

Article

A Political Action against the Good Immigrant Narrative

Liliana Campos Rames

School of Nursing and Health Professions, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA 94066, USA;
lcamposramales@dons.usfca.edu

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Abstract: This brief article draws from research on the undocumented student experience and incorporates personal perspectives about the complexity behind the good immigrant-model, minority narrative on identity formation. From a de-colonial lens, this article aims to emphasize the impact of the DREAM(Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors)-er narrative on the immigrants right's movement and urges a need to separate the narrative from the movement as a political action to continue to diversify immigration reform advocacy as more inclusive of various immigrant and undocumented sub-communities. Lastly, this article aims to challenge the sociopolitical construct of the undocumented term on identity and introduces the importance of person-centered language to externalize undocumented legal status from the individual to position it as a circumstance rather than an identity.

Keywords: immigration; undocumented; dreamer

Even though research on undocumented student populations is growing, most of the available literature has primarily focused on exploring the student experience and the DREAM(Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors)-er narrative as a form of deservingness of citizenship, protection of deportation among a particular subcommunity among undocumented and refugee communities, and American ideals, thus, reinforcing merit and promoting the model minority and “good immigrant” stereotype (Rodriguez 2013, p. 18). Moreover, the available literature on the undocumented student experience has examined undocumented legal status as a form or personal identity and has paid very little attention about the mental health implications when social constructs such as the undocumented identity are internalized (Torres et al. 2018; Gonzales et al. 2013). DREAMers have been categorized as the model minority immigrants because of their outstanding accolades, academic performance, and high level of assimilation or socialization to American life despite the barriers they face due to their immigration status (Schwartz 2015). The term DREAMers derives from the federal DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act, a proposed bill in congress that would provide legal status to a particular group of undocumented individuals who were “brought” to the U.S. as children and attended public education in the U.S. (Schwartz 2015). Research on student organizing and activism within the context of the DREAMer narrative has also pointed to the various effects of political consciousness on identity and sense of belonging (Cadenas et al. 2018). In analyzing the DREAMer narrative beyond student activism, this article aims to examine and protest against the DREAMer narrative as well as the socially constructed undocumented identity from a de-colonial approach because deconstructing these narratives is a political action against American ideals grounded in Eurocentric practices that originate from colonialism. Lastly, this article seeks to understand how this model minority narrative within a broader immigration movement can be diversified and be more inclusive of all people who have an undocumented legal status. It is important to note that this article was written a few days before the U.S. Supreme Court oral hearings of the program, Deferred Action

for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which serves as an opportunity to advocate for immigrant's rights from a humanitarian perspective.

There is a dearth of research on the importance of deconstructing the undocumented identity from a decolonial lens and exploring how using person-centered language to discuss legal status as a circumstance rather than an identity. Therefore, this research topic is important because it could significantly impact the way undocumented legal status is perceived and internalized psychologically. Moreover, much of the research that explores identity formation has focused on difficulties with sense of belonging as a mediator to mental health outcomes such as depression anxiety (Rodriguez 2017). By critiquing undocumented legal status as a social construct rather than a form of identity, individuals impacted by their legal status may better be able to experience positive identity formation. Focusing research on clinical practice that honors a person's whole self and not just trauma brought about one's legal status could further strengthen the existing resiliency of undocumented communities. Additionally, by externalizing legal status from an individual's identity and shifting this narrative to be circumstantial rather than an identity, researchers can increase advocacy efforts that address the effects of language in immigration discourse to understand the undocumented identity and the good immigrant narrative as a form of the ongoing effects of racism and colonialism. Further, this perspective is unique because it aims to de-colonize the research methodology used to understand the psychology of people that experience oppression because of their legal status, especially because most of the models on identity formation reflect Western/Eurocentric ideals (Rodriguez 2017).

Additionally, this article aims to challenge the immigration language to better analyze the intersection of immigration policy and psychology, specifically how language can drive immigration pro- and anti-immigration policy and how these policies can influence psychological experiences. Further, it may behoove us to explore this intersection to create opportunities for individuals to experience and understand themselves outside of their legal status. Moreover, by analyzing identity formation by exploring how sense of belonging and self-worth are experienced by DREAMers, a group of individuals who are perceived as the most deserving and worthy of citizenship because of their outstanding professional and academic pursuits, as it has been measured by their high levels of acculturation, research may bring attention to other internalized psychological experiences. Because of the research that looks at high levels of acculturation as risk factors to depression and anxiety among immigrant and first-generation individuals, it is vital that the impact of immigration-based language on mental health and policy be examined (Schinke et al. 2013; Chang et al. 2017).

Again, the rationale for this research article is to raise awareness about the impact of pro- and anti-immigrant language, overall, especially, as we near the re-election of Donald Trump and we approach the results of the U.S. Supreme Court oral hearing on the future of DACA. The 2016 presidential elections strategically used fear and hate-based language not only to target individuals with an undocumented legal status by threatening to enforce stricter deportation efforts, militarizing the borders, terminating programs such as DACA and Temporary Permanent Status (TPS), but fear-based language was used to motivate voters (Crandall et al. 2018). In an online survey about the 2016 U.S. presidential election, conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA American Psychological Association), 52% of Americans reported that the presidential election was a source of stress. Therefore, understanding how language is used to evoke fear and hate is of significant importance so that we may better advocate for the psychological safety and wellness of communities who have an undocumented legal status (Wray-Lake et al. 2018).

Research in this area could contribute to the literature on the psychology of immigrant and undocumented communities. More specifically, there are consequences when immigration is discussed from a legality perspective and when deservingness of citizenship is understood from a merit-based process that reinforces the good versus the bad immigrant. For example, arguments about the good immigrant narrative are seen in the way that immigration policy is approached and written. The DREAMers have been unequivocally used as political pawn by politicians during the Trump administration to increase border militarization and rationale for detention centers. Studies that

examine the negative impact of terminating DACA argue that ending DACA would not only put thousands of beneficiaries at risk for deportation, including 24,100 students, but terminating the program would jeopardize their employment, financial security, access to higher education, and overall psychological wellness (Enriquez et al. 2018; Cadenas et al. 2018; Gonzales et al. 2018). The DREAMer and the good narrative are purposefully constructed terms and identities that better absorbed by those who are privileged by systemic oppression because this language is non-threatening to the dominant group in the U.S.

1. The DREAMer Narrative versus Its Political and Social Movement

The term DREAMer derives from the federal legislative bill introduced by a white politician who named it the DREAM Act and also coined the term DREAMer. The DREAMer narrative has been romanticized because it focused on raising awareness about the exceptional conduct of a group of young people by essentially creating sympathy for undocumented young people by emphasizing they were brought to the U.S. as children by no choice of their own or traveled on their own and that their high levels of socialization to American life was a reason for their deservingness of citizenship (Schwartz 2015). The DREAMer movement, however, unequivocally, was an efficacious organizing strategy in the undocumented student movement that led to the program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) as well as state-based educational, financial aid policies across the U.S (Terenzini et al. 1996). DACA has been one of the most successful pro-immigrant policies because it has provided physical and psychological safety to many of its recipients, including positive educational and economical outcomes, the DREAMer stereotype has been embedded within the eligibility requirements of DACA (Gonzales et al. 2018; Durbin 2019). A number of DACA beneficiaries may identify as DREAMers while others may not. The term, DREAMer is oppressive because it is another identity placed on communities, which may placate those for whom it is imposed on as well as those who find more peace knowing that the DREAMers are the good immigrants. Therefore, it may behoove us to further study the developmental identity formation of young movement leaders from a liberation psychology and de-colonial lens outside of the trauma imposed by social constructs of illegality that may inform someone's undocumented identity because there is no part in a human's body, mind, or spirit that is inherently undocumented (Rodriguez 2017).

2. The Trump Administration

Undocumented immigrants are not integrated and welcomed as equal and contributing members of American society. They are faced with painful social and legal challenges that simply limit their opportunities. On September 2018, the Trump administration rescinded DACA, putting at risk of deportation close to 70,000 undocumented young people, many of whom either self-identified as DREAMers or have been categorized as such (Cadenas et al. 2018, p. 571). A San Francisco federal judge blocked Donald Trump's effort to end DACA in 2017 and determined that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services must (USCIS) accept DACA renewals across the U.S. (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA/DAPA), ILRC 2019). Trump's efforts to end a program that protects individuals from deportation was targeted and intended to induce fear among a marginalized group in the U.S. (Cadenas et al. 2018). Current studies about DACA have focused on analyzing the positive benefits of DACA, suggesting that the program has led to their formal economic integration into U.S. society as well as increased the beneficiaries' participation society (Cadenas et al. 2018, p. 564). Studies that examine the negative impact of terminating DACA argue that ending DACA would not only put thousands of beneficiaries at risk for deportation, including 24,100 students, but terminating the program would jeopardize their employment, financial security, access to higher education, and overall psychological wellness (Enriquez et al. 2018; Cadenas et al. 2018; Gonzales et al. 2018).

The research that has examined the effects of DACA on health from a social determinant health perspective suggest that the program supports economic, education, community, social perspectives, and health care (Sudhinaraset et al. 2017). The educational and economic stability that DACA has

provided to beneficiaries has been substantial to their employment and outlook on future (Patler and Pirtle 2018). Their ability to legally obtain employment may reduce their risk of exploitation if their only option for jobs that pay under the table are lowered (Siemons et al. 2017). The social effects of DACA on health have emphasized economic and social stability on political empowerment, which has positively influenced identity and self-perception (Sudhinaraset et al. 2017). Further, individuals have become more empowered to engage in their communities because of the protection of deportation that DACA has provided them (Negrón-Gonzales 2017). Additionally, in recent studies, DACA beneficiaries have indicated that they are more likely to seek health care because the fear of deportation in a hospital has lessened due to the protection of deportation under DACA.

Threats to end DACA violently target the psychological warfare of DACA recipients, including their family members (Durbin 2019). Ending DACA would be detrimental to the health of DACA beneficiaries and would add to trauma and stress related factors already associated with immigration status (Sudhinaraset et al. 2017). A recent study by Enriquez et al. (2018) used a fear of future measure where they asked students with DACA status how worried they were about the possible termination of DACA. The results from this study for level of worry about the threat of terminating DACA demonstrated that 70% of 508 respondents with DACA reported being worried about the future of DACA daily (Enriquez et al. 2018).

Donald Trump and his administration have used fear as a violent tactic by threatening to terminate programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Permanent Status (TPS), militarizing the U.S. and Mexico border, denying immigration law services to undocumented individuals in detention centers, and separating children and families at the border and placing them in detention centers (Furman et al. 2015). Threats to terminate current pro-immigrant policies, combined with the dangerous xenophobic language, attitude, and actions carried out by Donald Trump and his administration are part of an ethnic cleansing campaign based on white supremacy ideals clearly exemplified in his famous “Make America Great, Again” slogan (Engelhardt 2016). Donald Trump’s threats to end DACA calls for broader advocacy efforts that discuss illegality and immigration status as social constructs stemming from colonization aimed to maintain social hierarchy such as white privilege and white supremacy (Brenda et al. 2016).

The intent behind discussing how the DREAMer narrative is to question the ways in which these narratives are internalized by the undocumented communities in relation to self-worth, especially when dealing with the pressures of having to fit or meet the model minority-immigrant narrative (Negrón-Gonzales 2017). As more research becomes available and more researchers that self-identify as undocumented, immigrant, and DREAMers, it is important to call attention to this area of research, but importantly, challenge research methodology that also creates opportunities for individuals to share their lived experiences so that we can understand identity formation from a developmental standpoint and we can practice from a person-centered approach by externalizing immigration status from who the individual is. By separating the DREAMer and the model immigrant-minority narrative, people may find more agency in the movement which calls for a broader and inclusive immigration reform that includes all immigrant, undocumented, and refugee individuals that does not quantify individuals based on their age of immigration to the U.S., their merit based accolades, and assimilation, but instead values their humanity and welcomes them into a new society (Heldke and O’Connor 2004).

3. Oppression

Oppression cannot be eliminated simply by changing the “laws, creating new ones, or overthrowing the tyrant, identifiable oppressor,” or a particular lion (Heldke and O’Connor 2004, p. 2). Eliminating oppression requires a change of thought, attitude, interpretation, and application of the humanization of a social group that is oppressed (Heldke and O’Connor 2004; Shlasko 2015). The psychological effects of oppression often result in inhumane practices displayed within existing structural institutions as seen in education and labor. Moreover, to “understand the health of individuals and the health of communities who [experience] oppression and those who inflict it,” there must be an understanding

and conscious awareness about the effects of stressors in environments that inflict injustice, violence, and oppression on the psyche of individuals and the health of a community. When spaces and language are not accessible for individuals and communities to exist (Watkins and Shulman 2008), individuals and communities that experience oppression may develop somatic symptoms such as fear and anxiety (Watkins and Shulman 2008).

The word 'undocumented' continues to be referenced in research to describe people who do not have legal documents allowing them to migrate or remain in the U.S. without the threat of deportation (Abrego 2008). Having an undocumented legal status is a part of someone's circumstances but it does not define who they are so undocumented status cannot be an identity. The problem or the deficiency does not lie within the individual. The problem and force feeding this label are the social and political structures in place that maintain it and also encourage a certain level of internalized colonization that pushes people to view and treat themselves as such (Willen 2012). Therefore, it is important to challenge the "undocumented" label and adjective to describe people and communities because this label is oppressive and reductionistic (Abrego 2011, p. 337). In attempts to humanize individuals impacted by current immigration policies in the U.S. as well as incorporate person-centered language research needs to begin externalizing the real problem from the person. In other words, it is vital to recognize that the term 'undocumented' is yet another forced identity that is socially and politically constructed in order to continue to "otherize" human beings (Lynn and Parker 2006, p. 263).

4. Person-Center Language

The idea behind using person-centered language stems from a liberation psychology, which focuses on the psychology of individuals who experience oppression. Liberation psychology draws from narrative therapy as a form of externalizing the problem from the person (Perdomo 2017). For example, in mental health, when an individual is diagnosed with a mental health condition due to their presenting collection of symptoms, a person does not become the diagnosis. In other words, a person who experiences symptoms of psychosis is not psychotic. Often, mental health symptoms become stigmatized because of this reason. Narrative therapy focuses on separating the problem from the person and using externalizing language so that individuals are allowed the freedom to live their lives and experience various parts of their identities outside of the problem or circumstance they face (Watkins and Shulman 2008). Individuals who have an undocumented legal status are the experts in their lives and should also feel empowered to identify themselves how they choose. For example, a person might separate himself from their legal status by stating that they have DACA versus being DACA-mented, having an undocumented legal status versus being undocumented, refugee seeker versus people seeking refuge. Placing people's humanity before a circumstance they may be experiencing, as it is with someone's immigration legal status, puts the responsibility on the system and the unjust and inhumane ways people are treated under that social and legal status rather than creating a punitive and violent label that is dehumanizing to their identity and existence. For years. People who have an undocumented legal status and their families encounter daily, ongoing life stressors such as worrying about being pulled over for traffic violations that put them at risk for deportation or detention, not having eligibility to obtain a driver's license, and experiencing traumatic microaggressions from people enforcing discriminatory, systemic policies at school, health care, or in the community. These life stressors are social determinants of health which influence how people perceive and approach life events (Cavazos Vela et al. 2014). Social conditions such as immigration legal status reinforce inequities in class and race, which can directly impact people's psychological wellness (Siemons et al. 2017).

5. Policy Actions in the Trump Administration

The impact of racism on the mental health of minority groups in the U.S. has been long documented in the literature (Sue et al. 2007). Donald Trump's presidency and his anti-immigrant rhetoric has carried out a series of anti-immigrant policy changes that have directly impacted the lives of individuals

who have an undocumented legal status in the U.S., including immigrants who hold legal immigration status (Chishti et al. 2017). The consequences of these anti-immigrant policy changes have resulted in fear and confusion among immigrant communities, including community members who have legal status and those who have an undocumented legal status.

Donald Trump tweeted, “Our country needs strong borders and extreme vetting, NOW. Look what is happening all over Europe and, indeed, the world—a horrible mess!” Since January 2017, he has signed a total of seven executive orders related to immigration. Donald Trump’s comments exemplify the xenophobic language he has carried out personally and legislatively through policy changes by the Department of Homeland Security since being inaugurated into office. For example, Donald Trump signed a public safety executive order that would strip federal grant funding from states protecting community members who have an undocumented legal status. Additionally, Trump redirected funding to increase the militarization of the border, including 5000 border patrol agents (Zoppo et al. 2017). In January 2017, Trump introduced an executive order banning nationals of Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia from entering the United States; temporarily rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Program; and ended Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for nationals from El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Chishti et al. 2017). According to a policy brief from the Migration Policy Institute, the number of admissions to people seeking refuge has been the lowest since 1980 (Chishti et al. 2017). On August 2019, Donald Trump introduced a public charge rule against green card holders receiving public benefits, which would ultimately bar them from citizenship of the U.S. (ILRC Public Charge, Immigrant Legal Resource Center).

6. Conclusions

The goal of this short article as it was written just a few days before the U.S. Supreme Court oral hearings on DACA is not to strip away the power of the student movement and leaders protesting the injustices of the Trump administration. The purpose for this article on the effects of the model-minority immigrant within the DREAMer narrative is to use the leverage that the undocumented student movement has had on pro-immigration policies to protest against the anti-immigrant rhetoric that is keeping children and families incarcerated in detention centers. Current immigration policy and enforcement practices such as border militarization and the creation of Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the U.S. have led to the dehumanization, criminalization, and racialization of undocumented immigrants which can be seen in the number of children and families incarcerated in detention center (Rosenblum 2015). Illegality (Furman et al. 2015) encompasses the historical, social, and political “produced condition of immigrants’ legal status” as criminal (Abrego 2016, p. 6). The concept of legal immigration for the good model-minority immigrants inevitably brings forth illegality as a construct and process that controls who is eligible and welcomed to enter and remain in the U.S. as well as who is blamed, criminalized, and punished. Thus, the concept of legality and illegality (Furman et al. 2015), may indeed set-up forms of structural oppression that ultimately marginalize and criminalize undocumented individuals in the U.S. The uncertainty communities that have an undocumented legal status experience related to the future of their lives in the U.S. because they may not fit eligibility requirements for programs such as DACA that quantify deservingness or perhaps amnesties that are obsolete or have historically only existed in waves is as present for DACA beneficiaries as it is for their families and community members who were left out (Zong et al. 2017). This is a form of continued violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism against families and groups that operate from a collective approach and rely on community as a part of their survival (Heldke and O’Connor 2004). It is therefore that illegality, including the model immigrant-minority rhetoric as it is reflected in the DREAMer narrative (Furman et al. 2015) needs to be addressed as a risk factor impacting the overall wellbeing of individuals and communities (Chomsky 2014).

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