questions that explicitly addressed their experiences before,

during and after participation in narrative-sharing spaces; however, it is important to recognize that individuals generally grow in these areas through interactions with various people, communities and systems outside of these spaces as well. Because human experience is complicated and ever-evolving, lack of clarity exists in terms of which areas of growth in each participant occurred only because of their involvement in a narrative-sharing space. As an example, the fact that relationships with allies and other documented people came up during the interviews points to the fact that there may be confusion in regards to this theme.

As a self-reflective social work researcher, it is also imperative that I question the ways in which my own identities and presence as interviewer may have contributed to limitations in this study. Although I consider myself to be an ally to the undocumented Latino community, I am indeed a white citizen; therefore, issues related to race, safety and/or cultural understanding might have been present in the intersubjective space during the interviews. After all, in one way or another, every participant spoke to these themes as they have arisen in their lives. For example, some of the participants talked about the ways they decide to frame their narratives when talking to authority figures and/or people who are documented. I do question how the interviews may have been different had I been an undocumented researcher myself, engaging with participants from a place of authentic, experiential understanding. Since this clearly was not the case, I could only hold an awareness of these potential dynamics and stay alert during the interviews for moments when they may have been coming up.

Practice Recommendations

Based on the literature and results of the current study, it is clear that storytelling and participation in narrative-sharing spaces has great healing and advocacy potential for undocumented young people. Social workers concerned with the socioemotional well being of

undocumented youth should consider collaborating with the undocumented community in building programs or workshops that aim to create environments where this type of work can occur. This type of healing and advocacy work confronts lived experiences, and its value will last even as the undocumented community gains further political rights in the future. One research participant described her thoughts on the possibility of gaining citizenship as follows: “It’s like that doesn’t fix the way you’ve felt for years. You’ve been ostracized in one way or another. It doesn’t change that.” Changes in political dialogue and individual citizenship status do not erase the impact, whether positive or negative, of a marginalized identity. Providing undocumented youth with an opportunity to exchange thoughts and emotions in safe, intentional environments can benefit both the individual and advocacy efforts.

It is also imperative to make note of a number of caveats that the social work community must remember in developing these types of spaces. The results of the current study highlight several important points that may determine the potential value and success of these narrative-sharing spaces. The first set of these concerns the emotional processes that will undoubtedly arise in these types of group processes. A number of participants in this study shared that they consider the emotional components of the narrative-sharing process to be integral to its purpose; they thus feel “devalued” or “split” when emotional processing is not an explicit part of the space. At the same time, one woman in this study shared that she exercises caution when choosing what to share about her experiences and at what moment out of a fear that she will open up wounds that may not heal. Other participants named anger as a prevalent emotion that may arise for them, one that many people find difficult to process effectively.

Anyone who chooses to create and/or facilitate these types of spaces must always keep in mind the sensitivity of the topics that may arise. Facilitators must be adept at constructing a

space that welcomes a range of emotions, and they must be able to handle those that surface. This reality also speaks to the fact that facilitators must be prepared to provide participants with emotional support and have a list of resources to which they can refer someone who may be struggling.

On another note, it is important for those who plan and design these spaces to explicitly state their intentions and the nature of the space to potential participants. One student in the current study spoke about her difficult experience being part of a narrative-sharing space wherein not everyone was undocumented, despite the fact that she had been told that would be the case. She understandably felt angry by this betrayal. Honesty and clarity are essential at all times, before and during participation in a space that has triggering potential.

It is also vital that these spaces be created first and foremost for the needs of undocumented youth. Though this may seem obvious, one study participant spoke to the fact that opening up about his citizenship status to documented people can sometimes feel like the process is more about educating the other than it is about his own benefit. This can be tiring, and a space designed for undocumented youth must be about them, their needs, and how their experiences can feel empowering. A narrative-sharing space run by a documented person who constantly presses for information based on his or her own interest, however well intentioned, is inappropriate. These spaces should include facilitation by other undocumented people as a way to minimize the potential of a voyeuristic dynamic.

Finally, two further ideas should be considered by social workers who may engage in this type of work with undocumented students. A number of study participants expressed a desire to find ways to extend a sense of community to other undocumented youth who may not be pursuing higher education and who may not be reached by current advocacy efforts. It would be

useful for the social work community to explore ways to reach out to these young people. Also, almost all study participants noted that a reason for their initial participation in narrative-sharing spaces included the opportunity to connect to community, financial and/or educational resources. Those in the social work community who plan to develop these types of spaces should make sure to educate themselves on up-to-date legislation and available resources so as to best support undocumented youth who may participate.

Suggestions for Future Research

The current study raises a number of questions that remain unanswered and might be explored in future social work research. Since this study focused on very small sample size, it would be useful for future research to engage a greater number of individuals. Perhaps these studies could incorporate the voices of those missed completely by this study, including but not limited to: undocumented youth from Latino countries outside of Mexico and from other countries in the world at large; and undocumented youth who do not identify as students.

One factor for which this study did not account includes the length of time each participant has been “out” as undocumented and to what extent they publicly announce that identity. Some of the participants described themselves as very private and out to only a few people, while others take pride in their political activism, participating in rallies in the public sphere. It would be interesting to understand the relationships between levels of outness, length of time as out and those factors that this study did explore.

The results of this study brought up a number of valuable points concerning the intersectionality of various social identities. The social work community will benefit from research that further explores the relationships between citizenship status, class, race, gender, sexuality and other identities. This study made an effort to link some aspects of queer theory to

the undocumented experience, finding legitimate parallels. Furthering this type of research can serve to both better understand complex identities as well as to find ways to connect social movements for all oppressed populations. Future studies on intersectionality could benefit from a grounding in various critical theories, especially Black feminist theory and queer theory.

Summary

As in line with the literature and the current study, participation in narrative-sharing third spaces can help undocumented students to heal, integrate identity, band together and engage in transformational resistance. The clinical social work field can use this understanding to develop innovative spaces wherein undocumented young people can explore identity with their peers in a safe environment through creative means. Storytelling, whether through written or spoken word, encourages people to open up and use each other to grow both individually and together. By creating counter-narratives that reclaim and redefine what it means to be undocumented in the United States, undocumented youth embark on healing and advocacy work for themselves and their communities. For the social work community to be involved in these efforts speaks to the foundations and ideals of the field. The creation of innovative person- and community-centered spaces that combine efforts toward individual healing with social justice has the potential to be truly transformational.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Dear Interview Participant,

I am a Masters level student at Smith College School for Social Work, and I am conducting a research study to explore how coming out as undocumented and sharing life stories with other members of the undocumented community may or may not affect undocumented students. I am specifically looking to speak with current undocumented Latino students who have been a part of a space wherein they have been encouraged to share their life stories. This “space” could be a workshop, organization or club meeting, or other event that explicitly asked for participants to reflect on and share their experiences of being undocumented. The data from this study will be used to write my MSW thesis and perhaps for professional publications and presentations on this topic.

You have been selected for this study, because you fit the necessary personal information categories (student, age 18-30, Latino/a) and you are “out” as undocumented to at least some of your peers. By agreeing to be a part of this study, you will participate in one interview that will last approximately 45 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked to respond to a series of questions related to your experiences of sharing life stories with undocumented peers. You will also be asked to answer a brief series of personal information questions in written form. The interview will be audio taped so that it can be reviewed, and I will transcribe the tapes myself. My research advisor will have access to the data with all identifying information removed.

Risk from participation includes the emotional affects that the research questions will evoke. Participants may experience emotional distress when reflecting on their experiences. I will distribute contact information for mental health referral sources – including the Psychotherapy Research Group, Integral Counseling Center and Psychotherapy Institute – to provide you with options for seeking services if you so choose. At the same time, you may gain new insight into your experiences as you reflect out loud. The information gained from these interviews will help us to understand the ways in which to best foster individual and group empowerment. You will not be paid for your involvement. You may withdraw participation in the study at any time before or after your interview, until April 15th, 2012.

You may be concerned about confidentiality surrounding your legal status and regarding what you may say during the interview. First and foremost, all identifying information about you will be removed from the transcription of the process. The data gained in this study will be disguised in my MSW thesis, public presentations or publications. Individual identities will be held confidential; nobody will be able to identify that you were ever a part of this study. The interviews will be audio taped, and the tape will only be heard by this writer and one other transcriber, who are both committed to maintaining confidentiality. My faculty thesis advisor may view transcriptions of the interviews after identifying information has been removed. Data, audio tapes, notes and consent forms will be kept secure in my office for a period of three years

as stipulated by federal guidelines after which time they can be destroyed or continued to be maintained securely.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any question during the interview. You may withdraw before the study begins. You may stop participation in the interview at any point during the interview. There is no penalty for withdrawal from the study. The final date for withdrawal is April 15th, 2012. You may contact me at the email or phone listed on the consent form for questions or concerns about this study, before, or after the interview.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Christopher Heinrich, and I am a Master of Social Work (MSW) student at Smith College School for Social Work. I consider myself to be an ally to the undocumented community, and I have been involved in a number of advocacy efforts through the organization Educators for Fair Consideration (E4FC). I am conducting a research study to explore how coming out as undocumented and sharing life stories with other members of the undocumented community may or may not affect undocumented students. I am specifically looking to speak with current undocumented Latino students who have been a part of a space wherein they have been encouraged to share their life stories. This “space” could be a workshop, organization or club meeting, or other event that explicitly asked for participants to reflect on and share their experiences of being undocumented. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to attend an in-person interview exploring these experiences and reflecting on your personal development as an undocumented student. This research will be used for my thesis and is being conducted as part of the requirements for the Master of Social Work degree.

I am gathering data for this research through in-person interviews. I am seeking participants who are currently attending college in San Francisco, the Peninsula, The South Bay, Marin, Oakland or Berkeley. Participation involves engaging in an in-person interview with me at a location that is convenient and private for you. The interview will take approximately forty-five minutes to complete and will be conducted in English. Participation in this study is completely confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via email or phone. My contact information is below. I will then call you to review the study criteria and to set up a time to meet. Please review the Informed Consent for this study, which is included in this correspondence.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Christopher Heinrich
M.S.W. Candidate ‘12

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Part I: Demographic Information

1. What gender do you identify yourself to be?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. MTF/transwoman
 - d. FTM/transman
 - e. _____

2. What is your age?
 - a. _____

3. What is your country of origin?
 - a. _____

4. Where do you go to school and how far along are you into your studies?
 - a. _____

Part II: Interview

1. In which type of “space” (workshop, organization or club meeting, etcetera) have you been encouraged to share life stories with other undocumented peers?
2. What types of life stories have you shared – either verbally or in written form – with your peers?
3. How did you feel before sharing these stories? During? After sharing?
4. How did you feel while listening to the stories of your peers? After they finished?

5. Did the stories of others affect your understanding of your own life? How did they or how did they not?
6. Did you feel more or less connected, or the same level of connection, to peers with whom you have participated in these “spaces” after the experience? Please explain.
7. Have you interacted differently with your communities post participation in these types of spaces?
8. Has “coming out” as undocumented to your peers impacted your sense of self as an undocumented immigrant?
9. How do you use other members of the undocumented community as support?
10. How does your story of your undocumented identity differ from that which you see on television or read in the papers?

Appendix D

Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 28, 2012

Christopher Heinrich

Dear Chris,

Beautiful work! Your project is now accepted. Your explanation of the resources meets our needs.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

This is a very exciting project and I wish you the best of luck with it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David L. Burton'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Crystal Hayes, Research Advisor