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Invisible Illegality:
The Double Bind of Being Asian and Undocumented

By

Esther Yoona Cho

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
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ABSTRACT

Invisible Illegality: The Double Bind of Being Asian and Undocumented

By

Esther Yoona Cho

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Irene Bloemraad, Chair

How do undocumented young adults of Asian origin, namely those who can “pass” as documented, navigate their everyday lives? More broadly, how do racial discourses shape pathways of incorporation for undocumented young adults? Undocumented immigrants of Asian origin occupy a unique social location in the United States because what “illegal” conjures in the American consciousness is not what “Asian” looks like. On one hand, they live in a context where they are primarily racialized as non-threatening “model minorities” leading to perceptions of success, achievement, and docility. Simultaneously, however, they also carry the burden of their criminalized undocumented immigration status. This status, and both the stigma and burden that come with it, is invisible. Not only is legal status undetectable to the naked eye, unlike race or gender, but Asians do not fall into the racial imagery of an “illegal immigrant” that is conflated with “Mexican.” Living in the United States as someone who is Asian and undocumented is, in essence, a double-edged sword.

Drawing on a comparative analysis of in-depth interviews with 63 undocumented Asian and Latinx young adults from California, in addition to two years of intermittent participant observation at community-based organizations, events, and workshops serving the undocumented population, I shed light on the ways in which illegality, the everyday experience of living with undocumented status, is refracted through the prism of racialization in the United States. My findings reveal that 1.5-generation undocumented Asian immigrants experience what I call *invisible illegality*. Race operates to simultaneously shield Asian undocumented young adults from and expose them to the precarious nature of their immigration status, and this varies across institutional and relational contexts. Relative to their Latinx counterparts, Asian undocumented immigrants experience advantages such as greater physical security since they are less vulnerable to racial profiling and ICE raids. However, being a camouflaged minority within the undocumented population results in their exclusion from a collective identity of illegality that, for many, rests on shared race-based narratives of being Latino. Such exclusion results in intensified feelings of shame and a sense of isolation both within their ethnoracial community and the broader undocumented community. It also hinders access to formal and informal supports in civil society. The unique nexus of being Asian and

undocumented thus leads to a delicate position of invisible illegality that is produced by multiple co-constitutive processes of racialization.

By unraveling how the intersection of race and undocumented status uniquely shapes the burdens of illegality of undocumented young adults of Asian origin, *Invisible Illegality* has sobering implications beyond an understanding of diverse trajectories of illegality. It exposes the ways in which the racialization of immigrant communities is a powerful mechanism that cements broader inequalities in U.S. society.

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Graduate school often feels like a solitary endeavor, but the reality is that it is far from that. I would not have been able to navigate and endure my years as a doctoral student without a supportive community of family, friends, and advisors. My successes are not my own.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Lydia¹ emigrated from South Korea when she was nine years old, when her mother decided to start a new life with her two daughters in the U.S. Because her father had been the sole breadwinner, the divorce in addition to the transatlantic move made the first few years especially challenging. However, living in a Korean enclave with familiar sights, smells, and faces, Lydia gradually found her way in Southern California. Being devout Christians, they also made the Korean immigrant church ten minutes from their apartment a central part of their lives in their new home. Lydia taught Sunday School, sang on the music team, and tutored younger kids, a great way to make money when you don't have papers. With the help of DACA and the CA Dream Act, Lydia got to finish college and now works at a non-profit supporting foster youth. While she lives an active life, she has struggled with feeling isolated. Being Korean allowed Lydia to fly under the radar and avoid being detected as undocumented. Despite being embedded in her church community, no one knew about her status for many years. In fact, well into her adulthood, Lydia thought her family was an outlier in the population of undocumented immigrants, the only undocumented Korean family that existed. It was not until one of her Korean friends "came out" to her about her immigration status that Lydia realized that she was not alone.

Ana was just three years old when her dad decided to help the rest of the family cross the U.S.-Mexico border to join him in California. While her dad's intention was to eventually return to Mexico, the money that he made as a construction worker alleviated some of the extreme poverty that Ana's family endured. Having come at such a young age, Ana acclimated quickly to life in her new home. Competitive and ambitious, she also excelled in school and found deep enjoyment in academics. When she was a teenager, her family sought the help of a lawyer to legalize their status, only to end up being defrauded, losing thousands of dollars they had invested in him, and being thrown into deportation proceedings. Miraculously, Ana was able to remain in the U.S., going on to graduate with honors at a top state university, despite the incredible challenges of her legal situation. During her college years she found close, lifelong friends bearing similar struggles through undocumented student groups on campus. After years of feeling dejected from being stuck in menial, low wage jobs, with the passage of DACA, she finally has been able to apply her hard-earned degree in her dream career in biomedical sciences. Although navigating her tenuous immigration status continues to be a challenge, she finds some relief knowing that she has the strong support of the Latinx undocumented community she has cultivated over the years.

Lydia and Ana are both undocumented young adults who were raised in the United States. The story that many of us are likely more familiar with, however, is Ana's. Both in public and academic conversations, we often find ourselves telling and hearing a singular undocumented immigrant narrative: undocumented immigrants are Latinx, usually Mexican, low-skilled, and working class. Between 2000 and 2010 approximately 75% of all mass media coverage on immigration was of Latinos, with nearly half of all stories depicting concerns around undocumented immigrants and enforcement along the southern border (Farris & Mohamed

¹ I use pseudonyms and intentionally keep details vague to protect the identities of respondents.

2018). In the academic literature, the most acclaimed books and articles are overwhelmingly about the Latinx population (e.g., Abrego 2006, 2011; Chavez 1998; Dreby 2012; Donato & Armenta 2011; Gonzales 2016; Menjivar & Abrego 2012; Patler 2017).² There is no question that it is incredibly crucial to pay attention to the experiences surrounding the community that comprise nearly three-quarters of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in this country. However, with the focus often being on the Latino population, undocumented minorities that have come from other parts of the world have been less visible and less understood.

In the United States, racialized narratives of “illegal immigration” in broader discourse continue to equate “illegal” with “Latino” or more specifically “Mexican” (e.g., Chavez 2008). This conflation obscures ethnoracial differences among Latinos, even among Mexicans, and keeps undocumented Asians in the shadows. In this dissertation, I therefore complicate this conversation by exploring “the exception to the rule,” those on the demographic and discursive periphery, in order to shed light on the broader socio-political landscape of race relations and immigration politics in the United States. Occupying a small segment of the broader undocumented population, Asian undocumented immigrants are located in the demographic periphery. Being situated in this physical peripheral space, they are also on the discursive periphery, often unacknowledged in public and academic discussions about the conditions and consequences of illegality.

Studying exceptions and outliers, particularly in comparison to who and what is considered normative, can offer deeper analytical insight into broader social processes and mechanisms. Hence, by centering the experiences of Asian undocumented young adults in this sociological study, I show the myriad ways in which *race shapes illegality in everyday life*. I highlight how the racialization of undocumented immigration status in the American context leads to distinct constraints, opportunities, and pathways of integration for undocumented immigrants of diverse ethnoracial backgrounds, contributing to the reification of broader social stratification structures in the United States.

Discussions about social inequality and stratification in the U.S. have historically focused on race, class, and gender, but more recently scholars have been underscoring the importance of legal status and citizenship as additional, re-emerging axes of stratification. Research has indeed shown that disparities between immigration statuses have grown over time. Scholars such as Frank Bean, Susan Brown, and James Bachmeier (2015) and Hirokazu Yoshikawa (2011) have found that undocumented immigration status has long-lasting intergenerational effects. Undocumented immigration status leaves individuals in vulnerable positions, the effects of which extend beyond simply those holding this status themselves. Around 4.5 million children, who are U.S.-born citizens, for instance, have an undocumented parent. Having an undocumented parent, despite having birthright citizenship themselves, can lead to poor early childhood development (Yoshikawa 2011) and hinder educational attainment (Bean, Brown, and Bachmeier 2015), having significant implications for future academic and professional trajectories. Like class or socioeconomic status, the detrimental effects of undocumented

² Exceptions include works by Tracy Buonavista, Kara Cebulko, Esther Yoona Cho, Loan Thi Dao, Soo Mee Kim, and Caitlin Patler, and Aggie J Yellow Horse.

immigration status on life chances are found to persist into the 2nd and 3rd generation (Bean et al 2015). Undocumented immigration as such is arguably the inequality issue of the 21st century in the U.S.

The Case of the United States

As inhabitants of the U.S., we find ourselves in an era of heightened white supremacy, anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric, and associated restrictionist legal and political decisions by those in power (The White House 2017, 2018). In this fraught sociopolitical climate, the human lives and futures of the 11 million undocumented immigrants that reside in our midst (and the 4.5 million citizen children who have an undocumented parent) have been negotiated on local, state, and national political platforms.

In recent years, a subgroup of the undocumented immigrant community popularly known as “DREAMers” have emerged as a population of particular interest to governmental officials. Of the approximately 11 million undocumented individuals in the U.S. today, about a quarter of the population or 2.5 million are these DREAMERS -- youth and young adults in their teens, 20s, and early 30s who migrated as children, often as infants and toddlers, with their parents and have grown up and been socialized in the U.S. (Batalova & McHugh 2010). These youth and young adults are the focus of my study. “DREAMers” is a moniker derived from the federal DREAM Act (short for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act), which is a legislative proposal that would grant an opportunity for certain eligible undocumented young people who migrated to the U.S. as minors to apply for legal permanent residency status. DREAMers are deemed the “most deserving” of a pathway to legal permanent residency by political leaders, given their identities as Americanized youth and young adults who can readily integrate and contribute to U.S. society. Due to multiple failed attempts enacting the DREAM Act since the early 2000s, the Obama administration implemented the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2012 through executive action as a temporary measure. DACA has since provided a renewable 2-year protected residency status along with a work permit to nearly 700,000 undocumented youth and young adults (MPI 2018). In 2017 the Trump Administration decided to rescind this program that had offered newfound stability, opportunity, and hope to many young people and their families. While the courts have blocked this decision thus far, allowing current beneficiaries to continue applying for DACA renewals, the announcement has led millions of undocumented community members to live each day with grave uncertainty and trepidation about their future.

In terms of the national origin breakdown, it is estimated that of the 11 million immigrants residing in the U.S. without documentation, about 71% are from Mexico and Central America. However, a nontrivial proportion of this population, approximately 14% or 1,500,000 undocumented residents, are of Asian descent. Of the top ten countries of origin of undocumented immigrants, four are in Asia – China, India, South Korea, and the Philippines (Figure 1). The vast majority of DACA recipients are also originally from Mexico and Central America, with more than 80% being of Latinx origin (MPI 2018).

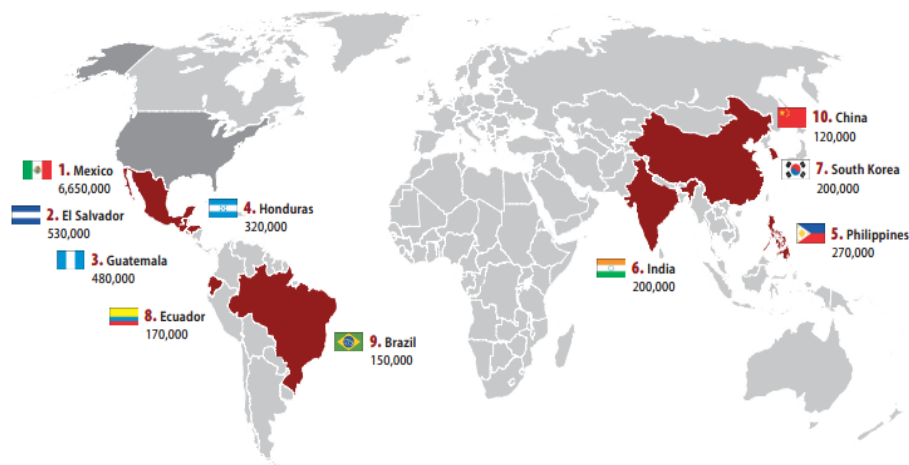


Figure 1. Estimates of Top 10 Countries of Origin.

Source: Department of Homeland Security, 2010.

Contrary to popular assumptions about undocumented immigration, as demonstrated by the constructed exigency about the southern border wall, net Mexican migration has been below zero for more than a decade (Gonzales-Barrera 2018). According to the Center for Migration Studies (2019), the undocumented population has declined by one million since 2010. Moreover, only one third of recently undocumented residents entered the U.S. by crossing the southern border (CMS 2019). In fact, Asians are now among the fastest-growing segments of undocumented immigrants, outpacing Mexicans in terms of growth (Figures 2 and 3). The number of Asian undocumented immigrants, who enter this status by overstaying their visas, is shown to be steadily increasing.

Beyond national origin, what is often forgotten in public discourse on undocumented immigration due to its focus on border enforcement is the long-term residency of immigrants without papers. Many undocumented immigrants have been living in the United States and calling this country home for decades. About a fifth of undocumented immigrants have been residing in the U.S. for 20 years or more and 62% have lived in the U.S. for at least ten years. The vast majority of the undocumented population lives in California, Texas, New York, Florida, and New Jersey, with California -- the focus of this study -- being home to more than a quarter of the entire population (Gelatt & Zong 2018).

Given the constraints of their immigration status, undocumented immigrants are poorer and less educated than the broader immigrant population and the U.S.-born population. Undocumented immigrants are much more likely than the U.S.-born population to live in poverty, with 28% living below the federal poverty level (Gelatt & Zong 2018). The educational attainment of undocumented adults is also much lower than the U.S. native born population; 15% have a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree, compared to 34% of the native born population (MPI 2014). In terms of the age breakdown, 22% of the country's undocumented population are 24 years old or younger, 26% are 25 to 34 years old, 25% are 35 to 55 years old, 15% are 45 to 54 years old, and 12% are 55 and over. Most undocumented immigrants, 63%, do not have children,

and 40% of all undocumented immigrants have never married (MPI 2018). This study focuses on a unique sub-group of this population: young adults who are under the age of 35, many of whom have a college degree.

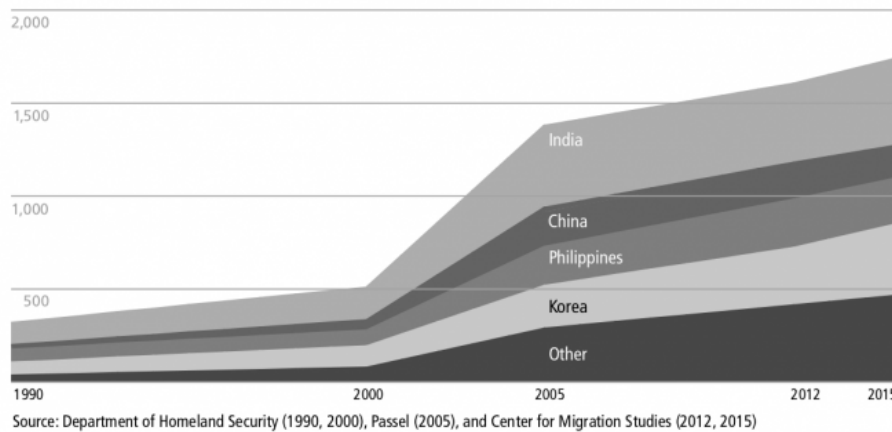


Figure 2. Number of undocumented Asian immigrants from top four Asian countries of origin, 1990-2015

Source: Kim & Yellow Horse 2019

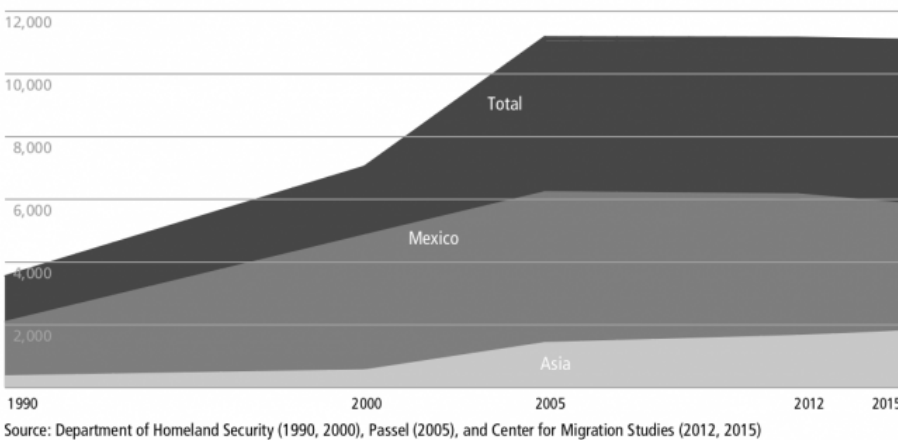


Figure 3. Proportion of Asian immigrants within total undocumented immigrant population, 1990-2015

Source: Kim & Yellow Horse 2019

Illegality and Incorporation

Immigration scholars have long explored the question of how immigrants of diverse countries of origin are “assimilating” into American society (Alba & Nee 2003; Portes & Rumbaut 2006; Portes & Zhou 1993), attempting to understand what individual-level and contextual factors shape the incorporation pathways of immigrants. While our understanding is still limited, in recent years there has been a burgeoning scholarship examining the *legal* context of reception, a key mechanism underemphasized in assimilation theories, and the myriad ways in which the production of illegality constrains the livelihoods of undocumented immigrants (Abrego 2006,

2008, 2011; Abrego & Gonzales 2010; Dozier 1993; Flores 2010; Flores & Horn 2009; Gleeson & Gonzales 2012; Gonzales 2008, 2010, 2012; Menjívar 2006; Menjívar & Abrego 2012). This literature thus far demonstrates that, although all undocumented immigrants are legally constrained, their experiences, identities, sense of belonging, and interpretations of their status vary most consequentially by (1) age at arrival (and related, DACA receipt) and (2) ethnoracial background.

Although the effects of undocumented status are broad, one's experience of illegality is significantly shaped by one's life stage at age at arrival (Abrego 2011), as this determines the types of interactions one has with diverse social and institutional structures which then inform sense of belonging, understanding of rights, and trajectory of incorporation (Gleeson & Gonzales 2012). There is, therefore, a clear distinction between those who arrive as children (1.5 generation) and are socialized in the K-12 educational system -- those in my study -- and those who migrate as adults primarily for employment (Abrego 2011; Menjívar & Abrego 2012). Drawing on theories of structural and symbolic violence, Menjívar & Abrego (2012) found that immigration and criminal law together inflict a legal violence on the lives of immigrants with tenuous legal statuses, particular in the areas of work, family, and school. However, the harmful yet normalized effects of legal status are experienced differentially by age group in these domains; blocked paths to education and social mobility are most salient for younger migrants, while legal violence among older migrants manifests itself through exploitation in the work force and acceptance of these abusive conditions. These varied experiences and interactions with social institutions, in turn shapes their legal consciousness, their relationship to the law (Ewick & Silbey 1998), and political incorporation of 1st generation and 1.5 generation immigrants in distinct ways as well. While the former internalizes the law primarily as a source of fear, the legal consciousness of 1.5 generation immigrants is characterized more by stigma as they have internalized social norms, rights, and privileges that are inaccessible due to their status (Abrego 2011).

Undocumented youth and young adults experience diverse pathways of incorporation, especially as they must "learn to be illegal" after they exit the K-12 educational system, where they are legally protected under *Plyler vs Doe* (Gonzales 2011). While they are all severely restricted in their access to higher education, those who are able to "patchwork" social capital (Enriquez 2011) in the form of caring teachers and administrators, supportive relatives, and fictive kin with shared status (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2011) are found to experience a smoother transition into illegality. Indeed, in a study on the role of DACA on recipient lives, Gonzales et al (2014) found that the benefits of DACA were reaped more fully by those who already possessed relatively substantial social and human capital, i.e., those involved in immigrant organizations were significantly more likely to obtain a job.

A growing body of scholarship has emerged over the past few years exposing the differential pathways of undocumented communities by race and ethnicity, along with growing recognition of the substantial presence and distinct challenges faced by undocumented Asians in the mass media (Buena Vista 2013; Cho 2017; Dao 2017; Gonzales, Terriquez & Rusczyk 2014; Kim & Yellow Horse 2019; Patler 2016). The category of illegal immigrant is understood and adopted differently by diverse populations, thereby informing their motivation for collective political mobilization. Non-Latino undocumented immigrants, while less politically engaged compared to

Latinos (Zepeda-Millan 2014), have been found to benefit more from when lawful presence is granted: Asian recipients of DACA are more likely to obtain an internship and acquire a credit card when compared to Mexicans, and beneficiaries from all other parts of the world (including Canada, Europe, and Africa) were also more likely than Mexicans to open a bank account (Gonzales et al 2014). Despite significant barriers to higher education and the labor market that come with undocumented immigration status, Asian undocumented young people in general access these institutional spheres of life at greater rates than Latino youth and young adults (Buenavista 2013; Cho 2017; Gonzales 2010). We could infer therefore that Asians may fare better instrumentally and materially, while Latinos may have greater emotional and mental support and collective solidarity through grassroots community efforts.

Racial Context of Reception

Building on scholarship examining the legal context of reception of 21st century immigrants in the U.S., my study infuses an intersectional lens to this conversation by centering the role of the *racial context of reception* of these communities. It is not simply that immigrants of diverse races and ethnicities have different pathways of incorporation, but that their experiences are profoundly colored by and embedded in a racial hierarchy. By taking an intersectional approach to the study of immigration status, I therefore argue that illegality cannot be fully understood without paying equal attention to processes of racialization in contemporary America.

When immigrants enter the United States, they also enter a system stratified by race (Waters 1999). They are assigned to an American racial category at entry – going from Ethiopian to Black, from Korean to Asian. And, moreover, those racialized identities are imbued with perceptions about their deservedness and desirability as well as their illegality.

In the early 20th century, Asian immigrants were targeted alongside Latino, specifically Mexican, immigrants as undesirable and inassimilable foreigners, becoming among the most legally racialized groups in the United States. Racial distinctions are not simply a function of social relations, but are embedded in the law, as I will elaborate in Chapter 2. However, master narratives surrounding these two immigrant groups have diverged over the last few decades. Undocumented immigration from Mexico began to grow after 1965 when avenues for legal entry were abruptly halted at a time when the U.S. had already become dependent on Mexican labor. This rise in unauthorized migrants from south of the U.S. border led to a villainizing, stigmatizing discourse that began to frame Latinos as “threats” to the nation (Chavez 2008; de Genova 2004; Ngai 2003). This trope that reinforces stereotypical images of Latino immigrants as undocumented, unskilled, and undesirable persists into the contemporary era (Chavez 2008).

Asian immigrants, on the other hand, were the country’s first “illegal aliens” (Hsu 2000; Lee 2002; Ngai 1999), perceived as threats and excluded through both immigration and citizenship law for decades. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan in 1907, and the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 kept the numbers of Asian migrants to a minimum.

Then, while the Immigration Act of 1965 opened the door to previously barred migration from Asia, it simultaneously created the seeds for undocumented Mexican migration. Unlike the

Mexican migrant, the trajectory of the Asian migrant has since evolved from the “yellow peril” (Lee 2007). With the relative selectivity of contemporary Asian immigration (Junn 2007; Lee & Zhou 2012), particularly in comparison to other national-origin groups, Asians at large have been stereotyped as documented and educated, and relatively desirable. Though they are still seen as “forever foreigners” (Kim 1999), Asians have been positioned as the self-reliant, docile “model minority” (e.g., Wu 2015) that others should emulate, particularly in relation to blacks (e.g., Abelman & Lie 1995) and Latinos (Huntington 2004).³

In other words, what “illegal” looks like is the opposite of what “Asian” looks like. “Illegal immigrants” in the U.S. have been constructed as criminal, low-skilled, uneducated, undesirable Latinos (Chavez 2007; Farris & Mohamed 2018; Flores & Schachter 2018), whereas “Asians” are racialized as being on the other end of the spectrum. It is much easier for Asian undocumented immigrants to keep their undocumented immigration status hidden (Buena Vista 2013; Cho 2017) and “pass” as legal. Asian undocumented young adults therefore serve as a particularly interesting and important case to explore, given their social location at the nexus of two master narratives of racialization that vary in visibility and valence: they are simultaneously visible, benign “model minorities” (Okimoto 1994; Osajima 1988) and invisible, stigmatized “illegal aliens.” U.S.-raised undocumented Asian young people live in a context where they are primarily racialized as good, high-achieving immigrants, viewed as successful partly due to presumed legal entry. In stark contrast, they also bear the burden of undocumented immigration status, invisible to the public eye because they do not conform to the racial imagery of an “illegal immigrant.” Given these entrenched connotations in the American public consciousness, we would expect that individuals at the intersection of these ostensibly dissonant master narratives in particular – those who are Asian and undocumented – would experience and understand their undocumented immigration status differently from those of Latino descent.

The dissonance between these two racialized positions motivates my research questions: *How do undocumented young adults of Asian origin, namely those who can “pass” as documented, navigate their everyday lives? More broadly, how do racial discourses shape pathways of incorporation for undocumented young adults?*

I borrow from Erving Goffman’s concept of “passing” (1963), which describes the process by which individuals can hide a stigmatized aspect of themselves, because this information is not detectable or observed by others. In this case, the stigma is being undocumented. Young undocumented immigrants raised on U.S. soil in general, regardless of race or ethnicity, can “pass” as legal because of their linguistic and cultural socialization. Asian undocumented young adults, however, can doubly pass. Being Asian provides an additional shield, due to persistent

³ It must be noted that not all Asians are seen purely as model citizens who are law-abiding and high-achieving. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 brought poorer, less educated refugee communities from Southeast Asia significantly diversifying the “Asian” population in the U.S.. Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao immigrants are therefore constructed in a bifurcated framework, also perceived as delinquent welfare dependents and underachievers (Ngo 2006). However, in considering dominant racialized discourse, Asians are lumped together and primarily labeled as “model minorities” while Latinos are primarily cast as “illegal.”

tropes and stereotypes that disassociate them from the racialized, colored construct of “illegal immigrants.”

Omi and Winant (1994) define racialization or “racial formation” as “the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings” (61). I follow John A. Powell (1997) and other scholars to take it a step further, demonstrating that racial meanings have concrete consequences for the racialized. In this work, I show how the racialization of illegality in the American milieu is a powerful mechanism that produces the everyday outcomes observed in the lives of undocumented immigrants. Further, the impact of these racialization processes extends beyond undocumented communities to sustain structures that keep immigrant and racial minorities marginalized and subordinate, cementing broader systemic inequality.

Building on the important work of scholars exploring diverse trajectories of illegality by race and ethnic background, my research therefore elucidates how illegality, the everyday experience of living with undocumented status, is refracted through the prism of American racialization. My findings reveal that undocumented Asian immigrants experience what I call *invisible illegality*. Race operates to simultaneously shield Asian undocumented young adults from and expose them to the precarious nature of their immigration status, and this varies across institutional and relational contexts. Relative to their Latino counterparts, Asian undocumented immigrants experience advantages such as greater physical security since they are less vulnerable to racial profiling and ICE raids. However, being a camouflaged minority within the undocumented population results in their exclusion from a collective identity of illegality that, for many, rests on shared race-based narratives of being Latino. Such exclusion results in intensified feelings of shame and a sense of isolation both within their ethnoracial community and the broader undocumented community. It also hinders access to formal and informal supports in civil society. The unique nexus of being Asian and undocumented thus leads to a delicate position of invisible illegality that is produced by multiple co-constitutive processes of racialization.⁴

By investigating the lived realities of those who must navigate and negotiate their social location as both racially and legally constructed individuals, my research bridges scholarship on intersectionality and immigrant incorporation in the U.S. Intersectional frameworks have historically focused on race, gender, and class, but legal status is an equally important source of categorical stratification. Indeed, research shows that social inequality by citizenship and legal status has grown over the years. In this context, my work demonstrates the complexities of incorporation pathways for U.S.-raised immigrants by centering immigration status within a broader conversation about intersectionality.

⁴ My research on invisible illegality (also see Cho 2017) is complementary to the concept of “social illegality” by Rene Flores and Ariela Schachter (2018). Flores and Schachter argue that illegality is not only a legal construction but a social construction produced by stereotypes and views held by the majority white population in the United States. My findings show that the role of the perceptions held by fellow undocumented immigrants as well as co-ethnic community members is consequential as well. Furthermore, my focus is on invisible illegality as lived experiences of undocumented Asian young adults beyond their social categorization.

Data & Methods

My dissertation enters this dialogue with a comparative study of Asian and Latino undocumented immigrants, drawing on the Korean and Mexican case, respectively. From Summer 2015 to Spring 2017 I conducted in-depth interviews with Korean- and Mexican-origin undocumented young adults and participant observation in organizational settings that serve undocumented immigrants.

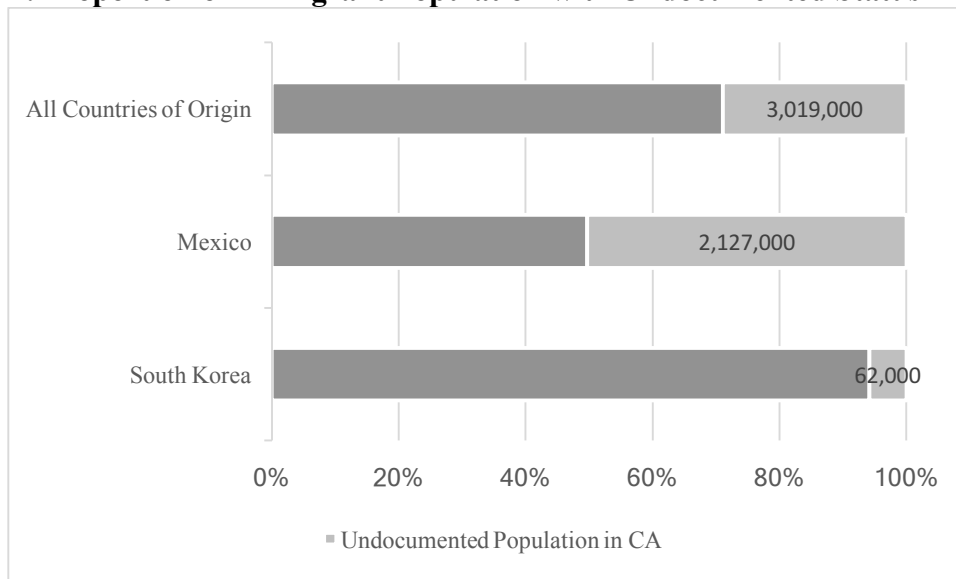
I chose to focus on Korean and Mexican individuals primarily for theoretical reasons. Koreans are one of the two largest undocumented Asian national-origin groups most closely associated with the model minority myth (e.g., Junn 2007), and as a result are racialized as “good immigrants.” In contrast, Mexicans, who comprise the majority of the Latino undocumented immigrant population, have been racialized as “bad immigrants.” The respective social positions of these two groups allow for a robust comparative analysis.

In light of my theoretical reasons for studying Korean and Mexican communities, I decided to focus my study on the state of California. California has the largest Korean and Mexican undocumented population in the country. Some estimates say that 1 in 5 Korean immigrants are undocumented. More broadly, California is an appropriate site for this research as it is the state with the highest share and greatest ethnic diversity of undocumented immigrants. California is also home to just under a third of all undocumented youth and young adults and more than a quarter of, or approximately 200,000, DACA recipients (MPI 2014, 2018).

I interviewed 33 Korean- and 30 Mexican-origin undocumented young adults in California for a total of 63 respondents from Summer 2016 to Spring 2017 (Table 1).⁵ To be eligible for this study, respondents had to be young adults between the ages of 21 and 35, be of Korean or Mexican descent, and have experienced living with undocumented immigration status for most of their lives. While I designed a comparative study to draw out the significance of race as a mechanism towards differentiated pathways among undocumented young adults, the Mexican case is primarily used as a comparative case triangulated with existing secondary literature.

⁵ I conducted 78 interviews in total across two periods of time, 2013-2014 and 2016-2017. I interviewed 24 Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults in the 2013-2014 wave - 12 Korean and 12 Mexican undocumented young adults. In 2016-2017, I then followed up with 11 of these 24 respondents for a second interview and then conducted an additional 39 interviews with unique respondents. In addition, I interviewed two Korean staff members at immigrant service organizations as informants. I also interviewed 2 Filipino, 1 Honduran, and 1 Indian undocumented young adults, but have chosen not to include those interviews in the analyses presented in the book, to focus on the Korean case in comparison to the Mexican case. Therefore, in total I have 65 unique respondents whose voices inform the findings in this book.

Figure 4. Proportion of Immigrant Population with Undocumented Status in CA



Source: Migration Policy Institute

In an effort to overcome some of the selection bias in chain-referral sampling common in research on vulnerable populations, and to maximize the trust and comfort of respondents, I employed purposive snowball sampling. First, I reached out to a broad range of individuals in my personal network and asked them to provide my contact information to anyone eligible for the study. Respondents found in this way contacted me directly to express their interest in participating. I then asked these respondents to refer me to others who might be willing to participate in the study. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and mitigate a sense of coercion, I had interested participants initiate contact and choose an interview time and location that was most convenient and comfortable for them. Because my call for recruitment was forwarded to various advocacy and activist organizations, my sample includes three undocumented activists.

While I did not intentionally recruit DACA recipients for the study, the vast majority of the sample had received DACA benefits (n=50). Eight respondents had experienced living without papers but had LPR or citizenship status at the time of interview. Because they lived the majority of their lives without documentation and got legalized in their mid-to-late 20s, they were able to speak to the ways in which undocumented status shaped their relationships, more effectively tracking its effects due to their experience of legalization. My sample is majority female (n=38), with an average age of 26 years old, and highly educated; the vast majority of them (n=35) were college graduates or had some college (n=26). While this sample may not be representative of the population of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. as a whole, they are representative of the “Dreamers” -- the population of undocumented youth and young adults that has been of special interest to governmental authorities and central to contemporary debates around immigration. Furthermore, focusing on this unique subgroup that has strong advantages along traditional lines of incorporation is valuable for our understanding of the broader undocumented immigrant community, who arguably operates in a significantly more restrictive social context. Examining

those who are highly educated, culturally and linguistically “assimilated,” and otherwise well situated to achieve upward mobility (if not for their immigration status) allows us to more effectively isolate the operative effects of their lack of documentation on their life trajectories.

At the beginning of the interview, I explained my motivations for the study, received oral consent, and asked if the interviews could be audio-recorded. All of my interviewees I met with consented to the recording.⁶ Before beginning the interview, I had them fill out a short demographic survey form on my laptop with questions such as age, age of arrival, place of birth, highest educational level of parents, etc. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted in English, and lasted 1 to 2 hours, covering questions about the respondent’s migration history, school, work, personal relationships, encounters with law enforcement, and ethnic and racial identity. I concluded interviewing when I reached theoretical saturation.⁷ Interviews were transcribed and anonymized, then coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis platform Dedoose. After coding transcripts into broad categories based on existing understandings in the literature, I further coded them inductively based on emergent themes. In a methodological appendix, I provide a more detailed description of my recruiting and interviewing experience and how my positionality may have affected this overall process (see Appendix A).

While interviews serve as my primary data source, I also conducted intermittent participant observation throughout the San Francisco Bay Area where I was based from Summer 2015 to Spring 2017. I volunteered at a local East Bay Korean community center, participated in a grassroots support group for undocumented students in the Bay Area, attended demonstrations, and volunteered at various citizenship and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) application clinics. Field observations provided further insight into the context within which undocumented young people navigate their immigration status, examining how support spaces perceive and address their needs, and how they interact with institutional actors.

As alluded to above, there are limitations to this study. There were expected challenges in recruitment given that undocumented immigrants are a vulnerable, hard-to-reach population. Therefore, with the limited sample and focus on the Korean and Mexican case, there is a lack of diversity in the sample. These cases, by providing a deep understanding of the complex meanings and mechanisms that undergird the lives of diverse undocumented immigrants, contribute to theory generation in the realms of illegality, race stigma, and marginalized identities more broadly. My work, by exploring the lives of Asian and Latino undocumented young adults simultaneously and comparatively, points to the need to revisit and nuance contemporary notions of race and illegality.

Political Context: From Obama to Trump

My interviews began in the summer of 2016 when undocumented immigrants in the U.S. were cautiously optimistic. Particularly in the state of California, there was still strong hope that the

⁶ One respondent asked to converse via Google Chat, because he was uncomfortable with a phone or in-person interview.

⁷ I stopped recruitment when I reached theoretical saturation for my particular case of educated Mexican and Korean undocumented young adults in California.

Democratic Party would continue to lead the government in the next presidential cycle under Hilary Clinton, finally putting into action decade-long discussions of comprehensive immigration reform that would provide pathways to citizenship, and at the very least the expansion of DACA and DAPA (a similar temporary protection program for the parents of U.S. citizens). As such, the interviews reflect the respondents' experiences in a specific moment in time when state and national policies seemed to be moving in a favorable direction for undocumented immigrants. A few years into DACA (which was introduced in 2012), undocumented young adults in this program were navigating their everyday lives with more ease and freedom, making progress on their college education, working in occupations in the formal economy commensurate with their educational background and interests, financially supporting their siblings and parents, and going out with friends with less anxiety. Then in the first week of Trump's presidency in January, the new president began to implement anti-immigrant, restrictionist policies through a series of executive orders, including the tripling of the number of ICE officers, withholding grant money from sanctuary cities, and issuing the "Muslim Ban," suspending entry from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

Given these drastic political shifts, I sensed a marked difference in the affect of respondents around this point of data collection. The relative relief that DACA offered was now replaced with relative anxiety. Without my prompting, respondents I met with toward the end of my interview period would mention the effects of the new presidential administration on their well-being and future plans. A few respondents described feeling physically ill and fatigued after the announcement of Trump's election, filled with trepidation and dread of what the future held for them and their loved ones. Respondents discussed contingency plans with their families, considering whether they should quit school and start working, or move to Mexico despite knowing they could never return to their home in the U.S.. I ended data collection in part because I was approaching theoretical saturation, but also in part due to the increasing challenge of recruitment and the potential heightened discomforts and harms I felt the interviews could bring to respondents. A few respondents did mention that sharing their stories with me was cathartic, but knowing that participating in my research could potentially lead to greater psychological distress or expose them to malicious eavesdroppers, I chose to stop recruitment. My last interview was on March 25, 2017. While the presidential election did come up with some interviews with immigrants, it did not impact my findings other than what I described above. My findings, which bring nuance to the experience of illegality by illuminating how Asian and Latinx undocumented young people differentially navigate and negotiate their interactions with various key actors, are still germane for the work of academics and practitioners positioned to support diverse vulnerable immigrant communities.

Roadmap of Chapters

In what follows I highlight racialized interactions with four key sets of actors in particular: state agents, other undocumented immigrants, friends, and co-ethnic community members. Through these interactions, different experiences and processes unfold to together contribute to the construction of *invisible illegality* for young Asian immigrants. I argue that these mechanisms in turn further cement stratification structures in the U.S. by race and legal status.

Before diving into my findings, I briefly trace the journeys of Korean and Mexican immigrants as racially and legally constructed communities in the United States to situate the individuals in this study in their broader sociohistorical contexts. Next, I examine how the racialization of illegality differentially shapes Asian and Latino undocumented young adults' freedom of movement. At a time when detention and deportation rates have escalated, physical and existential threats to security are deeply racially contingent. While undocumented Koreans and Mexicans are both vulnerable to the threat of removal, I find that Korean respondents experienced *abstract anxiety* because they are not as susceptible to the practices of detention and deportation. In contrast, Mexican respondents reported a more tangible *experiential fear* based on concrete and persistent reminders of their deportability, both through the personal experiences of close family and community members and the barrage of alerts in the media.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the ways in which master narratives of Asian and Latino immigrants are reinforced by undocumented immigrants themselves. Having adopted racialized tropes of socioeconomic status and achievement as well as ideologies of deservingness, both Mexican and Korean undocumented young adults contributed to extant intergroup boundaries, maintaining the camouflage of undocumented Asians. Prevailing tropes racializing Asian immigrants in the U.S. colored the understandings that undocumented Mexican young adults have of this population. For Mexican respondents, their perceptions of the Asian American community as legal and high-achieving were orthogonal to their own harsh path to and experience of illegality. And many Korean respondents, having both subscribed to the racialized narrative of the "illegal alien" who crosses the southern border and adopted individualistic work-based frames of deserving and undeserving immigrants, perceived themselves as different from their Mexican counterparts despite their shared immigration status.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I turn to the most personal aspects of their lives, shedding light on potential sources of social support. First I bring attention to the deep-seated effects of immigration status that extend into their friendships. I find that undocumented immigrants approach interpersonal relationships with caution, engaging in what I call "security work" to protect themselves and their loved ones. The vast majority of undocumented young adults, regardless of ethnoracial background, had internalized the stigma of their status and therefore exercised caution in interpersonal interactions. However, in contrast to Mexican respondents who usually felt comfortable disclosing their legal situation with close friends, Korean respondents were often only prompted to divulge their status when it was offered as an explanation for another, potentially as injurious source of shame, such as the inability to pursue higher education.

For Korean respondents the Korean immigrant church played an important role in shaping their social lives and their overall sense of well-being. In Chapter 5 I therefore focus on the Korean case, showing how the church, as an institutionalized manifestation of their co-ethnic community, assumes a complex, ambiguous role in the lives of undocumented Korean immigrants, where both a sense of dignity and shame is reinforced. For Korean respondents, their church was a sanctuary space where they find a sense of belonging and dignity in the midst of their stigmatized social and legal location. Some respondents were also able to benefit from drawing on the social and institutional capital of their documented church members of higher socioeconomic status. However, the church was also not always a no-judgment zone of respite

and safety. A place where respondents confronted Korean cultural ideals of societal success and status, they were at risk of feeling shamed by and ostracized from their community.

In sum I argue that relational mechanisms deeply transform the character of everyday lives of Asian and Latinx undocumented young adults due to the particular nexus of their racialized identities. These processes have consequential implications on the individual, community, and societal level. They not only contribute to divergent pathways of incorporation for these groups, but also perpetuate a sense of fragmentation and disunity within the undocumented community which may impede collective political mobilization. Furthermore, on a broader level, these intergroup mechanisms reify a social caste system based on an ascribed sense of membership and belonging derived from intersections of race and legality. Exploring the stratifying effects of undocumented immigration status, and in particular, how it intersects with race, is therefore not only important to understanding immigrant integration, but social inequality more broadly in 21st century America.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information by National Origin			
Demographic Information	Korean	Mexican	Total
Gender			
Female	21	17	38
Male	12	13	25
Age at interview (years)			
Average age	25	26	25.4
Age range	20-34	21-35	20-35
Age at arrival (years)			
Average age at arrival	6.6	8.1	7.4
Range of age at arrival	0-15	0-15	0-15
Level of education (number of participants)			
High school diploma	0	1	1
Some college	13	14	27
Bachelors degree	17	11	28
Masters degree	3	4	7
Highest parental education*			
Elementary/middle school	0	9	9
High school diploma	4	10	14
Some college	9	5	14
Bachelors degree	11	2	13
Masters degree	6	1	7
Chose not to answer	3	3	6
Documentation			
Undocumented (with DACA)	26	21	47
Undocumented (without DACA)	4	3	7
Legal Permanent Residency	1	3	4
Naturalized citizen	2	3	5

*Note: Parental education indicates the highest level of education received by either mother or father

CHAPTER 2

Context | Immigration and Racialized Identities

The Korean and Mexican young adults I interviewed would at times identify themselves by national origin and ethnicity, but would also often speak about their identities as “Asian” or “Latino/a” and the impact of their racial background on how they are perceived and treated by others. They understand that their everyday experiences are refracted through the prism of racialization. When immigrants step foot on U.S. soil, they also negotiate an inescapable identity shift by being assigned a racial category with deep-seated, every day consequences (Omi & Winant 1994; Waters 1999). The racialization of immigrants in contemporary America is central to the stories of the Korean and Mexican origin young adults in this study. In this chapter I therefore trace the racialized journeys of Korean and Mexican American immigrant communities, delving into the ways in which membership and belonging in the U.S. has been informed by the intersection of race and illegality in particular.

Yellow Peril & Model Minority: Korean Migrants in the United States

The United States is home to the largest South Korean immigrant population in the world, with approximately 1.1 million Koreans residing in the U.S. today. They represent 2.4 percent of the nearly 45 million immigrants in the country, but their presence is primarily concentrated across three states: California, New Jersey, and New York. Nearly half of all Korean immigrants live in these three states with about a third residing in California (O’ Connor & Batalova 2019). Scholars have examined the integration of the Korean immigrant community, particularly with respect to education, socioeconomic status, employment, and generation (e.g., Kibria 2002; Kim 2006; Lew 2006; Lee 2015; Min 1995, 2007, 2011; Park 1997), but what is less studied and understood is the role of legal residency and citizenship status. Estimates show that nearly 1 in 5 Koreans in the United States is undocumented, putting South Korea in the top 10 countries of origin of undocumented immigrants in the country. Particularly with “illegal immigration” today being rigidly associated with migrants from directly south of the border, we often miss that there is a nontrivial proportion of undocumented immigrants of non-Latinx origin among us. Moreover, the trajectory of the Asian immigrant archetype has evolved over American history. The construction of Asians, with East Asians (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) in particular, as “model minorities” has infused contemporary perceptions and stereotypes associated with this population, significantly distant from their experiences as the first “illegal aliens” in the United States due to their decades-long exclusion from entry and naturalization.

The First “Illegal Aliens”

Koreans, but more specifically the “race” of Asians⁸, were not always permitted to enter through U.S. borders. The first significant wave of Korean migrants came over a century ago in 1903 as wage laborers on sugar cane and pineapple plantations in Hawaii, then along the Pacific Coast in

⁸ Using the broad racial category “Asian” elides internal heterogeneity within the Asian American population. Asians in the U.S. exhibit a bimodal pattern on structural indicators such as income, poverty, and education. However, throughout my work I strategically use the term “Asian” to highlight the very real role of race in conditioning one’s every day experience with legal status.

agriculture, mining, and the railroads, joining migrant workers from China, Japan, and the Philippines (Patterson 1988). This initial group of Korean migrants entered the U.S. when xenophobia against “Mongolians,” as Asians were referred to at the time, was at its apex. Though demand for their labor was high, working conditions were poor: they were paid wages below that of their white counterparts, were crammed into tight living quarters, and forced to work long hours – much akin to the experiences of low-wage Latino laborers in the 21st century. Perceived as a military threat, East Asian migrants were constructed as the “yellow peril” and an insidious climate of nativist fear pervaded the country, institutionalized in a series of federal legislation that blocked further entry and naturalization for individuals of Asian “race” for decades. The Page Law of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 forbid the immigration of Chinese laborers and their wives, which then extended to those from India in 1917, Korea and Japan in 1924, and the Philippines in 1934.

These immigration laws are the first pieces of legislation in the history of the United States to exclusively target particular national origin groups. The notion of the undesirable foreigner and the long lineage of U.S. immigration and naturalization laws and policies rooted in a gatekeeping nativist framework therefore began with the racialized exclusion of Asian migrants (Lee 2002). As some scholars have argued, Asians were thus the nation’s first “illegal aliens,” in addition to criminals, the “feeble minded” and “insane,” and prostitutes (Lee 2002; Ngai 1999, 2003). Due to the legislative restrictions barring their entry, many came to the U.S. using fraudulent documents claiming their citizenship by birth (known as “paper sons”) or crossing Mexican or Canadian borders, which were relatively unguarded at the time. Because Asians, the Chinese in particular, actually had papers at inspection, however, they were able to evade public discourse of illegality and deportation efforts, in contrast to Mexican undocumented immigrants who would later become constructed as the prime “illegal alien” with the formation of Border Patrol at the U.S.-Mexico border and the pervasiveness of a criminalizing rhetoric (Hsu 2000; Lee 2002; Ngai 2003).

A New Era of Asian Immigration

The doors to Asian migration and Asian American naturalization began to open gradually in 1947, when legislation was passed to grant entry to racially ineligible spouses of U.S. servicemen, including Korean women from the Korean War (1950-1953) (Min 2011; Wolgin & Bloemraad 2010). Korean immigration then opened up with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished the national quota system that had kept numbers to a minimum. Post-war conditions of continued political unrest and economic insecurity motivated many Koreans to migrate for better opportunities for themselves and their children. In a single decade, from 1970 to 1980, the Korean population grew exponentially from 39,000 to 290,000.

With the post-1965 wave of Asian migration also came a shift in tropes and understandings of these once excluded foreigners. While earlier flows of Korean immigration consisted mostly of low-wage laborers and their families, the majority of contemporary Korean migrants come from higher socioeconomic and educational backgrounds than immigrant counterparts of other national origins. For instance, in 2017 the median income of Korean immigrants was nearly \$65,000, higher than the national median for U.S. households, and the poverty rate was lower than the rate of other immigrant groups (MPI 2017). Perceived therefore as “good” immigrants

who have “reached parity” with whites, Korean Americans, along with many other East Asian groups in particular, have been racialized as the “model minorities” of the U.S. As such, Asian Americans have been primarily stereotyped as docile, smart, hard-working, and self-sufficient (e.g., Lee 1994, 2015; Osajima 1988; Wong et al 1998). Forms of discrimination being qualitatively different and often covert compared to those toward other minority groups (Bobo and Suh 2000; Kim 2007; Lee 2000), the challenges facing Asian Americans in schools and workplaces are also found to be overlooked and underaddressed (Kim 2007).⁹ However, what is often not sufficiently considered is that the U.S. immigration system has played a huge part in the types of immigrants that come through its borders. These higher SES immigrants from Asia have been selectively chosen upon entry into the United States, in a similar fashion to the flows of lower SES immigrants from Latin America which have also been a consequence of structural drivers.

Narratives that paint Asian Americans as the model minority are not only constructed and fueled by whites and other out-groups. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2016) also found that Asian American young people operate within a “success frame” fueled by their own co-ethnoracial community. With the selectivity of contemporary Asian migration which has drawn higher class migrants (Junn 2007; Lee & Zhou 2016), especially compared to immigrants of other national origins, they navigate their lives within a narrow but pervasive frame of achievement and mobility within the Asian American community. Asian origin students benefit from the guaranteed presence of the positive “model minority” stereotype in the form of symbolic capital, resulting in “stereotype promise” that can enhance their educational outcomes (versus stereotype threat [Steele 1995]). Achievement is intricately linked to race and ethnicity within Asian immigrant communities as well, where the reference group for success is not middle-class whites but high-achieving co-ethnics (Jimenez & Horowitz 2013; Lee & Zhou 2015). Asian students are seen as top performing in schools, becoming the new reference group for academic success and achievement instead of white students. Due to these narrow frames of achievement, Asian American students of low-income backgrounds are found to be able to override material disadvantages when scaffolded by ethnic resources. The material capital of more advantaged pockets of Asian immigrants are shown to “spill over” to benefit lower-resourced, more disadvantaged members of the community as well (Lee & Zhou 2016; Nee & Holbrow 2013).

Literature suggests, however, that existing within these cultural frameworks of the model minority myth, success frame, and stereotype promise are not always beneficial. Scholars such as Angie Chung have pointed to the emotional and mental challenges that Korean Americans in particular may confront due to the need to “save face” and perpetually curate their public selves. “Saving face” is “maintaining one’s dignity and reputation by hiding and avoiding humiliating or embarrassing situations” (Chung 2016, 15). Chung argues that this practice is not solely about crafting one’s “presentation of self” (Goffman 1959) by distorting one’s behavior in front of others, but furthermore, involves suppressing feelings that may compromise their public-facing image and therefore their integrity. This emotional management can be expected to be

⁹ In schools, they experience “stereotype promise” (Lee & Zhou 2015) while as employees, they hit the “bamboo ceiling,” facing greater constraints and obstacles to promotion and advancement compared to their white counterparts (Hyun 2005).

heightened among those who bear the stigma and challenges associated with undocumented immigration status. Particularly for those who have grown up alongside their citizen and documented peers but do not have legal residency status, they experience significant barriers to achieving the “American Dream” of educational and professional success, which is at the core of stereotypical perceptions of others and, more importantly, their expectations of them.

Despite decades and generations of U.S. residence, membership for Korean Americans, and Asian Americans more broadly, has remained elusive. Understandings of Asian American membership have been framed relative to the black-white color line, which inflate the positive experiences of Asian Americans and obscure the vast heterogeneity that exists within the population. Due in particular to markers of educational achievement and socioeconomic mobility, especially compared to other immigrant and minority groups, there is a body of scholarship that has suggested that the Asian-origin population has “assimilated” into segments of the American mainstream (Portes & Rumbaut 2001; Portes & Zhou 1993) and have become “honorary whites” (Bonilla Silva 2004; see also Bean & Stevens 2003; Gans 1999; Lee and Bean 2004; Yancey 2003). However, I join the community of scholars who have argued that Asian Americans, along with other minority communities, live in a system of racialization perpetuated by white gatekeepers to social belonging and membership. The social location of Asians, therefore, is a result of racial triangulation, where whites “valorize” Asians as favorable racial minorities relative to blacks, but keep them on the margins and outskirts of civil society (Kim 1999). Racialization therefore does not happen in a vacuum in isolation, but always in relation to the social positions of other native and immigrant groups (Kim 1999; Winter 2011; Shih 2008). While Koreans may be assimilating along socioeconomic lines, they continue to face racial hostility and discrimination and are perceived as perpetual foreigners, denied reception into the American collective identity as authentic Americans (Ancheta 1998; Bosniak 2000; Kim 1999; Tuan 1998, 1999).

Undocumented Koreans in the U.S.

Hurdles attaining legal status add another structural barrier to participation in U.S. mainstream society. Many contemporary Korean immigrants initially come on student or high-skilled work visas, if not through family sponsorship.¹⁰ While the vast majority gain legal permanent residency (LPR) status and become naturalized, a nontrivial segment of the Korean migrant population does not take this pathway, overstaying their visas and becoming undocumented. According to MPI estimates, approximately 198,000 Korean immigrants are undocumented, comprising two percent of the total undocumented population (Zong & Batalova 2017). In other words, as mentioned earlier, nearly 1 in 5 Korean immigrants in the U.S. is undocumented, having lost legal immigration status by overstaying student, work, and travel visas (Kim & Horse 2019).

Congruent with broader trends, all Korean interview respondents in my study had migrated to the U.S. because their parents were originally able to obtain some kind of visa. When 21-year-old Joseph was a young boy, his parents had migrated to California¹¹ from South Korea on student

¹⁰ The vast majority of Korean immigrants who become legal permanent residents do so through family (35%) or employment sponsorship (59%).

visas by enrolling at a community college where they made sure to fulfill the minimum course requirements to maintain their residency status. Because Joseph's dad was a pastor, arrangements had been made with a Korean immigrant church to sponsor him and the family for a green card once they arrived and began working for the church. However, due to some logistical and organizational complications, Joseph's family did not receive the sponsorship as they had planned and hoped, leading them to overstay their visas and become undocumented. Joseph is now one of about 7,170 undocumented Korean youth and young adults participating in the DACA program (Zong & Batalova 2017), while his parents have no legal recourse.¹²

The Korean undocumented population that I explore in this dissertation is but one case, but it offers a useful lens into the broader phenomenon of undocumented immigration in the current context of the United States. A recent study from the Center for Migration Studies (2018) found that the number of immigrants who become undocumented from visa overstays has surpassed the number from border crossings, pointing to shifts in the nature and trajectory of undocumented immigration. Asian immigrants are not only the fastest growing racial segment of the broader population but also the fastest growing undocumented population, with 1 in 7 Asian immigrants estimated to be undocumented.¹³ Nearly half of Asian undocumented immigrants are from India and China, and, like their Korean counterparts, they typically fall out of legal status by overstaying their visas (Karthick & Shah 2017).

Welcomed and Criminalized: Mexican Migrants in the United States

If Asians were the first illegal immigrants in the U.S., how did Latino immigrants, namely those of Mexican origin, become synonymized with "illegal"? As of 2017, there are 11 million Mexican immigrants, making up a quarter of the foreign-born population, and more than half of the Mexican population is undocumented (MPI 2018). The story of Mexican presence in the U.S. begins with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. This treaty, which ended the Mexican-American War, resulted in the annexation of the northern parts of Mexican territory by the U.S. whereby tens of thousands of Mexican nationals became foreigners or "migrants" on their own soil (Alba, Jimenez & Marrow 2014). As the years ensued, the combination of the demand for labor in the U.S. and the Mexican Revolution began a gradual stream of migrants in search of safety and economic opportunity. For many years immigrants from Mexico were not excluded from entering and residing in the U.S. while those from Asia were. However, in the middle of the 20th century, changes in law and policy as well as public discourse and sentiment led to shifting constructions of illegality for these communities.

¹² South Korea is the top country of origin of DACAmented Asians. However, only 24% of all eligible Korean youth and young adults are participating in the program. 52,000 undocumented Korean youth and young adults, a quarter of the entire undocumented Korean population, are estimated to be DACA-eligible, though only 7,170 are participating in the program. (Zong and Batalova 2017; USCIS 2018).

¹³ With federal policies that are now targeting Asian immigrants with legal residency status, with the deportations of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees as one example, Asian immigrants who have resided in the U.S. legally are feeling insecure, making them the group that could be most affected by the 2020 Census citizenship question (Grace Hwang Lynch, PRI, May 21, 2019, "Asian Americans could be the group most affected by Census citizenship question.")

Welcomed as Laborers

These waves of Mexican immigrants became steadier as years went on, culminating in a U.S.-Mexico guestworker agreement, known as the Bracero Program, a defining moment in Mexican migration (*bracero* is a Spanish term meaning “manual laborer”). From 1942 to 1964 this federal government program, which offered temporary employment contracts to Mexicans in order to fill labor shortage problems in the agricultural industry, brought approximately 5 million Mexican migrants into the country (Massey, Durand & Malone 2002). The high demand for labor was however unmet by bracero visa workers, leading to a drastic spike in Mexican workers without documentation. From 1945 to 1950, in only 5 years, the number of border apprehensions escalated more than ten-fold from 69,000 to 883,000. The unprecedented influx of migrant crossings led to “Operation Wetback” in the 1950s, “wetbacks” being the primary derogatory term that was used to describe Mexican manual laborers at the time (Ackerman 2014). During this period¹⁴, over one million Mexican immigrants were apprehended and deported (Hernandez 2006).

However, undocumented migration to the United States only began to rise steadily after this point, particularly from the year of 1964 with the termination of the Bracero Program and the introduction of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which placed tight numerical limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere for the first time in the nation’s history (Calavita 1992; Massey and Pren 2012b; Ngai 2003). Congress also later passed amendments that restricted migration from Mexico even further, not offering any temporary work visas and limiting legal resident visas to only 20,000 per year¹⁵ (Massey et al 2002). The passage of such constrictive immigration legislation, however, did not abruptly stop flows of seasonal agricultural workers from south of the border as was intended (Massey & Pren 2012a). The only difference was that the sole option available was undocumented hiring and undocumented entry. By this point American employers had become reliant on cheap Mexican labor, and Mexican migrants had become dependent on American employers. By 1980, therefore, the undocumented population had grown to 2 million, filling gaps in labor shortages that had formerly been addressed by the Bracero Program.

Wetbacks to Illegal Aliens

During this period, starting from the 1970s, marked a consequential shift in public discourse around Mexican migration -- a rhetoric of fear began to permeate the American consciousness. The public narrative took a dramatic foreboding turn, shifting the construction of Mexicans from primarily a low-wage, menial worker identity to that of an unlawful, criminal one. Political leaders and government agents increasingly began to frame migrants from Mexico as “illegal aliens” and “illegal immigrants” instead of “wetbacks,” producing a racialized migrant illegality that was distinctly Mexican (De Genova 2002; Dowling & Inda 2013; Lee 2002; Ngai 2003).

¹⁴ Through a detailed historical analysis, Kelly Lytle Hernandez (2006) shows that the large number of apprehensions in this period is not in fact attributed to Operation Wetback, but is a result of years of efforts by both the U.S. and Mexico to control undocumented migrant flows.

¹⁵ This number does not apply to immediate relatives of U.S. citizens seeking legal permanent residency.

What burgeoned in newspaper media accounts to reflect the changing political discourse were narratives of threat, crisis, and invasion of Mexican migrants into the U.S., reminiscent of fears that surrounded the “Oriental invasion” years prior (Lee 2002), sustaining the notion of Mexicans as the quintessential illegal immigrant (Chavez 2001; Massey & Pren 2012b). Hand in hand with the racialization of illegality emerged a growing public rhetoric of the criminalization of unauthorized entry. Through the Immigration Act of 1924 unlawful entry and deportation had gone from being treated as a civil and administrative process to a criminal offense (Dowling & Inda 2013; Ngai 2003). These legal and discursive mechanisms fueled a new and ballooning politics of fear and xenophobia toward Mexican migrants among the American public and catapulted the criminalization of undocumented immigration that persists into the contemporary era, a phenomenon that Leo Chavez has called the “Latino threat narrative” (Ackerman 2014; Chavez 2001, 2008; Massey and Pren 2012b; Santa Ana 2002).

In 1986, to address the stream of undocumented migration, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) legalized certain eligible migrants and increased border enforcement. A few years later, the federal government established the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which further incentivized labor migration from Mexico to the U.S., while simultaneously enacting more restrictive immigration policies that criminalized and penalized undocumented immigrants. However, these legislative actions to minimize undocumented migration in fact “backfired,” causing an exponential growth of immigrants living without documentation instead. Undocumented migration rose sharply in the 1990s, from 3.5 million to 12 million at its height in the early 2000s (Krogstad, Passel & Cohn 2018). Increased border enforcement made it more challenging and risky for Mexican laborers to engage in circular migration, leading them to bring their families to the U.S. and remain permanently. The Mexican participants in my study are the children in these very families.

Undocumented Mexicans in the U.S.

These push and pull mechanisms by the U.S. government over the last century have contributed to the large presence of undocumented immigrants from Mexico today. More than half of the Mexican foreign-born population is undocumented. Mexico is also the top country of origin of undocumented immigrants, comprising 53 percent or 6 million of the total undocumented population. Mexicans as such are less likely to be naturalized, but also the most likely to have lived in the U.S. for at least a decade, compared to other immigrant groups. Those who are able to obtain LPR status do so through family sponsorship (87 percent). In 2017, 67 percent of Mexican immigrants who became legal permanent residents did so through the sponsorship of immediate family members who were U.S. citizens (Zong & Batalova 2018).

In large part due to employment trajectories and legal conditions, a significant proportion, or approximately 21 percent, of Mexican immigrants are living in poverty, a higher rate than both native-born and other immigrant populations (Zong & Batalova 2018). The median income of Mexican households is \$44,700, 70 percent of the median Korean household income. Many undocumented Mexican youth and young adults – nearly 560,000 individuals -- have benefited from DACA, making up 80% of the total number of DACA recipients in the country (USCIS 2018). This temporary relief program is found to have a number of significant positive effects on individuals, opening up pathways for young people to attain internships and jobs, apply for

drivers licenses, access health care, and open bank accounts and credit cards (Gonzales et al 2014). Being able to pursue higher-paying work and build financial capital has not only benefited these young people themselves, but has provided an avenue for them to support their family members who continue to live in a more precarious legal situation.

The increase in ICE raids, development of inhumane migrant child encampments, and discussions about the border wall by the Trump administration continue to perpetuate a narrative of aggressive, criminal undocumented entry. However, in recent years, with more immigrants returning to Mexico than have migrated to the U.S., the number of undocumented immigrants from Mexico has been steadily decreasing (Gonzales-Barrera 2015). Albeit a small group, newer Mexican arrivals are also more likely to be high-skilled, college-educated, and have stronger English language skills, due to various structural factors including a stronger Mexican economy and more draconian U.S. immigration enforcement (Garip 2017).

In sum, Asian undocumented immigrants, of which Koreans are a part, while they were the first “illegal aliens” of the United States, are no longer perceived as such in the contemporary era. Rather they are primarily racialized as model minorities in comparison to other non-white groups in Claire Jean Kim’s field of racial positions (1999). It is therefore not simply *racial* triangulation that informs their lived experiences; it is complicated by the racial construction of legality. In addition to the field of racial positions, this population must navigate and negotiate an equally salient field of legal positions that intersects with and is shaped by the former. Hence, the Asian model minority myth and the Latino Threat narrative are simultaneous and dialectical processes that “are mutually constitutive of one another... not racialized in a vacuum, isolated from other groups, [but] racialized relative to and through interaction with” one another (Kim 1999, 106). The lived experiences of Asian undocumented immigrants therefore are not only shaped by the ways in which they themselves are racialized, but how another minority community, namely Latinx immigrants, is illegalized in the current sociohistorical context of the United States.

In what follows, I therefore explore how these deeply entrenched racialized tropes regarding the deservingness, social belonging, and legal membership of these immigrant communities contribute to the unique experiences of every day illegality of undocumented Asian young adults. How does residing at the intersection of these “good immigrant” and “bad immigrant” narratives shape pathways of incorporation for undocumented Asian Americans? How do their nuanced intersectional identities inform their interactions with ICE? Their decisions around which friends to trust with their stigmatized situation? Their sense of belonging in the undocumented community? These are some of the questions I delve into in the following pages.

CHAPTER 3

State Agents: Differential Sense of Deportability

With escalating efforts to deport undocumented immigrants by the Trump administration, immigrant communities live in a constant state of fear that they and their loved ones might be removed at any moment from the place they call home. According to a 2018 National Survey of Latinos by the Pew Research Center, regardless of their immigration status, Latinos are much more worried under the Trump administration (compared to the Obama administration) that someone they know might get deported (Lopez, Gonzales-Barrera & Krogstad 2018). However, even though 30-year-old Kevin, who had immigrated with his family from South Korea when he was five, is terrified of law enforcement, he also shared that “it’s a privilege that [he doesn’t] have to worry about” being stopped and possibly detained by ICE. He understood that his being Asian protected him, especially compared to his Latinx counterparts. Rapidly shifting immigration conditions in the midst of ongoing, and considerably more palpable, processes of racialized criminalization of the undocumented population raise the question of how race and ethnicity shape understandings and experiences of deportation and deportability for diverse undocumented immigrants.

Research has revealed that certain intersections of race, gender, and class fall particularly victim to racial profiling and enforcement. Brown and black bodies have been hyper-surveilled in public spaces, leading to negative, at times violent, encounters simply by engaging in mundane activities such as “driving while brown” (Mucchetti 2005) “shopping while black” (Feagin 1991; Gabbidon 2003), and “flying while Muslim” (Blackwood, Hopkins, Reicher 2015). Furthermore, with regards to the undocumented population, studies using USCIS removal data have shown that deportation rates are highly racialized and gendered. Latino and Caribbean working class men overwhelmingly being targets of deportation (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Ngai 2004). In 2017 more than 90% of those deported were from Latin American countries with 57% being from Mexico. In stark contrast, 0.004% were from China, India, the Philippines, and South Korea combined¹⁶, even though 12% of all undocumented immigrants come from these four Asian countries, and these discrepancies are reflected in my study sample. These accounts of evidence point to the presence of shared normative understandings of intersections of race and gender and associated behaviors that connote threatening and non-threatening identities. Given the modern regime of policing, enforcement, and deportation in the contemporary era, considering the position of invisible illegality of Asian undocumented young adults becomes particularly salient. With dominant tropes and perceptions of Asian Americans that primarily categorize them as “good immigrants,” would we expect for the spatial and mobile freedom of young undocumented Asians to be less compromised?

This chapter builds on our understanding of the effects of the mounting threat of detention and deportation by examining feelings of security and insecurity, or what I call their *sense of deportability* of Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults. “Deportability” – the vulnerability that comes with the constant threat of being physically removed from the country–

¹⁶ Calculated by author based on USCIS Fiscal Year 2017 ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Report

is a central, consequential aspect of migrant illegality that is produced and reproduced by the apparatus of the law and its on-the-ground implementers of surveillance (De Genova 2002). However, my findings demonstrate that not all undocumented immigrants are equally perceived as deportable by ICE and other state actors, which then shapes how individuals perceive their own deportability vis-à-vis their more heavily profiled and policed counterparts. I find that the palpability of the risk of detention and deportation varies significantly between Korean and Mexican communities due to racialized tropes surrounding “illegal,” “model,” and “bad” immigrants. Though fear is indeed still present for all undocumented young adults, the criminalization of Mexican illegality operates to provide relative protection to Korean undocumented immigrants from perpetual fear and anxiety as well as palpable threats of detention and deportation. Indeed, more than half of the Mexican respondents I interviewed knew someone – whether a parent, sibling, relative, or close family friend – who had gone through removal proceedings and/or had gotten deported compared to only a fifth of Korean respondents. Moreover, the majority of Mexican respondents who were fortunate not to have been close to deportation noted that they had experienced “a lot of scares,” compared to most of the Korean sample who, while not completely immune to close calls, in aggregate were further from this precarious reality. In other words, undocumented Koreans are vulnerable to the same threat of deportation that plagues immigrants in liminal illegality with fear and anxiety. However, they are not as susceptible to the practice of deportation, which dictates their experience of mobile security and freedom. Undocumented Korean young adults are more likely to suffer from an *abstract anxiety* while undocumented Mexican young adults must navigate an *experiential anxiety* that stems from palpable threats.

Thus, the threat of deportation manifests differently in the everyday lives of undocumented immigrants of diverse ethnoracial origin due to entrenched stereotypical associations in the American consciousness regarding who and what is “illegal” and “Asian.” The racialized practice of profiling and removal translates to differential feelings of physical insecurity and vulnerability -- a differential sense of deportability -- among diverse undocumented immigrants. Because of the dual racialization processes of (1) not being racialized as “illegal,” and (2) being racialized as a model, non-threatening migrant by powerful state actors, Korean undocumented young adults are more likely to be able to lead their lives without confronting the most dehumanizing aspects of illegalization, that is, the material and symbolic violence of racial profiling. These findings, which illustrate the ways in which Korean young adults without legal status interact with immigration enforcement, highlight the relative capacity for young undocumented Koreans to “look away” from their tenuous immigration status. This mechanism of racial triangulation of illegality contributes to the unique experience of invisible illegality among many undocumented young people of Asian origin, leading enforcement actors to look toward Latinos and away from Asians. This work sheds further light on the racialization notion of deportability, shedding light on how multiple processes of racialization, illegality, and criminalization intersect to differentially shape the day-to-day residential security and mobile freedom of immigrants living in tenuous legal situations.

Evidence-Based Fear in the Mexican Community

What primarily differentiates the trepidation that is so pervasive and shared by the entirety of the undocumented population is the degree of palpability and potentiality of this fear becoming a

reality. While there exists a constant nagging sense of fear and cautiousness among all interview respondents regardless of racial and ethnic background, in general, Korean respondents experience more of an abstract anxiety around their deportability whereas Mexican respondents are haunted by a more tangible, experiential one that is far from a remote reality. Their fear is one based on concrete and persistent reminders of their deportability, both through the barrage of alerts in English and Spanish language media in addition to personal anecdotes among family and community members (Abrego & Menjivar 2012; Chavez 2008). The extreme risks of going about everyday life without absolute vigilance are understood well in the Mexican community, as 30-year-old Felipe shared:

“I feel like there’s kind of these rumors that get spread in the community that also kind of foster this environment, like this fear in people. Like people don’t wanna tell other people about their status because they’re like oh, you know, like oh I heard that so and so told somebody about his status and he got deported, you know? And that person told, you know, ICE on them and now he’s like deported and his family’s screwed over, you know.”

In a question about who his most trusted relationships are when it comes to his immigration status, Felipe surprisingly brought up the threat of deportation. Felipe is a top graduate of a preeminent state university, but no accumulation of educational accolades and markers of mobility protected him from the realities of his deportability as a brown-skinned Latinx male living among a concentrated Mexican population in the Inland Empire of Southern California. For Felipe, discernment around sharing about this status with one’s social ties was imperative, because, as widely known, one unfortunate incident of disclosure to the wrong person could lead to catastrophic consequences such as deportation. This essential need to remain careful and stealthy with one’s every decision, word, and action, because of the real risk of deportation, is an understanding that seems to circulate throughout the Mexican community.

Unlike the Korean young adults I interviewed, their Mexican counterparts always referenced the deportation of a family or community member when I asked about whether or not they fear being deported. The Mexican young adults I talked to were intimately aware of the harsh realities of their deportability, experiencing someone close to them navigate the palpable threat of expulsion from the country. To them, it was not merely a remote phenomenon that they read on the news or on someone else’s Facebook page. It was their dad, their mom, uncle, aunt, or sibling, and, at times, themselves.

“The fear of deportation, it’s there. Especially because my dad got deported last year.”
- 22-year-old Diana from Los Angeles

“Yeah, good thing we haven’t [had any deportation scares], because it’s super scary. We’ve seen some of our ... My mom and dad’s friends, some of them have been deported, and my uncle as well, but my parents have not encountered anything like that, so I’m kind of glad. But it might happen because of everything that’s going on, so it’s kind of scary.”
- 22-year-old Adrian from San Diego

More than half of Mexican respondents mentioned someone close to them, if not the participants themselves, going through removal proceedings or even getting deported, compared to only a fifth of Korean respondents. Lucas, a 35-year-old Mexican American from Oakland, for instance, had the salient reference point of his father's repeated deportations for his anxieties with perfunctory activities such as driving. For Lucas, who witnessed, not one, but multiple removals of his dad from the country they called home, the realities and pains of deportability were extremely palpable:

“I spent so much time trying not to be seen, like when a cop car got behind me when I was younger, I was worried. [I would think,] ‘Maybe this is like the time my dad got deported, and it’s my turn.’”

Fortunately, Lucas was able to regularize his immigration status, but even as a legal permanent resident, when I asked if he still had this fear, he promptly, without hesitation, responded: “Absolutely.” There existed an innate, persistent veil of heightened vigilance due to the many years of living with such trepidation. The impact of Mexican deportability and the powerful climate of fear that pervades undocumented immigrants actually extends to the broader community regardless of the immigration status of its members (Dreby 2012; Hagan et al 2010). Due to the prevalence of mixed status families, the “burden of deportation” is not simply carried by individual themselves (Dreby 2012; Menjívar 2011; Talavera, Nunez-Mchiri & Heyman 2010). It deeply affects the psychological and cognitive well-being of children and youth, including the more than 4 million U.S. born citizen children who have an undocumented parent (Brabeck and Xu 2010; Yoshikawa 2011), and brings emotional distress and material duress to entire households and communities as a whole (Bean, Brown & Bachmeier 2015; Menjívar, Abrego & Schmalzbauer 2016). Psychologists have even found observable differences in brain development among children who experience this type of “toxic stress” from having undocumented parents and particularly from experiencing deportations of their parents. Living in perpetual fear of parental deportation and hiding their parents’ immigration status leads to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and rule-breaking behavior among children of undocumented parents (Delva, Horner, Sanders, Lopez & Doering-White 2013).

Three interview respondents had experienced the trauma of deportation proceedings themselves; two of these three individuals were of Mexican descent. Twenty-nine-year-old Sergio had come into the United States as a barely walking one-year-old soundly asleep in the arms of his mother, but when he turned 21, he unexpectedly received a letter in the mail mandating that he appear in court to determine whether he was allowed to stay in the only country he knew. After a few court visits, however, the immigration judge fortunately ruled to close his case, shortly after which Sergio received DACA benefits. In his final statement, Sergio shared that the judge told him that he was a “model” undocumented immigrant who would be the “perfect poster child for the DREAM Act.” Indeed Sergio was a light-skinned Latinx young man whose fashion fit the style profile of the retail clothing store that he managed. During our interview at a local coffee shop in San Francisco, his proper demeanor, with his incredibly straight posture, hands folded above his lap, and extremely mild and steady vocal cadence, was certainly noticeable. While I was not in the courtroom, to the immigration judge who had handled Sergio’s deportation order, it is quite plausible that the undocumented man in front of him signaled “deserving” and “desirable,” in

contrast to the construct of the “criminal,” dark-skinned illegal alien that threatens the safety and integrity of American society. Sergio was likely viewed as the kind of young, morally upright, “passing,” undocumented immigrant that should be allowed to remain in the country and receive a pathway to citizenship.

The case of Sergio points to enduring constructions of “good” or deserving and “bad” or “undeserving” immigrants (Bosniak 2012; Yukich 2013) that permeate the perceptions and logics of the American public (Lawton & Escobar 2010), including those who hold bureaucratic and judicial positions of power (Jones-Correa 2008; Marrow 2009). Even more dissonant to the imagery of the criminalized dark-skinned, blue-collar Mexican laborer is the small yet nontrivial segment of the undocumented population that has migrated across the Pacific Ocean – those of Asian origin. In the highly racialized sociopolitical context of the U.S., undocumented immigrants of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds experience a differential sense of deportability, due to varying visible markers and associations with the non-threatening, good immigrant identity.

Relative Protection of Korean Undocumented Young Adults

My interviews show that the freedom of movement of Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults is significantly shaped by the racialization of illegality in the U.S. In a political climate where detention and deportation rates have increased exponentially, particularly among low-income Latino populations, physical and existential threats to mobile and residential security are racially contingent. The majority of the Korean respondents in my study felt less constrained in their ability to traverse institutional spaces and contexts compared to Mexican respondents. That is, I find that Korean undocumented young adults in California are likely not as susceptible to racial profiling by border and law enforcement because of their non-Latino identity. Due to embodied associations with who is a “good immigrant” as well as who is an “illegal immigrant” in the American consciousness, Korean undocumented young adults are not perceived as readily as “deportable” and therefore experience less mobile and residential insecurity than Mexican undocumented young adults. That is, they are less afraid of being pulled over or stopped by interior enforcement officers and of being deported from the country they call home.

Despite their lack of documentation, several of my Korean respondents mentioned traveling locally without much hesitation and with minimal repercussions (without and before DACA). Often their legal status seemed to be less of an issue than one would expect, even in their navigation of spaces that would be considered high-risk contexts such as domestic airports and security checkpoints where government identification must be presented to state officials. In other words, at airports and checkpoints -- manifestations and representations of “the border” where citizenship, belonging, and entry are contested (Di Masso 2012; Hopkins & Dixon 2006)– Korean respondents not simply experienced more ease in general but were aware that they benefited from being perceived as non-threatening.

For instance, Soojin, a 34-year-old Korean woman who had moved to Southern California with her family when she was eight years old, described her relationship with state authorities as not only being neutral but actually quite positive. When I asked whether she has had any encounters with law enforcement, she first wanted me to clarify if I meant specifically due to her

immigration status. She then proceeded to share that she has never felt timid around government authorities. Rather her experience was the contrary. In spite of her precarious legal situation, she felt protected by the government, even as an individual who was not eligible for DACA due to falling outside the bounds of the age requirement. Because she felt protected, instead of targeted, it affected the liberties with which she traveled.

When I followed up with her by asking about any domestic travel experiences, it became even more apparent that she had never considered her status as a barrier to movement. In response to my question about any “close calls” at the airport such as encounters with immigration officials, she said:

“No, no, not at all. I did travel like domestically a lot, but I never got checked. I never got checked... I didn’t think that they would go after me. I actually felt protected. As far as I know, immigration status is totally separate from law enforcement, so they don’t really check your status even if you have like, a DUI or something.”

Because she and her family had been issued social security numbers when they immigrated on a temporary visa in the 1980s, Soojin had been able to obtain a California driver’s license. This piece of government-issued identification, despite her unauthorized residency status, at least in part seems to have allowed her to travel domestically with ease. Despite being “undocumented” in terms of residency status, therefore, like many other undocumented migrants who typically have some form of legal documentation from their home country or place of residence (e.g., driver’s license, social security number, municipal ID) (Chauvin 2014), Soojin had acquired legitimate civic identification that offered a sense of inclusion and integration.

Soojin’s relationship with law enforcement illustrates the extent to which the race-status intersection shapes the materialization of its consequences. Put another way, the distance between purported bureaucratic barriers and physical threats from the lack of documentation and the actual lived experiences of these constraints is greater for Korean undocumented immigrants than for Mexican undocumented immigrants. Soojin’s life had indubitably been significantly constrained by her immigration status – curtailing her educational opportunities, limiting her job opportunities to ethnic economies, and dictating decisions around dating and marriage. However, caution around flying, fear and anxiety of government officials -- namely, the notion of deportability -- was the most remote of concerns.

In the same manner in which Soojin did not perceive her immigration status as linked to other arms of the government and therefore felt safe in the presence of law enforcement, 21-year-old Eric, a college student from southern California, described interacting with police without any discernible consideration of the potential risks of detention or deportation. “Yeah. I’m not like afraid to call the police,” he told me. When I probed further, asking why he may not have experienced any precarious situations with law enforcement, he attributed the absence of such negative encounters simply to “timing.”

“I think it’s like timing, like being in the right place at the right time. Like I’ve never had a situation where I felt like I was in the wrong place at the wrong time with the law at least or like even in school.”

In his statement, it is apparent that Eric perceived himself simply to be a beneficiary of good fortune – “being in the right place at the right time.” Attributing the ease with which he navigates public spaces to “timing,” Eric seems not to consider potential protective mechanisms such as his Asian racial identity that afford him the benefits of being disassociated with undocumented status.

Along the same vein, Daniel, a 22-year-old Korean male from Los Angeles who immigrated to the U.S. when he was seven years old, did not have any reservations navigating the airport. Some of this mental freedom could be owed to the legal protection of DACA that has allowed hundreds of thousands of undocumented youth and young adults like Daniel to fly domestically. But rather than referring to DACA, Daniel mentioned that he is “approachable” with “mannerisms [that] are on point,” suggesting that he believes, at least in part, that it is his personal characteristics, namely his generally amicable and respectful demeanor that shields him from any confrontations:

Esther: Have you had any close calls at the airport?

Daniel: No, because you know you just need your driver’s license. And I like to think that I’m a pretty approachable-looking dude. So they don’t really like...they don’t really care. They’re just like, “aye what’s up” and I’m like, “have a nice day.” And I feel like my mannerisms are on point too.

Even when it came to driving, while Daniel discussed that he has to be more careful with driving compared to his documented friends, for whom the consequences are merely financial, he also expressed that he “[doesn’t] drive like [he’s] worried that [he’s] going to get pulled over.” “If I get pulled over I have nothing to hide,” he boldly stated.

In referencing his mannerisms, Daniel points to shared normative understandings of what constitutes a non-threatening, civically upright individual – or more specifically, how such an individual presents oneself. A few respondents both of Mexican and Korean origin would mention how their appearance – whether it was within the realm of their control, such as clothing, or not, like skin color -- would make a difference in their treatment. While only a small minority made these direct references to performativity of civil uprightness, it is worth noting that such notions exist and are deployed as a strategy for self-protection, in the same way that some Black Americans are found to “wear their class identity” to reduce suspicion and surveillance (Feagin 1991).

For instance, Kevin, who has been able to work in a major tech company in the Bay Area of California¹⁷ since receiving DACA, discussed the ways in which he could navigate everyday life without much concern, despite pervasive fears of actors “in uniform.” In the midst of challenges being undocumented, his parents had remarkably been able to support Kevin financially, making it possible for him to attend a prestigious university on the East Coast, by toiling every day for decades as small business owners. With his clean haircut, button-down shirt, and well-fitted pants, Kevin blends seamlessly into his social environment and looks like the coworkers around him, he shared with me. Furthermore, when I asked him about people in general whom he feels he needs to be most careful around, he responded:

“Most careful? Authority. Just like yeah, police... police, any sort of authority, legal authority. Yeah, like so you know especially with the whole race related stuff, I mean it’s a privilege that *I don’t have to worry about that*. But I’m also very... just like try to be super respectful. Just not talk back, talk slowly, show that I can speak English very well, and just you know follow directions, submit, things like that. Yeah, just one of the most frightening things, the most frightening thing is just somebody in uniform.”

Kevin is completely inconspicuous as he goes about his routine of commuting to his white collar job in San Francisco and socializing with his predominantly white and Asian friends with similar high-achieving backgrounds. While already experiencing a baseline of protection due to his own identity as a well-coiffed, well-dressed Asian American male in the Bay Area, particularly in potentially risky situations such as being in the vicinity of authority figures, he confronts the tenuousness of his immigration status, prompting him to further enhance his conduct as the utmost reverent, mannerly individual.

Korean respondents above all experienced a relative ease in movement and mobility, diverging from the perennial physical insecurity and vigilance that comes with being undocumented, as reported in studies of undocumented Latinos (De Genova 2002, 2010; Dreby 2012; Hagan et al 2010; Menjívar & Abrego 2012).¹⁸ To be precise, their non-Latino and non-black ethnoracial identity certainly did not protect them from the *threat* of deportation, still making them targets of legal violence. However, compared to Mexican respondents, they are not as likely to be a

¹⁷ While my study does not explicitly address regional differences, it is possible that there is some regional variation in the ways in which undocumented young people experience their sense of deportability. California is the first “sanctuary state” and public opinion is fairly consistent across state regions, with the greatest support toward undocumented immigrants coming from the LA and SF Bay Areas (Bonner 2018). However, since the 1990s local police has had the power to turn undocumented immigrants over to ICE through federal programs such as Section 287(g) and Secure Communities, leading to the deportation of many individuals across California. The work of Abigail Andrews suggests that the sense of deportability among Mexicans differs greatly between San Diego and Los Angeles, leading undocumented immigrants in the SD area to feel more “powerless and afraid” (63). However, this study focuses on 1.5-generation undocumented young people whose parents had decided to migrate, while Andrews’ work focuses on older Mexican undocumented adults. Fear and legal consciousness (Abrego 2011) varies by generation and thereby regional differences in sense of deportability for this study group may vary as well.

¹⁸ According to a recent Pew Hispanic Survey, 68% of Latino respondents without citizenship or a green card worried that they, a family member, or close friend might be deported (2017). (No comparable national studies exist for the Asian population.)

victim of the *practice* of deportation, contributing to a more diffuse climate of fear.¹⁹ An underlying cognizance of potential repercussions certainly exists, but there is a relative comfort with which they navigate their everyday lives, in addition to more explicitly surveilled locations such as airports and checkpoints, because of the camouflage their model minority status provides. Whether enacted intentionally or not, through their English speaking ability, respectful demeanor, and deferential attitude, respondents such as Daniel and Kevin were able to demonstrate to enforcement officers that they are low-risk “good” residents. The cases of these undocumented Korean young adults underscore the extent to which one’s relationship with the law (legal consciousness) and its enforcers could vary dramatically among immigrants living without papers. Racialized perceptions of threat and foreignness alienate, exclude, and violate one’s sense of dignity and claims to citizenry for all minority groups in different ways. However, in moving through public spaces, because undocumented Asians are seen and recognized as law-abiding and docile (albeit foreigner), and not illegal and deportable, they are comparatively less at risk of their fears of deportation becoming a reality.

Recognizing their Asian race as a protective guise

A significant factor that contributed to the non-threatening presentation of Korean undocumented immigrants is their clearly identifiable Asian race. Several respondents, in addition to presenting a certain way to avoid suspicion, specifically identified their Asian appearance as operating as a protective guise in potentially risky public spaces. The “model minority” construction which has problematically essentialized Asian Americans into a cultural group defined by success and hard work, had been internalized by the undocumented Korean young adults I interviewed. They understand how their racial identity was constructed by external actors in a way that fed into broader good immigrant/bad immigrant discourse. By positioning themselves in opposition to other groups of color, namely their Latinx counterparts, their elision and obscurity actually was a source of existential protection along with cumulative marginalization.

Katie, a demure, soft-spoken young woman who had moved to the SF Bay Area from Orange County in Southern California for college, described proactively making an effort to present herself as a model citizen. Growing up in a single mother household, she and her siblings were often working while attending school; one year all three of the children took a year off their studies to save money for college tuition. Being an extremely tightknit family that relied heavily on one another for financial and mental-emotional support, when she was admitted to a college far from their home in Southern California, the whole family eventually moved up north to live together. When I asked her if she ever felt treated differently due to her race, she responded:

Katie: Well, I’m pretty sure I have. I’m a small female Asian, too, so yeah. I’m very soft-spoken... Yeah. I think I do that, too, unintentionally, especially being undocumented. I

¹⁹ The Trump Administration has increased its efforts to deport immigrants with criminal records, sparking unprecedented fear among Asian immigrant community members, even those with legal residency status. So far, however, the number of actual deportations are lower than the Obama Administration (Radford 2019). (<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-asian-deportations-20180125-htmstory.html>; <http://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/entertainment/tn-wknd-et-citizenship-20171221-story.html>)

don't want there to be something to make people be suspicious of me. I think I unintentionally try to be like a model minority, like a model person who people wouldn't suspect of doing anything.

Esther: What kind of things would you say you do?

Katie: I think just maybe the way I talk. I try to be extra polite to people. Yeah. That would be an example. Yeah... and then carrying myself a certain way.

Katie describes not only behaving in a way that would allow her to go about her life unnoticed, but is also extremely aware of how her appearance as a “small female Asian” could also contribute to her being treated well by whomever she encounters. She understood the ways in which the combination of her physical and personality characteristics, both intentional and unintentional, made her more invisible and non-threatening to the public eye. There was certainly a sense of familial responsibility that added to her effort to live into the “model minority” stereotype. Because her mom depended on her children under such fragile economic and legal conditions, Katie had developed a “work hard and stay out of trouble” mentality that was further buttressed by the racial narrative of Asians, and particularly Asian women, being model immigrants that embodied the antithesis of the trope of the criminal illegal alien.

Twenty-five-year-old Mijoo was similarly aware of the ways in which the visibility of her East Asian background and female gender came together to make her less conspicuous to enforcers of the state. She had attended a university close to the Mexico-U.S. border, increasing the probability of encountering checkpoints. Mijoo’s family, though originally from South Korea, had immigrated to Paraguay first in her infancy before moving to the U.S. when she was eleven years old. Given this unique bilingual, bicultural background as well as her work in immigrant advocacy, Mijoo’s awareness of her own intersectional identity and racial dynamics within the undocumented community appeared to be more prominent.

“Yeah, like a checkpoint. There's a checkpoint. I definitely did not feel safe about that. *But at the same time, being an Asian girl, they don't expect you to be undocumented.* That was another weird advantage that I have, because I'm Asian. I know for sure, my friends who are Latino who have status, they drive through and they will get stopped, just because they look a certain way. That made me really sad, because my friend was saying she has status, but her mom doesn't have status. Her mom can't visit her at [her college in San Diego] because she's so scared that there might be checkpoints, and they might actually ask her for her chapter and stuff.” [emphasis mine]

As Mijoo recounted her anxieties about passing through checkpoints near her school, she recognized that the intersection of her Asian race and female gender portrays a racialized guise that is benign and noncriminal. While she “definitely did not feel safe,” she also acknowledged that her Asian identity gives her a “weird advantage,” especially compared to her Latino friends who feel the need to be hypervigilant due to the fear of being stopped by immigration officials -- a fear that is so palpable that her friend’s mother cannot even freely visit her child at school.

Mijoo proceeded to share that, in contrast, her parents had no reservations about driving from Los Angeles to see her despite the presence of checkpoints:

“My parents, they're undocumented, but they came to visit me all the time. They didn't care. My dad didn't care if there was a checkpoint or not, because he knew exactly what the border patrol was looking for, and he knew that that wasn't him.”

According to Mijoo, it was because of her dad's implicit understanding of the racial profiling of undocumented immigrants that he felt less fear in navigating interior border sites such as checkpoints.

Thirty-year-old Nancy shared a similar perspective, which shaped the degree of fear and anxiety that pervaded her life on a regular basis. Nancy, along with her family, had first immigrated to Argentina from South Korea, before they decided to come to the United States when she was in elementary school. She had spent her formative years of middle and high school in a predominantly middle- to upper-class suburb of Los Angeles, and then entered the Korean ethnic labor market in downtown Los Angeles in the fashion industry. Since receiving DACA benefits, she had been able to secure a position at a major fashion firm in the formal economy. When I asked her if she ever had a fear that she might get deported, she responded:

“Maybe a few times when I was working in downtown LA, and I heard immigration's coming, but even then it would've been very slim because of who they target. It's racial profiling, you know. So that wouldn't have been a big issue, but... I never was really scared. And I don't think people really looked at Asians and thought they were illegal. It's usually Hispanics who are targeted. Because you know, they're like in the streets, selling fruits. Asians they all have their own businesses, somehow. I don't know how. But they all end up opening up their own businesses, and to open your own business, you need documents. I think actually all my friends from high school, they had their own business. And they had nice cars. My aunt and uncle had nice cars, we lived in a nice house. No one would ever think that we were struggling with that.”

The racialization of undocumented immigrants as Latino not only endangers and threatens the lives of both documented and undocumented Latino community members, but also operates in a protective manner for some Asian undocumented immigrants, such as Katie, Mijoo and her parents, and Nancy.

Immunity is Not Guaranteed

Before concluding, it is important to emphasize that immunity is not guaranteed for non-Latinos undocumented immigrants. While “passing” as documented allows them to be seen as less deportable and therefore less targeted by state actors, undocumented Koreans are not completely protected from the realities of deportation and sensitive relationships with governmental authorities. Consider the case of Allie:

Esther: How come your mom and sister ended up moving back?

Allie: So my mom was deported and my sister is really close with my mom. And so my sister decided to just move there with my mom. And my sister is, she's, you know, she's very American. She's fluent in English, but like she's also fluent in Korean and is a lot more familiar with the culture. So it like wasn't like that hard of a transition for her you know? Like it would be very different for me to move to Korea. But she still has some ties and knowledge to Korea, so she decided to move with my mom.

Esther: Oh wow. Can you walk me through a little bit of what happened?

Allie: Mhmm. It was when I was eighteen and we were all living in Orange County at the time. And, you know to this day, I'm still not exactly sure about like what exactly happened. But in the middle of the night, like ICE came and like raided our apartment and then like detained my mom. And then, and like I think she should've just been like detained for a while and like deported. But then I guess when she got to the detention center, there was like an attorney there that for some reason like wanted to help her. So she actually got let go the next day but then she had to come back for monthly check-ins. And then after about like six months or so, it was in December 2011, they just basically told her she had to self-deport by just like buying a plane ticket and leaving the US. So she got like a few months to get her stuff in order and then go.

In a single moment that Allie still does not fully comprehend five years later (the time of interview), she was separated from her mother and sister with no possible recourse for reunification. Allie was the only Korean individual I interviewed with a parent who had been deported, compared to five Mexican respondents. Nonetheless, as Allie's experience highlights, they are all deportable. It is notable, however, that Allie's mom was not identified via racial profiling (through a check point for example) but was specifically targeted in a home raid. Her experience therefore further demonstrates that while Asians are also at risk of being deported, their racial identity makes them less susceptible to immigration enforcement.

Despite acknowledging that she “never [gets] stopped” because she thinks that “[the cops] are looking for Latino travelers,” 24-year-old Julie, for instance, shared that “[she] still gets really scared anytime [she is] exposed to authority.” Julie, who had immigrated to the U.S. as a young toddler with her parents and older sister, had a happy-go-lucky demeanor, describing herself as gregarious and extroverted unlike her timid older sister. I experienced the ease with which she seemed to navigate her social world in our conversation as well. Despite her general open posture and cheery disposition, however, when it came to enforcement authority, she felt “very scared.” About a third of Korean respondents did sense extreme discomfort and anxiety about (potential) encounters with government officials, dreading the possible existential ramifications of their residency status. Twenty-one-year-old Joseph from the Bay area of California, for instance, told me:

“Places I definitely like felt tension was when I have to go into like government institutions, like police stations... like I was in high school leadership and we had to go like get like donation forms from like the police station and I remember like not wanting to go in... And also just like whenever I go into USCIS [United States Customs and

Immigration Services] even if it's just for fingerprinting for my DACA which is a completely legal thing like just being in that presence, like feeling very like nervous and anxious.”

Even with the protective status of DACA, Joseph described feeling very “nervous and anxious” in the presence of immigration agents. This sense of perpetual anxiety was present in his whole family, manifesting as fear for his parents. Joseph narrated a time when his mom decided not to go into work after seeing police cars surrounding her workplace one morning:

“And my mom also one day she went into work and there were like police cars in the parking lot around the restaurant she worked at, and it was a completely irrelevant minor like criminal activity that the police was there for, but my mom couldn't go into work. She called in sick and then watched from afar because she just thought it could have been for her, and that was like four months ago so it's very recent. And it's like, yes, unnecessary but like reasonable fear like...reasonably irrational fear that is in my family.”

Similarly, 24-year-old Korean respondent Yoonkyung mentioned her mother hiding in the restroom of their apartment for hours, after receiving an alarming text from one of her local friends that ICE may be raiding their neighborhood.

The experiences of Julie, Joseph, and Yoonkyung highlight the nuanced relationship that Korean undocumented immigrants have with law enforcement. Further, the anecdotes offered by Joseph and Yoonkyung about their parents point to the fear that seems to plague the 1st generation's legal consciousness compared to the stigmatization of status that primarily characterizes the 1.5-generation (Abrego 2011). Although they share a repressive legal context, the first generation primarily understands their status in relationship to labor and employment, compared to the 1.5 generation who has experienced a level of receptivity and integration under the protection of the K-12 education system. Broader undocumented immigrant rhetoric vilifies and criminalizes undocumented adults working illegally and “stealing jobs,” while youth and young adults are more humanized, painted as innocent and assimilable. Having such categorically different life course experiences shapes each generation's primary posture towards their status – one of fear versus one of stigma and shame, thereby informing their day-to-day lives particularly in public spaces.

Conclusion

The rapidly growing “deportation regime” of the U.S. government has led to an escalation of fear and distress among those directly and indirectly affected by undocumented immigration status. Since 1990 the number of deportations have risen from 30,000 to 400,000 annually as of 2019 for the past several years (Migration Policy Institute 2019). The criminalization of migrants and its ensuing legal violence is only intensifying in the current sociopolitical era, with President Donald Trump's stalwart “zero tolerance” administration hindering effective bipartisan progress. While scholars have begun to identify the consequential impact of the threat of and the practice of detention and deportation on individuals, families, and communities, my findings shed light on how this ubiquitous threat may manifest differently in the everyday lives of ethnoracially diverse migrants without legal status. My interviews with Korean and Mexican undocumented young

adults reveal that they experience a differential sense of deportability due to the dual racialization processes of Asian and Latinx migrants. That is, while the climate of fear is pervasive, the burden of deportation was not as onerous for many of my Korean respondents, contributing to their unique social condition of invisible illegality. Armored by their Korean appearance, the associated perceptions of which are diametrically opposed to the image of the undocumented Mexican laborer, they not only understood how their racial identity was far from the purview of ICE, but viscerally experienced this manifestation of racialization in their everyday lives as they navigated public spaces.

To be clear, this is not to say that an Asian face is a sure protection against legal violence. While there was less of a likelihood that their fear materialized, and they were cognizant of such probabilities, they still carried with them a perpetual anxiety and concern over the vulnerable nature of their immigration status. In recent years interior enforcement by ICE has intensified across the country, even targeting individuals who are and have been purportedly protected, such as beneficiaries of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Asian refugees who have been in the U.S. for decades. Journalistic media has begun to document heightened degrees of fear among Asian immigrant communities, particularly in light of targeted deportations of Cambodian and Vietnamese immigrants at unprecedented levels (e.g., Do 2018). Studies of undocumented Asian students, especially those of Filipino descent, have shown that they are not safeguarded by the carceral arm of the government, living in a culture of trepidation and ensuing mental-emotional fragility and vulnerability (Buenavista 2016). In March 2019 National Public Radio featured the story of Vu (Dooling 2019), who is one of 7,000 Vietnamese immigrants with criminal convictions who have received removal orders. Vu, who lives in Boston with his long-time partner and two U.S.-citizen children, was born in Vietnam to a U.S. serviceman and a Vietnamese mother who he barely knew and had been able to come to the U.S. through a residency program for war children like himself. However, he is now at risk of being deported to a country that he left as a child for a crime committed decades ago. In the midst of the rapid evolution of the immigration enforcement system into a more expansive punitive, “shadow carceral state” (Beckett & Murakawa 2012), it is critical to examine how undocumented immigrants of diverse ethnoracial backgrounds experience the threat and practice of deportation.

The implications of potential deportation are significant and widespread for all. Migrants are particularly hesitant to interact with government authorities and public institutions, preventing them from accessing resources critical to their health, education, and overall well-being, and being undocumented exacerbates these reservations (Hagan, Eschbach & Rodriguez 2008; Menjívar & Abrego 2012). Before the 2020 Census citizenship question was finally removed in June 2019, some speculated that Asian Americans would be the population most affected by it due to fears that the documentation would be used against them (Lynch 2019). Moreover, scholars have found that the fear of deportation affects undocumented students’ practice and likelihood of status disclosure and in turn their access to potentially vital mentors and academic resources (Buenavista 2016; Patler 2018).²⁰ It is critical for practitioners and service providers to

²⁰ For 1.5-generation undocumented young adults who came as children and grew up in the U.S., I find that decisions to conceal one’s status does not only stem from anxiety around deportation but from anxiety around social judgment from peers and friends. Internalizing the stigma of undocumented status is what primarily prevents them

implement creative ways to support undocumented communities in light of the very real ramifications of the persistent threat and rising practice of deportation.

from disclosing their status in their friendship ties, not necessarily the potential negative consequences of removal. These findings are discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4

Undocumented Community Members: Distinctions and Boundaries

When I met Young at his workplace, a small Korean-owned fitness center in Orange County in Southern California, he was considerate while also fairly distant, understandably so. Before we began the interview, I thought that he would guide us to a more private room, perhaps an office in the back, but instead, to my surprise, we stayed in the reception area. I later found out that his boss was aware that Young didn't have papers and was paying him under the table. Before this job Young had waited on tables at a Korean restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, where many of his co-workers, particularly the ones in the kitchen in the back, were Mexican immigrants. Even though he had worked alongside them, it was clear that Young had kept his distance from them, only really interacting with one of them. I had expected that the social proximity in the restaurant might contribute to a greater understanding and camaraderie between them. Instead, describing Mexican migrants as lazy, unmotivated, and lacking ambition when "they even have a green card," Young seemed to hold deeply onto racial stereotypes, elevating his work ethic above theirs.

Young's distance from his Mexican co-workers, and his pejorative views of them, may seem surprising. We might expect that the shared legal exclusion that undocumented immigrants face might lead to feelings of solidarity. But while some of my respondents did feel this solidarity, others seemed to fall into the same racialized trope of Mexican illegality and Asian model minority success that characterizes media portrayals and general public opinion that I discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter takes on this question of group distinctions and boundaries.

Specifically, I ask: Do undocumented immigrants residing in the United States feel a sense of collective identity and solidarity with one another due to the stigma of their shared immigration status? How do the collective "othered" respond to threats to their community? Is there a sense of group consciousness between undocumented immigrants of Latinx origin, who make up the vast majority of the undocumented population, and those who have migrated from Asia and Africa and other parts of the world?

Research has shown that a shared sense of marginality or of discrimination brings people together. That is, they have a sense of group consciousness (e.g., Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Dawson 1994). Scholars have primarily focused on examining the role of race and socioeconomic status in determining group consciousness or linked fate among Asians, Blacks, and Latinos (e.g., Masuoka 2006), but less is known with regards to legal status. When considering sources and forms of marginalization in our current social-historical context, undocumented immigration status becomes particularly prominent. Undocumented immigrants live and work and learn among us, fully participating in the community. However, they are formally denied access to dominant institutions of society essential for their livelihood and simultaneously constantly under the threat of being removed from the country to which they contribute daily. Given that group consciousness is based on perceptions of commonality, especially in thinking about how immigrants can be organized for political action (as inherent in the conceptualization of "group consciousness"), how do perceptions of their illegality shape their sense of group consciousness?

Two levels of perception are operative here, functioning co-constitutively in the potential formation of group consciousness: first are perceptions of the out-group (Asian of Latinos and Latinos of Asians) and second are perceptions of illegality.

This chapter reveals that intergroup demarcations based on broader racialized conceptions emerge between Asian and Latino undocumented communities. I argue that these fragmenting perceptions and stereotypes are another salient mechanism that contributes to the invisible illegality of undocumented Asians. First, prevailing tropes racializing Asian immigrants in the U.S. shroud the understandings that undocumented Mexican young adults have of undocumented Asians. There is a lack of awareness of the presence of non-Latino undocumented immigrants first because they comprise a small segment of the larger undocumented population (MPI 2018). But, moreover, my interviews reveal that the primarily class- and education- based racialized discourse of Asian Americans does not align with the harsh realities of the experiences of Mexican respondents, and relatedly, to the broader rhetoric on pathways to illegality. That is, there is a deep discrepancy between the stereotypical, capital-rich image of Asian immigrants and the struggles and challenges of living without immigration status.

Similarly, on the flip side, popular discourse around undocumented immigrants that pervade the American consciousness also permeate perceptions that undocumented Koreans have of undocumented Latinos. Many Korean respondents, having subscribed to the broader racialized narrative of the “illegal alien” that crosses the southern border and having adopted individualistic work-based frames of the deserving and undeserving immigrant, perceived themselves as different from their Mexican counterparts despite their collectively shared immigration status. Put another way, both Mexican and Korean origin respondents hold onto monolithic racialized ideas of who is “illegal,” which, I argue, lead to mutual, bidirectional boundarymaking that ultimately has significant implications for intergroup advocacy, solidarity, and mobilization.

These findings support the body of scholarship that has demonstrated that illegality is socially constructed (Flores & Schachter 2018). While undocumented immigration status is a legal status, legal documentation is often not what is used to determine whether one is undocumented by both common observers and government authorities alike. Scholars have shown that individuals draw on certain characteristics, namely national origin, socioeconomic status, and criminal history to ascribe “illegal immigrant” status. While research thus far however has shown how illegality is socially produced by perceptions by “mainstream” society (i.e., non-Hispanic whites), leading to “social illegality” (Flores & Schachter 2018), my work complements this concept by shedding light on the ways in which undocumented immigrants themselves have internalized race- and class-based stereotypes of illegality. In addition, more importantly, the social construction of Asian Americans further complicates perceptions and attitudes towards undocumented Asian immigrants, creating intergroup distinctions within the undocumented community and thus reinscribing broader ascribed characteristics to “illegal immigrants” at large. The unique experience of invisible illegality of undocumented Asians is therefore produced by racialized views held both by the majority white population and immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, themselves. Invisible illegality is therefore not only a social construct that is profoundly racialized, but has myriad deep-seated consequences for their everyday lived experiences.

Who is Undocumented? Understandings by Mexican Undocumented Young Adults

I met Diana, a twenty-three-year old Mexican origin woman, at a coffee shop of her choosing in her neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area. While I had made sure that all of my interview participants selected the interview meeting location with the goal of maximizing a feeling of safety and comfort, I quickly realized minutes into my conversation with Diana that it was particularly important in this situation. Exceptionally cautious and conscientious about her physical and emotional safety, she described avoiding “white people spaces,” such as “grocery stores like Costco,” that she felt were not welcoming to people who looked like her. Diana is noticeably resourceful and vigilant in general. Even when choosing where to transfer to after her years at community college, she made sure to attend a university that had a robust undocumented student support program. When I then asked her about the demographic make-up of the student organization, she acknowledged that it was predominantly Latino, which surprised her.

“I would say [there are] very few Asians, very few, which is kind of strange because I know that some of the folks who went to community college with me they transferred here, and I never knew that they were undocumented until later on when I got here. Like I remember talking to one girl when I was doing a project for one of my classes, and I was looking for undocumented students who were transfers. She's I think Korean, yeah, two of the girls. I was like "What the heck?" I did not even know, because people, like I said, they don't go around telling just anybody. I would say [the organization is] mostly Latino, which kind of sucks because I mean the struggle, it's not just you know in the Latino community.”

Without my prompting specifically about any Asian student involvement, Diana pointed out that there are “very few” Asian students in her campus organization for undocumented students.²¹ However, she was aware that this was not an accurate representation of the proportion of undocumented Asians at her school; they are simply less likely to participate in student groups that could potentially “out” them. In the University of California system, it was estimated in 2005²² that nearly half of the undocumented student population is in fact of Asian descent (UCOP 2006). However, those who walk through the doors of the undocumented resource centers are disproportionately Latino, because Asian students are less likely to organize around their status and less aware that these supports are available to them (UC Berkeley 2013). In Diana’s experience, her Asian undocumented counterparts are more covert, successfully hiding their undocumented immigration status from people around them. However, at some point, in their trajectory from community college towards a four-year university, they seem to have become more open to a degree that allowed Diana to discover that they were all in the same tenuous legal situation. It is also evident that Diana was surprised by the mere presence of non-Latino undocumented immigrants in the country, mentioning Blacks and Asians in particular. She acknowledged that this general unawareness could both prevent student groups from

²¹ Diana may have felt compelled to volunteer this information about the proportion of Asians, because of her understanding of the purpose of the study and/or my Asian American appearance.

²² This is the most recent UCOP data on AB540 students publicly available.

reaching out to these students on the periphery and for these students to actively seek and receive support.

Mexican participants described that when they learned that undocumented immigrants of Asian background exist, they instinctually reacted with shock and confusion. Mexican origin Sara recalled being “so confused” when she came across a photo in her local newspaper of Asian American students rejoicing over the passage of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012, which challenged her longstanding presumption that illegality was “just a primarily Hispanic issue” for the first time in her life. Mexican respondents would be surprised by the presence of undocumented Asian immigrants for a number of reasons, including the mere confusion around how migrants who have traveled across a vast body of water, versus a land border, could become undocumented. Adding to the shock, moreover, were the racial stereotypes of Asian immigrants in the U.S. as the “model minority” with high educational achievement and socioeconomic status. The discrepancy between the archetypal profile of the undocumented immigrant and the prevailing image of the Asian model minority was simply too vast. When I asked twenty-three-year-old Thiago, for instance, what thoughts went through his mind when he first encountered undocumented Asians, he told me:

“Umm, I was... I was surprised. Because... my view at the time was that you know, anyone that came over those Asian countries to study or to visit anything were like, super wealthy, and they could just pay to be here basically. Kind of like a pay-to-play videogame.”

Thiago’s image of Asian immigrants centered around their ability to use their accumulated capital to live in the U.S. and achieve their academic and professional goals – lives of luxury and privilege that was dramatically different from the less resourced situations that he found his undocumented Asian counterparts in.

The perceptions that Thiago and other Mexican respondents had about Asian immigrants are understandable. Many Korean immigrants to the U.S. have become small business owners in their new home country in order to move up the socioeconomic ladder, some estimates indicating that more than one-third of Korean households engage in entrepreneurship in major metropolitan cities like Los Angeles (e.g., Light and Bonacich 1988; Min 1988; I. Kim 1987; Waldinger 1989; Yoo 2013). If the employers are Korean, many of the employees are Latino, increasingly replacing Korean employees, often times for more menial, behind-the-scenes positions (D. Kim 2010). Research on DACA recipients has shown that the distribution of socioeconomic status by national origin among undocumented immigrants (Gonzales, Terriquez & Rusczyk 2014) does mirror the variation of class background among immigrants in general (Alba & Nee 2003; Portes & Rumbaut 2006). Those from AAPI backgrounds tend to come from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds than their Mexican counterparts, even within the undocumented population. “They have it easy. They do have an advantage,” Cristina, a 26-year-old Mexican woman working with DACA, remarked. Cristina described feeling nervous about her job security at her workplace, a large tech company where many of her colleagues were Asian. There was a sense that individuals with an Asian immigrant background do not encounter the

challenges that Cristina's community members do, not only at her specific workplace but in broader social life.

Miriam, another young Mexican origin woman from the SF Bay Area, held similar sentiments, noting that she would expect undocumented Asian migrants to have greater material security than undocumented Latinx migrants like herself, even in the midst of their restrictive legal situation. "Even if they're DACA, I would assume they [young Asian undocumented immigrants] still have a lot more," she told me. In saying that they "have a lot more," she was referring to greater access to financial resources and to academic support, unlike Latino youth and young adults who are "[expected] to go become gang bangers and criminals." Under the same breath, Miriam shared about a good friend of hers who was Asian that did not fit this stereotypical profile of a life without worries. Her friend Stephanie had expressed frustration over the pressure she felt from being held to such high standards of academic achievement, particularly because Stephanie had a learning disability.

Despite the complexity and heterogeneity of circumstances that exist in the Asian community, my findings reveal that undocumented Asians are still perceived however to be at an advantage, as a result of societal expectations for them to be "really smart and really good and super strict," as Miriam described. Mexican respondents would acknowledge the uniform elements of navigating life without the security of legal residency status, regardless of racial and ethnic background. Furthermore, they would even identify the exclusion and marginalization that non-Latino immigrants could endure within institutions and communities designed to support undocumented individuals. However, there was still a sense that their Asian counterparts benefited from the overriding strength of "model minority" stereotypes, lifting some of the material burden that may weigh on them due to their status.

Who is Undocumented? Understandings by Korean Undocumented Young Adults

Prevailing race-infused tropes of undocumented immigrants that pervade the broader American consciousness also permeate perceptions that undocumented Koreans have of undocumented Latinos. These boundaries were articulated more frequently and explicitly among Korean undocumented young adults, compared to the Mexican undocumented young adults I interviewed. Beyond those Mexican respondents who explicitly talked about Asian undocumented immigrants, most were not aware of and therefore did not think about this group much at all. When it came to experiences of illegality, Asians were therefore simply not on their radar, invisible to Mexican respondents. On the other hand, many Korean respondents had implicitly adopted individualistic work-based frames of immigrant deservedness and subscribed to the racialized trope of the "illegal alien," leading them to demarcate themselves from undocumented Mexicans and maintain symbolic boundaries through conscious and subconscious othering techniques. These perceptions and attitudes are further reinforced by their social and familial relationships and solidified through language differences and their desire for co-ethnic ties. I argue that these in turn further cement race-based boundaries on an interactional level and reify broader essentializing tropes on immigrants in the U.S.

Twenty-five-year-old Mijoo, whom we met in the prior chapter, had come to the U.S. with her parents when she was eleven years old. Seeking a better life, they had emigrated to Paraguay from

South Korea first when Mijoo was just an infant, before deciding to start a business in California. Despite their lack of documentation, Mijoo's parents had been able to join fellow co-ethnic entrepreneurs in the greater LA area and establish a business as independent contractors. While Mijoo's parents seemed to have minimal qualms about their own security whether they were driving or working, they were still concerned for the safety of their undocumented Latino employees in their downtown LA business. Hence, when I asked Mijoo whether she or her family had ever had a deportation scare at work, she responded:

“They have a lot of employees who are undocumented Latinos. They're not necessarily scared for themselves, but then they're scared for their employees, because they work in downtown LA. I think a few years ago, they [ICE] used to do a lot of raids.”

Aware that the archetype for the detainable, deportable undocumented immigrant is the Latino employee and not the Asian employer, it was not their own livelihoods that felt threatened but those who worked for them. Mijoo continued to share that her parents make the effort to notify their employees about potential ICE raids in the district, going so far as to advise them not to come in for work for their safety.

“It's like when they get a call from a friend or people that they work with and they let them know, ‘There's been an ICE raid here.’ They're like, ‘Oh shoot, I need to tell them not to come to work today. I need to call them and tell them to be careful.’ Stuff like that.”

Despite Mijoo's parents being as undocumented as their Latino employers on paper, the degree of their trepidation and fear about their employees' physical security exceeds their own. They seem to be fully aware of the racialization of illegality in the U.S. and associated assumptions of positions of power and class status in the labor market, particularly in ethnic niches in the LA area. Mijoo's parents not only are cognizant of their privilege but also participate in solidifying these boundaries with their Latino counterparts by distancing themselves from stereotypical conceptions of undocumented immigrants:

“I feel like my parents, or our parents [Korean parents], they always think, *‘even though I'm undocumented, I'm able to provide for my family.’* I think they have a lot of pride in that, and they feel like ‘there's nothing wrong with me,’ kind of a thing. There's nothing wrong with them, but don't think a lot of our parents acknowledge our status, or they're not very comfortable acknowledging that. *I think they definitely don't see that we're all the same community.*” [emphasis mine]

While Mijoo's parents were aware of the immigration status of their Latino employees because they had hired them and even went so far as to make an effort to protect them in potentially risky situations with ICE, the boundary was drawn there. In enacting these protective measures, because they cared for their employees' well-being, they were also exercising authority and placing themselves in a different category, demonstrating that they themselves did not need to practice the same precautions. I had asked Mijoo if her parents told their employees about their shared immigration status. She responded that they had not divulged their status to them, most likely to preserve a sense of power and authority in the workplace. As Mijoo described, her

parents did not perceive themselves as inhabiting the same sociolegal space as their Latino employees but instead maintained symbolic distance through conscious and subconscious othering techniques. A part of this distinction was rooted in differences in work ethic and financial stability, the sense of being able to “provide for [the] family.” The implicit perspective that the capability to achieve a certain standard of material security places them in a certain social position and warrants a strict boundary, despite being in a similar legal predicament, illuminates the nuanced mechanisms of racialization that persists in intergroup relations within the undocumented population.

Like Mijoo’s parents, many Korean respondents created similar distinctions between themselves and Latino undocumented immigrants, further reifying racial discourses and intergroup boundaries. Nancy had worked alongside her Mexican co-workers for years, but she explained that she kept silent about her undocumented status.

“All of my coworkers – the manager had his documents but there’s three Mexican people and one Korean 언니 [a young woman older than the respondent]. I don’t know what the Korean 언니’s status was, but all the Mexicans, I knew they were illegal. But they didn’t know I was illegal. I never told them. But I knew they were. So I couldn’t say anything. I didn’t want to let them know what my status is.”

Nancy actively distanced herself from her Latino co-workers by hiding her undocumented status from them. Even when one of them openly went through the DACA application process at the same time as she did, she was careful not to divulge that she was in a similar situation.

Using Immigrant Tropes to Maintain Distance

In addition to engaging in explicit boundarymaking, I find that Korean respondents maintain symbolic distance through the adoption of work-based tropes regarding deserving and undeserving immigrants. Although Young, who I introduced at the start of the chapter, did not create boundaries explicitly through his behavior, he held sentiments that pointed to perceived differences between Korean immigrants and Latino immigrants more broadly. He not only explained to me that there is a high likelihood that Latinos would engage in more menial labor such as dishwashing, “even [when some of them] have a green card,” but also that, while they are diligent workers, they are not ambitious workers.

“I see a lot of Latinos who work as a dishwasher. Even though they graduated from high school. [pause] They don’t like to get stress. Their mindset is like, 해도되고 안 해도되고. [‘If they get it, they get it. If they don’t, they don’t.’] They’re very hard workers, but they don’t try to upgrade. They try to stay low. So, when I see them, it’s like, why would they live like that, you know? Like some of the dishwashers, they even have a green card. They’re in a better situation than me. But they’re still there. And if they get fired, because sometimes they get a hangover, and they get fired. They just go to another restaurant to be a dishwasher.”

Interestingly, Young proceeded to describe that he had only interacted with one undocumented

Latino person (as far as he was aware). However, despite limited direct contact, it is clear that he had formed rigid opinions on the work ethic of Latinos in general, potentially from broader group stereotypes to which he had been exposed. Though Koreans have more favorable perceptions of Latinos than Blacks, particularly due to their common nativity status, a survey of Korean business owners showed that more than 50% perceived Latinos as less intelligent and 44% perceived them as lazy (Min 2007; Yoon 1998). Therefore, despite often working in close proximity with one another and having a shared immigrant experience, racialized dynamics paradoxically continue to persist. Stereotypes of Latino workers coupled with the pervasive Hispanicization of undocumented immigrant discourse in popular media seem to contribute to boundary making between racial lines within the undocumented community.

When I asked 25-year-old Isaac, for instance, about what comes to mind when he “hears or reads” about Latino undocumented immigrants in journalistic media coverage, his response conveyed clear apathy and distance.

“To be honest, I mean it sounds bad, but it’s [pause] I think I’m selfish in a way where it’s almost like, it’s like I wish the best for them, but I don’t know if I can step out, take that extra step to make a change or something. It’s kind of weird ‘cause I want something to happen but I don’t know, I’m not active about it. So when I hear about undocumented immigrants, I have a quick thought about ‘oh, that sucks.’ I know how that feels but it’s almost like, ‘Dude man, it’s your game. It’s life. I hope you make it.’”

Despite acknowledging that he “knows how [it] feels” to live without legal status, Isaac distinguishes himself from the predominant undocumented narrative that centers around low-skilled Latino immigrants. He answered my broad, open-ended question about exposure to stories about Latino undocumented immigrants with a particular angle, with the interpretation that much of what he “hears” or “reads” surrounds their struggle and plight. One could sense a tinge of guilt coupled with a hint of defensiveness, as Isaac explains that he remains passive despite his desire to “take that extra step” and fight for systemic change for undocumented immigrants. The individualistic mentality articulated by Isaac insinuates a lack of connectedness and solidarity with the Latino undocumented community. In his stream of consciousness, he neglects to include the modifier “Latino” to “undocumented immigrants,” suggesting an implicit sense of difference he has internalized between himself and other (namely Latino) undocumented immigrants. Having worked alongside undocumented Latinos at a construction company for a few years, Isaac seemed to have adopted a posture of distancing as a result of the managerial role he assumed, sharing that he knew about his coworkers’ statuses but they were unaware of his, because “once you break that barrier, it’s really hard to work or manage.” The relationship he had with the undocumented Latinos in the work environment appears to have colored his perspective on the undocumented Latino community in general, namely, approaching this group as “them” instead of “us,” as demonstrated in his sentiment of “... it’s your game. It’s life. I hope you make it.” Rather than a stance of collective identification and solidarity from shared immigration status, he perceives “life” as an arena operated by a “survival of the fittest” system.

Hence, boundarymaking between racial groups within the undocumented population is amplified by the subscription to meritocratic notions of the “good” immigrant by undocumented individuals themselves. Twenty-one-year old Daniel from Los Angeles, who was triple majoring at a local state university while tutoring and working at a chic, up-and-coming bar in Koreatown, described feeling quite hopeful about his future. His laissez-faire optimism came from confidence in his own resilience, work ethic, and abilities. He retained a strong belief in the possibility to overcome the stigma and barrier of status by gaining respect and acknowledgement for his accomplishments.

“It’s important to anybody who is in the same situation as I am [not to lose hope]. And ultimately if you work hard enough people will recognize you not for your status but for like who you really are and your capabilities.”

Along the same vein, when I had asked 30-year-old Paul if it is “okay to live in the United States without papers if you need money to support your family,” he responded:

“As far as you’re hardworking and you’re making honest money, I think as a human right, you should be compensated, ‘cause I mean that’s what I see at my work too. They [undocumented Latinos] work hard. ... If you work hard, you should be awarded. Yeah so if you’re feeding your family like hustling drugs and stuff? Okay, no. But if you’re actually putting in time and your energy in work, you’re in a sense contributing to the country so you should be compensated one way or the other.”

Belonging and deservedness for residency in the U.S., even if it means without status, was founded in “[working] hard” and “contributing to the country” for Paul. He had subscribed to particular notions of “honest” and dishonest income, and while he describes his undocumented Latino coworkers as falling into this paradigm, it is also likely that he had adopted stereotypes of the archetypal criminalized, racialized profile of the drug-hustling “illegal” immigrant. These work-based frames of deservingness were more likely to be articulated by male Korean respondents than female ones.

The Importance of Intention

Some Korean respondents saw themselves not only as fitting the trope of “good immigrants” better, but furthermore as “less illegal” (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas 2012). In addition to making distinctions between themselves and Latino undocumented immigrants by the nature of employment and socioeconomic capacity, implicit in my interviews with Korean undocumented young adults was the notion of *falling into* a state of illegality.

The vast majority of Korean respondents had immigrated to the U.S. with some sort of legal entry status, typically a student, religious, or tourist visa, then undergoing a process of undocumented status acquisition (Buenavista 2013) as they overstay the terms of their visa and choose to remain for the long term. Often they depended on co-ethnic lawyers to aid them with the process of changing their status to lawful permanent residency, but despite their concerted efforts and accompanying financial sacrifices, they did not get approved at times due to errors made by the lawyers themselves. For these respondents, their undocumented immigration status

was a result of a confluence of unfortunate events, particularly the negligence and sometimes even overt chicanery of legal actors, not their own deliberate act of disobedience. They, therefore, fell into undocumented status in spite of their sincere, concrete efforts to obtain legalization. Unspoken in their expressed narratives then is the idea that some undocumented immigrants do enter into this legally precarious situation willingly by their own volition. That is, they viewed their decision to stay without documents as different than the decision to cross the border without documents.

Out of all of interview respondents, there were three individuals, who did explicitly verbalize the putative unique legal position assumed by Korean undocumented immigrants as one beyond their control, as a lack of “choice,” due to bureaucratic and legal hurdles. For instance, Jen, a 27-year-old Korean American who had recently been able to get naturalized a few years into her marriage with a U.S. citizen, emphasized that undocumented Koreans are not here “by choice.” This was her response to a question about what she wished people knew about her co-ethnic undocumented community in particular.

Esther: If there’s one thing that you wish people knew about Korean undocumented immigrants, what would it be?

Jen: That we exist. That we’re out there. And that we’re like any other person. *We’re here not by choice*, but we’re here and we want to better our lives and we want better communities and that we be given a chance to be able to make that happen and that we are American. Yeah, I don’t know. [emphasis mine]

Similarly, when I had asked 24-year-old Elizabeth, who had immigrated to Southern California at the age of six with her parents, the same question as above, her initial instinct was to assert that “[Korean undocumented immigrants are] no different” from those residing in the U.S. with proper legal documentation. However, in the same train of thought, she also expressed that they *are* however different from their counterparts who have entered from south of the border. They were different precisely in that their intention has and always is to abide by the law and to become citizens should they be given the opportunity, compared to those who “just crossed the border and *chose* to be illegal.”

“I guess that like we’re no different, you know. It’s just our status that makes us different, but that doesn’t make us any less different in the sense that like we’re not... we’re not more stupid or we’re not like criminals. You know I think there’s such a negative stereotype or negative connotations when people hear the word illegal, right? Which is why people say they’re undocumented. ‘Cause yeah, sometimes we’re brought here with no choice or just like we didn’t choose to be illegal like in the case of my family. Like we came to be, so I mean you know, like everyone’s situations are different and we just have to consider you know, yeah, like *not everyone just crossed the border and chose to be illegal*. Like sometimes, things didn’t work out and we have no choice, you know? We’re law abiding people that really do want to be American citizens. It’s just we don’t have the choice of being one.” [emphasis mine]

For Elizabeth border-crossing was a choice, while overstaying a tourist visa, as her parents had done years ago, did not fall in this realm of intentionality, because they “just kind of became illegal” due to challenges they confronted in the green card application process. In the process of pleading for a more nuanced understanding of the diverse undocumented population, she participated in subscribing to the monolithic racialized perception of “illegal” immigrants who “choose” to cross the border. “You know illegal immigrants - the ones that hop the border,” Nancy also said. “It makes sense. I understand why *they* come” [emphasis mine]. Despite being a young undocumented immigrant herself, in her verbal stream of consciousness, she differentiated herself from the body of “illegal immigrants” that occupy the American imagination, using the word “they” as if she is not one of them.

Tension between Commonness and Difference

As detailed in this chapter, many Korean interview respondents had adopted and articulated ideologies and frames of belonging that demarcated deserving from undeserving immigrants, based on work ethic, economic attainment, and a supposition of intention. To be clear, however, this does not mean, that a sense of common ground and shared experience with Latino undocumented immigrants was completely absent among respondents.

Even though Julie, for instance, had hidden her immigration status with her formerly undocumented Mexican boyfriend, she described feeling a sense of “connectedness” with him when he divulged his undocumented history to her. Similarly, in another segment of the interview, she stated having a sentiment of group consciousness with Mexican immigrants due to their shared position of marginality:

“... to a lot of my Korean friends, they think being undocumented is limited to Latinos so they make a joke about Mexican immigrants. And I take it offensively because in some ways, I’m more in solidarity with them than I am with these privileged friends you know?”

Furthermore, the Korean undocumented immigrants in my sample were not completely immune to the criminalizing tropes of undocumented immigrants. The internalization of prevailing tropes of the broader population of “illegal immigrants,” undergirded the psyches of all respondents, including those of Korean descent, as Lydia, a 24-year-old undocumented immigrant from Los Angeles shared with me: “Even though I didn’t do anything wrong, I just feel like a criminal in a way. Because it’s ‘illegal,’ you know? Those kinds of terms, I think, really like, puts me down. Like it makes me want to hide.”

The perceptions that undocumented Latino and Asian immigrants hold of one another have significant implications for fostering group consciousness and mobilizing political action. Those young Asian individuals who are outliers in their attempts to access undocumented activist and advocacy spaces may feel marginalized, because there are not a lot of people who look like them. Leaders of these spaces who are organizing these grassroots and organizational efforts may not be as aware of the presence of undocumented Asians, being less sensitive to diverse experiences living without documentation.

Sangwoo, an exceptionally self-aware, eloquent 21-year-old who had been active in undocumented student campus organizations, remarked on the “privilege and power [he] had being someone who was AAPI undocumented.” When I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by this privilege and power, he continued to share with me, “if there’s a demonstration going on, if there’s a movement going on, for the most part it’s very Latinocentric[, so] “it’s so easy for me to walk away and pretend like I’m not a part of that community.”

“I guess, one of the privileges I have is *when someone looks at me, they don’t think I’m undocumented, which may not be true for everyone in my [AAPI] community. And I think that’s one of the conscious struggles I have constantly.* Every morning I wake up, and I realize that I can go through this day without “being undocumented” as my label. Like today, I can [choose] not [to] be undocumented. I can think that mentally, and the world can also treat me that way as well... And I think that’s a lot of power and privilege that a lot of folks don’t have. But that in some way or form, AAPI folks have. And there’s obviously a lot of struggles being an AAPI undocumented person, just ‘cause there’s not enough support systems and not enough comfortability with them but *I think that’s one of the greatest privileges that we have, is that we can just look away.*” [emphasis mine]

This advantage that comes with being Asian and undocumented, however, is in actuality a double-edged sword. Sangwoo continued to share that, because the world of undocumented advocacy is driven and dominated by the Latino community, it “makes [him] feel like sometimes it’s not [his] space.” There exists therefore a complex tension to the ability to “pass” as documented particularly as undocumented Asians. On one hand, Sangwoo understood the privilege of going through much of life without being seen and treated as “illegal.” However, at the same time, this also meant being invisible in and feeling peripheral to the undocumented community, where he also yearned to find belonging and a sense of collective identity.

When I asked 23-year-old Korean origin Sana as well why she decided to get more involved in an undocumented advocacy organization specifically for those of Asian descent, she fervently described feeling excluded in the heavily Latino organization in which she had previously participated. Though this organized community had been instrumental in helping her “come out” about her status and manage her feelings of isolation as an undocumented individual, she also felt that she did not quite belong in this group because of unique experiences that specifically stem from her Asian background.

“... Just the *constantly speaking in Spanish, that was a little exclusive.* Or they would even speak Spanglish, and talk about their culture, like the food they remembered. And they would all share laughs together, like ‘Oh I remember that.’ But me, I don’t know what you’re talking about. And I think the issue we talked about, some of the things we focused on, were Latino/Latina issues. *Like they wanted to shed light on the crimes that are happening at the border, but for me, there are other issues that affect both Asians and Latino/Latinas that we could focus on, but instead we’re focusing exclusively on those other issues, right?* I mean they’re not being insensitive to me, but I just didn’t feel comfortable. And I am very compassionate about border issues and enforcement issues, but at the same time, I think there are these other broader issues that affect everybody that we could

focus on. And my hope in being in those groups was to have this common goal, like transcending those racial and gender boundaries and everything, but that just didn't happen. And in a way, I think there is such a stigma about who the undocumented face is, and I just wanted to break that stigmatization, by saying that well here I am, undocumented and Asian. But that didn't happen either. So I think my goals weren't met, but at the same time, it really led me to find [this organization for Asian undocumented immigrants]." [emphasis mine]

Sana had several "goals" in finding peers in a similar legal situation, including the desire to break the racial stereotype of the "illegal immigrant" that persists even within the undocumented community. However, she experienced challenges to feeling a sense of group consciousness even in the midst of their shared legal marginality. It is clear that Sana's primary need was an emotional and psychological sense of belonging, and, to her dismay, even in a space designed for "the undocumented" more broadly, she could not find this fulfillment. Instead, she was able to find the support and community she yearned for through a group that specifically catered to undocumented Asian young adults. Sana's struggles trying to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and different migration experiences in the predominantly Latino space highlight how racialized illegality surfaces even in spaces that proactively strive to be inclusive.

Conclusion

These findings, which shed light on the ways in which Korean undocumented young adults construct symbolic boundaries with Latino undocumented immigrants, demonstrate how undocumented Koreans conceive of their legal situation as exceptional, different namely from those migrating across the southern border. Scholars have examined how perceptions by the dominant group (i.e., non-Hispanic whites) contribute to the production of illegality, but this work demonstrates that these perceptions are internalized by undocumented immigrants themselves to reify stereotypical group ascriptions. These processes of intergroup racialization whereby both undocumented Koreans and undocumented Mexicans do not see undocumented Asians as fitting broader tropes of illegality bolster the very conditions that produce the invisible illegality of Asian undocumented immigrants.

Research has shown that a collective sense of marginalization can lead to a cultivation of group consciousness among populations that perceive such commonalities across marginalized groups. Given long-standing theories that intergroup contact and higher education are associated with liberal ideologies and less racial bias (e.g., Bowman 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Tadmor et al 2012), because this work draws on interviews with individuals who grew up in ethnoracially diverse immigrant communities and have at least had some college education, we may expect that they would not be as susceptible to racialized perceptions of immigrant groups and have a shared sense of plight and social solidarity around their undocumented immigration status. However, due to strong racial stereotypes that pervade the minds of both Korean and Mexican respondents about one another as well as meritocratic frames of deserving and undeserving migrants, I find that they have a weak sense of group consciousness based on illegality.

The implications of these relational dynamics are consequential, as they can lead to the reinforcement of racialized perceptions that can further cement intergroup distinctions.

These entrenched beliefs can potentially create challenges for galvanizing diverse national origin groups for pan-ethnoracial immigrant mobilization. My findings point to the difficulties of cultivating meaningful interpersonal contact and the need to be intentional and strategic about building intergroup coalitions. Creating undocumented immigrant support spaces that are uniquely and purposefully designed for a multi-racial community and identifying and implementing effective strategies to attract undocumented Asians, Blacks and whites can provide opportunities for intergroup dialogue, gradually dismantling harmful stereotypes. Undocumented minority groups are also forming on a grassroots level. Communities like the UndocuBlack Network and ASPIRE (for AAPI youth and young adults) have empowered their own co-ethnoracial communities to organize, advocate, and educate on behalf of the broader immigrant population.

CHAPTER 5
Friends:
Selective Disclosure as a Self-Protective Process

In light of an aggressive immigration system that instills fear and anxiety and a racialized environment that colors intergroup perceptions and notions of inclusion and exclusion, where do undocumented young people find social support? In this chapter, I turn our attention to the most personal sphere of their lives, focusing on how Korean and Mexican undocumented youth and young adults who grew up in the U.S. protect themselves by being selective about friendships and status disclosure.

Due to the precarious nature of their immigration status, undocumented immigrants practice everyday behaviors to minimize the risk of detection by enforcement officers. Children are told to remain quiet and calm on all car rides, only certain grocery stores that are deemed “safe” are frequented, and family plans are carefully devised in case of risky situations (e.g., Dreby 2015). There is a myriad of strategies that undocumented individuals and families actively incorporate into their daily lives, so they and their loved ones do not fall prey to the threats of the U.S. enforcement regime. Legal violence (Menjívar & Abrego 2012) -- the harmful manifestations of the criminalization of undocumented immigration status -- reaches broadly and deeply, shaping decisions that may seem mundane to those with the privilege of living with legal residency status. What I contend in this chapter is that these responses to the immigration regime, while structured by legal violence, are precisely *agentic decisions and strategies* executed by immigrants. Through their engagement in these strategies, which I collectively call “security work,” they actively resist and push against the criminalization of illegality in order to alleviate the effects of legal violence and enhance a sense of security in their everyday lives.

One facet of security work that has not sufficiently been explored in academic literature is that of selective status disclosure in personal relationships. Like other social beings, youth and young adults who are undocumented seek emotional support and social acceptance. Being able to seek advice and compassion from friends and family is found to be critical for their overall well-being (Vaquera, Aranda & Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). However, they must be more selective about those *from whom* they seek this support and choose their friends wisely. Due to the criminalization of undocumented status, divulging one’s status (Abrego 2011) places one at risk for being judged and disrespected by one’s peers, and may even bring severe material and existential harm to one’s self and loved ones. Undocumented immigrants therefore practice security work for both affective and physical protection, and I find that one significant way in which they do so is through selective disclosure of their immigration status in interpersonal relationships.

In this chapter, I therefore propose the theoretical concept of *security work* as a parallel framework to *legal violence*, developed by Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy Abrego (2012). Legal violence is valuable for understanding how the seemingly normative criminalization of “illegality” adversely affects the well-being of undocumented immigrants, particularly in realms of family, employment, and education. Although useful for explaining the structural and symbolic violence of immigration law, this framework does not account for the ways in which undocumented immigrants *respond* to this legal violence. *Security work* encapsulates the

negotiated process of maximizing affective and material safety and minimizing violence. I find that undocumented immigrants, and undocumented young people in particular, resist, circumvent, and protect themselves from material and psychological harm as agentic actors by engaging in security work. Instead of focusing on the detriments of relational constraints, which is indeed a reality, I shift attention to the young undocumented immigrant as an *agent* of selective disclosure, which is critical to the preservation of their own emotional and ego security as well as the material protection of their and their family's livelihoods.

My findings show that Korean and Mexican 1.5-generation undocumented young adults, having been born abroad but grown up alongside peers with similar trajectories, are careful to maintain their own emotional stability and dignity by exercising security work through selective disclosure. As such, refracted through a filter of race and immigrant background, only a limited number and limited categories of persons are given the privilege of hearing the personal details of their legal situation. Undocumented young adults strategically navigate their social worlds by discerning who can and cannot be trusted with the intimate details of their legal situation, shaping their experiences with personal disclosure. Undocumented immigrants are hyper vigilant about who can penetrate their social worlds not only to counter the risk of detention and deportation but also to protect themselves from potential judgment, disrespect, and hurt.

This chapter also demonstrates how race and ethnicity segment patterns of disclosure. I find that the intersection of ethnoracial background and immigration status shapes how Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults construct their inner sanctum and traverse their social worlds. Koreans are more selective with their disclosure, drawing a brighter distinction between those whom I am calling "confidants" from those who are "companions." Confidants are select individuals to whom they reveal their legal situation, whereas companions are good friends they see regularly but from whom they hide their status.

In making these claims, I provide new insight into social ties and the complex role of experiential homophily -- sharing common, often difficult, experiences (Suitor et al. 1995) -- in social network formation. The precarious, stigmatized nature of undocumented status significantly circumscribes the freedom with which they navigate the most personal spheres of their social worlds. However, they also practice security work to protect themselves and their loved ones from a violation of their sense of dignity and well-being.

Coming out of the Shadows?

Undocumented immigrants in the U.S. often live "in the shadows" (Suárez-Orozco et al 2011) largely because of the stigma of being labeled as "illegal" as well as the very palpable risk of deportation, as discussed in Chapter 3 (e.g., Abrego 2011; Chavez 1998; Donato & Armenta 2011). Undocumented immigration status poses a unique, restrictive context of reception for undocumented young people, shaping structural incorporation due to denied access to the formal labor market and higher education despite their linguistic and cultural integration (e.g., Abrego & Gonzales 2010). The barriers they experience are therefore, in part, structural. However, they are also interpersonal, as these youth and young adults feel the need to hide this significant aspect of their lives due to the stigma attached to being "illegal," hindering access to instrumental and social support (e.g. Patler 2018; Sigona 2012). Especially in the two decades

bookending 2000, young people have been confined to the shadows.

In the last several years, however, undocumented youth activists have played a pivotal role in rejecting the stigma of undocumented status and reappropriating it into political strategy and civil disobedience. The year of 2010 marks a critical historical moment of immigrant rights, when a group of undocumented students in Chicago took a stand by “coming out” to the media, catalyzing a series of national political campaigns of being “Undocumented and Unafraid” and “Coming Out of the Shadows” (Galindo 2012; Terriquez 2015). These discursive efforts to combat the silencing and dehumanization of “illegal immigrants” have initiated a robust movement of collective and individual empowerment among young undocumented immigrants to publicly and personally disclose their status (Enriquez and Saguy 2016; Nicholls 2013; Seif 2014; Terriquez 2015). While the rhetorical strategy of mass disclosure has served to galvanize many young activists, one would expect that most undocumented young people remain cautious about declarations of their socially stigmatized identity. What are the friendship-making patterns and disclosure strategies of undocumented young adults, and how do they compare to those of undocumented activists who strategically and boldly “come out” to the masses?

I build on our understanding of this vulnerable population by highlighting how status disclosure in friendships shapes the social incorporation of U.S.-raised undocumented young adults. Friendships constitute a unique form of social capital where there is a significant element of mutuality (McWilliams & Howard 1993) and equality (Suttles 1970). Social networks can be vital for building social support and camaraderie, as well as accessing educational, occupational, and legal resources, particularly for those navigating the precarity of illegality (Abrego 2011; Gonzales et al. 2013; Patler 2018; Perez and Cortes 2011). Scholars have begun to shed light on the consequences of certain social networks, but less is understood about how they exercise security work in navigating the ties themselves, especially in their friendships.

Undocumented youth grapple with not only contradictory feelings of inclusion and exclusion on both interpersonal and institutional levels, but also the potential risk of detention and deportation should they not practice utmost caution in their social interactions. For these individuals there are both affective and material implications to sharing personal aspects of their lives. *When and with whom do they feel safe sharing their legal situation? What are the contexts, situations, and relationships that guide disclosure?*

Interpersonal Relationships of Young Undocumented Immigrants

Academic discourse on interpersonal relationships of undocumented young adults has centered around the role of social networks in accessing key instrumental figures and mobilizing educational and legal resources (Abrego 2006; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Enriquez 2011; Gonzalez 2016; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Patler 2018; Perez and Cortes 2011). Strong mentor relationships in particular play a significant role in providing valuable information and emotional-mental support in the midst of restrictive circumstances. Putting shame aside and revealing one’s status to teachers, administrators, and undocumented peers has been shown to be pivotal in gathering information on circumventing obstacles within educational and legal systems (e.g., Castro-Salazar & Bagley 2010; Enriquez & Saguy 2016). In addition to these supportive individuals, finding community through civic engagement also acts as a psychological

resource for undocumented young people, allowing them to remain resilient and hopeful (Gonzales et al. 2013). In the labor market, one's co-ethnoracial ties are instrumental in shaping work trajectories, at times opening up possibilities to work in sectors beyond conventional low-wage labor (Cho 2017). However, while we know that strategic social ties can alleviate institutional barriers and, for activists, offer a sense of belonging and mental strength, *how* undocumented young adults navigate their social worlds is less understood. The focus has been on the consequences of mobilization of social capital available to these young people and less about the ties themselves.

Extant scholarship suggests that there are a variety of other factors that may shape personal relationships and status disclosure. In examining the educational context, Patler (2018) finds that political and social context of reception, age of arrival, and perceived support from one's community determine whether undocumented students disclose their status to administrators, teachers, and other undocumented individuals. These in turn affect the resources they access that could be consequential for their educational and professional trajectories. Gender differences in navigating immigration status have been found among 1st- and 1.5-generation Latino undocumented immigrants as well, particularly in dating, marriage, and family (Cebulko 2016; Enriquez 2017; Pila 2016; Schueths 2015). Men struggle more with fulfilling gendered expectations of driving and paying for meals, steering activities in a way that protects them from risking status discovery (Enriquez 2017; Pila 2016). Women are found to have a more difficult time disclosing their status to partners, often breaking up before having to do so (Pila 2016). Immigration status also makes it particularly important to find trustworthy, meaningful romantic relationships, thereby leading some undocumented women to prioritize their education and careers before dating and getting married purely for instrumental reasons (Cebulko 2016).

While scholars have begun to unearth the salient role of immigration status in institutional and personal networks, less is known concerning the effects of being undocumented on friendships. Even though young undocumented immigrants can "pass" (Goffman 1963) as legal because they have grown up in the U.S., revealing this stigmatized aspect of their identity could cause shame, a loss of dignity, or even exposure that could lead to deportation. Consequently, undocumented young adults must be strategic when choosing and navigating their friendships, since one poor judgment call could lead to life-altering ramifications.

Scholarly consensus suggests that individuals have homophilous relationships, tending to befriend those similar to themselves, along various demographic markers such as race/ethnicity, age, class, and education (McPherson et al. 2001). Similarly, race has been found to be a significant determinant of interpersonal trust (Uslaner 2002). Little is known, however, about the role of legal status in social network formation. Many identity characteristics such as race, age, gender, and at times class could be signaled visually, facilitating homophily; but legal status is not inherently physically discernible. However, strong negative associations persist between race and immigration status, the Latino face being conflated with "illegal" in the American consciousness. Given these structural racialized conditions and mental linkages between the visibility of race and the invisibility of undocumented status, what aspects of being "like me" steer the friendships of ethnoracially diverse undocumented young adults? Does race hold primacy in the cultivation of their relationships, or does legal status matter more?

For young undocumented Asian immigrants in particular, they can doubly “pass” as legal from both being U.S.-raised and disconnected from the stereotypical “illegal” identity. Having this dual cloak of invisibility could shape the trajectories of their personal relationships and experiences of disclosure differently from their Latino peers. We know that having undocumented friends leads to greater openness about status among undocumented students, so being from an ethnoracial group in which undocumented status is less prevalent may lead them to conceal their status, preventing them from accessing resources (Cebulko 2014; Patler 2014). Unaware of peers who share their struggles outside their immediate family, they may be more inclined to withhold their status and shoulder their burdens alone. We might expect them to “come out” to administrative and academic figures who serve instrumental functions, but they may not disclose their status to friends as readily as their Latino counterparts.

Furthermore, relatively little is known about the role of socially stigmatized identity characteristics such as undocumented status in relationship-building and social network activation. There are other cases of “hidden” stigmas which might provide hints for understanding undocumented young people’s experiences with relationships. For instance, many studies on the LGBTQ community have shown that there are positive psychological and physical effects of “being out” (e.g., Jordan & Deluty 1998, Morris et al. 2001, Ullrich et al. 2004), though individuals who are more sensitive to social rejection may face greater stress (Cole 2006). Sexual minorities have been found to engage in “rational outness,” disclosing aspects of their status strategically to manage stigma (Bradford & Ryan 1987). Furthermore, having a sexual minority community is found to increase the likelihood that they disclose to significant others such as family members and friends, which in turn can activate further social support (e.g., Hershberger & D’Augelli 1995; Luhtanen 2003.)

Another community who also navigates stigmas that are “invisible” are individuals suffering from mental illness. While being found to exercise agency in activating one’s social support in the midst of difficult circumstances, they are inevitably situated in and constrained by their network culture and accessibility (Perry & Pescosolido 2014). Experiential homophily (Suitor et al. 1995) – in this case, having the shared experience of managing mental illness, as well as closeness of the relationship and frequent contact are found to be strong determinants of tie activation among those navigating mental illness. Do the social network patterns of those who live with the stigmatized identity of undocumented status parallel those with individuals who carry other social stigmas in our 21st century context? How do undocumented individuals selectively choose the confidants to whom they disclose their stigmatized identity?

Baseline Filter of Selective Disclosure: Shared Immigrant Experience

The precariousness of undocumented immigration status not only inflicted constraints on material circumstances, but also molded the approach with which undocumented young adults related to those around them, including their most intimate friendships. The individuals in my study developed their closest friendship ties with those who understood first-hand the experience of being an immigrant, even when they were not from the same ethnic or racial group. More importantly, they explicitly *attributed* their capacity to feel safe with these friends to this shared

immigrant identity, as 28-year-old Jenny from Los Angeles does when describing her best friend Fatima:

“She’s like my sister. I’ve known her since 7th or 8th grade. That’s a really long time, I think. [laughter] Yeah she was just my best friend and all throughout these years she’s been my best friend. She knew early along about my status. *She’s an immigrant herself so she’s very well aware of what it is to be an immigrant in this country.* So yeah, I feel very, very safe with her.” [emphasis mine]

For Jenny, in addition to having known her friend since middle school, she emphasized that she felt “very, very safe with her” because Fatima, a naturalized U.S. citizen originally from Turkey, was “an immigrant herself.” Even though Jenny’s family was from South Korea and Fatima’s from Turkey, their shared struggles of living as immigrants in the U.S. surpassed their distinct cultural backgrounds. For the vast majority of my respondents, the migrant identity marker was the primary screener for potential friends whether they mentioned this process explicitly or implicitly.

The significance of shared immigrant identity was most evident through the experience of 34-year-old Mexican male Lucas. The majority of respondents expressed feeling most cautious at their workplaces, more often strategically compartmentalizing and completely separating their work from their social lives. For Lucas, however, it was different. As someone who worked in the tech industry of the Bay Area, many of his coworkers were in the U.S. primarily on H-1B work visas. Despite having vastly different migration histories, for Lucas, knowing that they understood the essence of being a migrant afforded him greater ease in their interactions: “It’s interesting because it’s really easy to hang out with people at work because they’re also immigrants, so they get that. They’re Indian, they’re Russian, other backgrounds....” While Lucas remained cautious about trusting all of his coworkers with the specifics of his legal history, overall he identified a greater sense of security at work compared to my other respondents. These findings are in line with existing scholarship which shows that nativity status shapes collective identities and political behavior (e.g., Michelson 2003, 2007; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Schildkraut 2013; Barreto and Pedraza 2009; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Fraga et al 2012). Deborah Schildkraut (2013), for instance, reveals that even in the realm of evaluating political representativeness, immigrants invoke their immigrant identity more than a shared ethnic or language background.

Being familiar with “the immigrant narrative,” as one of my respondents described, was the most fundamental factor for building understanding and support, but shared race and ethnicity assumed a critical role as well. Particularly because many respondents felt isolated in their struggle with undocumented status and rarely knew of others in a similar situation (outside of their own family), they found unity and understanding in shared ethnoracial background. Most respondents had co-ethnics as their closest friends and when they mentioned friends in other ethnic groups, they were of non-white, immigrant background.

For instance, despite having a diverse friendship group, 24-year-old Julie described that most of her closest friends were Korean. “She’s not undocumented, but she’s still very similar to me in a

lot of ways,” she said about her best friend. “I don’t really have friends who are undocumented that are close to me.” The similarity that Julie referred to was her friend Soojin’s shared Korean background. Even though Julie thought “they would bicker less” if she were not undocumented (since she would not have to constantly remind Soojin of the limitations that come with her status), she expressed that Soojin was a “great support system [who was] as good as she can be” because of commonalities in heritage culture and interests.

Cristina, who was born in Mexico, also predominantly had co-ethnic friends. In fact, she was very intentional about that choice. When I asked about the ethnoracial backgrounds of her friends, she responded:

“They’re all from Mexico. Some are U.S. citizens, but most of their lives they lived in Mexico and they moved back here to the U.S.. Most of them moved back either when they started high school or college, but they were born here. But for some reason they were raised in Mexico... They know everything [about my status]... I surround myself with people I feel comfortable around. Like you know my group of people are all Hispanics. Maybe that’s why I feel comfortable and safe.”

Overall the perception of a shared experience of being an immigrant in the U.S. and implicit understanding of its complicated, broken immigration system assumed a prominent role in determining comfort, ease, and a potential space of belonging. To ensure their and their loved ones’ well-being, undocumented young adults engaged in security work, delicately maneuvering their social interactions and determining relational spheres of safety and of vulnerability.

Boundary Making with Perceived Outgroup Members

Security work not only entails carefully discerning who is a potential friend, but also who is not. Undocumented status significantly defines one’s location in the nation-state, restricting the freedom with which one navigates broader structural spaces such as the labor market and education system, but it also necessarily limits one’s orientation towards those social actors perceived as untrustworthy and potentially harmful to their social location. For many respondents, untrustworthiness was embodied in individuals who were racially white. When I asked 23-year-old Mexican-origin Sara, for instance, who she would keep her “legal situation under wraps around,” she initially responded, “Any peers that I feel are more privileged than I am, like coworkers, I wouldn’t bring it up with them.” I followed up by asking her to clarify what she means by people who are more privileged than her, which led her to elaborate further:

“Like peers that are white, I’m less likely to bring it up to them. Or peers that grew up wealthier, whatever that means. Because I do identify as low-income, I do identify as I grew up poor, so people who I perceive to have come from a higher status background, I wouldn’t talk about it with them.”

Class and socioeconomic background assumed a role in determining Sara’s level of vulnerability, but race took primacy. Being white was a symbol of privilege and status, in contrast to her own marginalized background, and thus signaled potential threat. Allie, a 23-year-old Korean-origin woman, also shared Sara’s guardedness around individuals who were white:

“I feel I’m pretty lucky that for the most part [my community] is a pretty accepting liberal one, but there are still a lot of white male dominated spaces where I would not feel comfortable disclosing my status... Not that I wouldn’t disclose it just because they’re white, but I think generally I feel more comfortable talking to people of color.”

For Allie, while she shared the caveat that whiteness was not an automatic social boundary, it was fundamental nonetheless in determining the security with which she could enter a conversation. Whiteness connoted the rejection and exclusion of her undocumented identity.

In addition to exercising caution around those who are white, some of my respondents also identified being vigilant around anyone they perceived as politically conservative, extrapolated from certain identity markers such as age and class. Sangwoo described his measured interactions with fellow students’ parents in his role as a resident advisor: “I try to be aware of how I approach parents and folks who are elderly. Particularly if they’re not from a progressive cultural background.” When I asked if he had any specific experiences leading him to his hyper-sensitivity, he detailed:

“Yeah. Some of them were micro aggressions. Like they [the parents] would be really close and suddenly they would distance themselves. I would really notice that after I said that I was undocumented. And sometimes they would just ask me, “How do you feel? You’re taking resources away from other students.” And I wouldn’t know how to answer that, especially at the time. And things like that made me feel like I shouldn’t have said it in the first place. And that’s what made me really wary of telling people like parents.”

Vigilance around individuals who are white and/or appeared politically conservative was not reserved solely for strangers. For example, Korean respondent Jenny did not feel she could entirely trust her own relatives by marriage. She had been married to her white husband for a few years and they had recently had a child together, but she was still uncertain as to whether her in-laws knew of her legal situation, because of the insensitive, politically conservative remarks about undocumented immigrants that they made in her presence. Despite the depth and intimacy of her relationship with her spouse, and having recently gotten naturalized, she continued to “feel very vulnerable” around these relatives due to their anti-immigrant leanings:

“They’re very conservative, they’re Republican. And things have come up in conversation about undocumented immigrants and about the wall they’re trying to build, and those things are very personal to me. They don’t realize it, or if they do, they don’t care, and they’re very against people like me. Yeah so that makes me feel very vulnerable and a little nervous.”

When Jenny’s white relatives would discuss “the wall they’re trying to build,” they were likely referring to Mexicans specifically, conflating undocumented with Mexican (Chavez 2008). However, when it came to her legal status, she saw Mexican undocumented immigrants as “people like me” and imputed such antagonistic rhetoric as directed to her.

Intersectional Identities and Diverging Pathways of Security Work

For both Korean and Mexican respondents, a baseline sense of relational ease and comfort was guided by shared immigrant and ethnic background, which signaled in-group status. However, passing this interpersonal filter did not necessarily lead to openness about their immigration status, and in fact, pathways of security work diverged between these two groups of respondents. While all respondents were very aware of the stigmatized inflection of their immigration status, the contexts of disclosure and the recipients of disclosure varied. Korean respondents were often prompted to share their status to supplant another source of shame, whereas Mexican respondents sought emotional support for direct challenges related to their status. The relative absence of peers who can empathize also led Korean respondents to create a brighter distinction between confidants, those with whom they discussed their concerns about their legal situation, and companions, individuals with whom they interacted regularly and would consider close friends, but to whom they did not disclose their status.

The combination of cultural expectations and the lack of awareness of other undocumented immigrants shaped the degree of vulnerability and trajectory of disclosure of my Korean respondents. While sharing openly about one's legal situation and building safe spaces of community was a profound struggle for all undocumented young adults, the intersectional identity of being Asian and undocumented contributed to more heightened feelings of isolation and rejection, as 27-year-old Jeff shared with me:

“I mean I think more so coming from a Korean background or an AAPI background, it's kind of hard to open up just because there's going to be less people who are going to be like you, and then folk who even are like me won't really accept me.”

As Jeff described, a significant factor in determining the social support communities of Korean respondents was accessibility. With only 2% of undocumented immigrants originating from South Korea, after considering other factors of homophily such as age, location, and educational background, the numbers become very small. Add to that the reality that, despite 1 in 5 Korean immigrants being estimated to be undocumented, many of them conceal their legal situation due to the social stigma. Difficulties finding those who are “like [them]” as undocumented minorities of Asian or Korean origin poses a severe challenge to cultivating friendships where they could find complete belonging and acceptance.

Due to greater feelings of isolation, and fearing judgment and a lack of empathy, most Korean respondents had specific confidants to whom they would be open about their status, whereas Mexican respondents were more likely to share that most or all of their friends knew about their legal situation. When I asked 26-year-old Isaac from Korea who his close friends were, he asked me to clarify: “Like you mean people I can be open to?” A few Korean respondents followed up with a variation of this question, indicating that they distinguished between confidants (those to whom they could entrust the details of their legal situation) and companions (those they could not). The extrafamilial²³ individuals that they talked to most about their legal situation were not

²³ Immediate family members occupied the innermost realm of trust for my respondents. Because in most cases my respondents' parents and siblings shared some undocumented history, their legal situation was both a personal and

necessarily those they spent time with regularly. This theme parallels literature on the specialization of relationships that finds that “experiential homophily” or shared experiences (versus shared demographic variables markers) is a significant factor in the activation of ties for important personal matters (Suitor et al. 1995). However, unlike previous studies on experiential homophily particularly in regards to similarly stigmatized experiences such as mental illness (Perry & Pescosolido 2014), I find that confidants are not necessarily individuals who are particularly close or significant to them. A perceived shared experience took precedence for undocumented immigrants when determining the confidants with whom they could discuss their anxieties related to legal status, but for Korean participants, they were often not those with whom they are closest or are in frequent contact. They were exceptionally wary of disclosure and exceptionally selective with their confidants. Isaac shared the following:

“Right now, I don’t have any close friends that I can openly talk about myself. Ironically I have less close friends that I can talk about this stuff... So even if I don’t hang out with them a lot or whatever, when it comes to that topic, because we understand each other’s issues and struggles, we’re good. But as far as my personal close friends, unfortunately not much.”

Here Isaac described that he did not discuss “that topic” with his close friends but actually his “less close friends.” These “less close friends” were in fact two older Korean individuals who assumed the role of mentor rather than friend. One of them was his former pastor whom he could depend on anytime he “[needed] to just talk or ask for help.” Because his former pastor worked with disadvantaged undocumented youth, Isaac trusted that his struggles would be approached with empathy and treated with sensitivity. With his personable, disarming demeanor, Isaac had many friends from various phases and domains of his life. Yet he withheld what was arguably one of the most defining aspects of his life, because he could not completely trust that these friends could hold this information with understanding.

Kevin, who emigrated from Korea, also spent time with the same group of friends every weekend but only one of them was aware of his status. Regardless of the many hours they spent together in each other’s homes and myriad bars and restaurants throughout the city, these friends were solely reserved for these activities. When it came to any status-related concerns, he would confide in his citizen fiancée, but even with her the bounds of vulnerability and understanding were inevitably limited because she did not share the experience of living in legal precariousness.

Thirty-year-old Korean-origin Nancy also remained very private about her legal situation with good friends, despite knowing one another for more than a decade. Nancy reiterated to me again and again that “people just don’t get it.” When she talked about one good friend in particular whom she knew since middle school and even lived with for three years, she intimated the need to protect herself from judgment regardless of the strength of their relationship:

collective family affair. Siblings often played a critical role in providing psychological support while conversations with parents primarily were often focused on “business” such as updates on relief programs. Hence, within the family, while trust was not an issue, my respondents generally did not confide in their parents to protect them from greater concern.

“I just didn’t feel comfortable telling her, because I feel like there’s also a lot of judgment. Not necessarily because it’s a certain type of person but people in general, they pass judgment. Myself included. If they’re not gonna get it anyways and it’s something that’s not really such a huge issue that I need to talk to people about, then what’s the point. I’m just setting myself up for judgment. I just don’t feel like it’s necessary.”

Nancy did not disclose her situation with her close friends because, though she trusted them enough to spend time together, that was where the boundary was set. She, like Isaac and Kevin, engaged in security work by distinguishing confidants from companions, friends she saw regularly and even considered close but did not discuss her personal matters. For many Korean respondents there was only a select handful of individuals who occupied the inner sanctum of their social world, those they could trust not to compromise their affective and material security.

Mexican-origin Cristina on the other hand only “[surrounded herself] with people [she felt] comfortable around.” She made sure that her close friends were individuals whom she could trust with “everything.” In addition to navigating school together, her closest friends were also all from Mexico and understood the plight of living without documentation.

Cristina: Most of my friends I made through either high school or college and it was mostly because we like the same music, we come from the same background and that’s what brings us closer together ‘cause we have similar stories...

Esther: How much do they know about your legal history?

Cristina: They know everything. Yeah. ‘Cause also most of the friends we went through the same process of DACA and you know like advising everyone how to do this or that. Yeah so we help each other. I’ll say half of my friends are U.S. citizens, half of them have DACA.

The security work of Korean respondents was therefore in stark contrast to Mexican respondents like Cristina who was able to be ensconced in a close community of fellow Mexican origin peers that understood firsthand the harsh experience of being undocumented. Cristina had developed a tightknit community for herself that was founded on absolute trust and safety, despite the evidence that she was an individual whose default state was mistrust. Without prior notification, she brought her sister to the interview, asking if it was fine for her to stay with her. It became clear that this decision to include her sister was for her own sense of security and comfort. For the first half of the interview, I also noticed that she was trembling from what appeared to be anxiety over disclosing such intimate details of her story to an absolute stranger. Though Cristina was able to talk to all of her friends openly about her legal situation, unlike many Korean respondents, this did not preclude her from being vigilant around others who did not occupy her closest social circle.

For those Mexican respondents who did not have the opportunity to have strong friendships with peers in a similar situation, they described at least an implicit, unspoken understanding of

the widespread presence of others like them in their schools and broader communities. Lucas, for instance, who grew up in an agricultural center of California, described the presence of a “tribal anecdotal knowledge” in the community about navigating life without documentation:

“It was a pretty huge population of undocumented people in Stockton. And we were aware that there were gonna be certain parts of town where you didn’t go out when INS was out. Or you know that when it was harvest season, like post-harvest season, stay off the roads because that’s when immigration is gonna come. It’s kind of like community knowledge, everybody knew, like looking back now, we were aware of how to maneuver through our circumstances.”

The awareness of a large presence of others in a similar precarious legal situation, whether close relatives or distant neighbors, however, did not necessarily facilitate the act of disclosure. While the likelihood for undocumented Mexican interviewees to have close ties that are fellow undocumented peers was higher than for undocumented Koreans, because of a heightened sense of community vigilance around immigration authorities, they also had to be as strategic about whom to trust.

I find, therefore, that ethnoracial background significantly shapes security work. Generally, Korean respondents were more private about their legal situation compared to Mexican respondents because of a perceived lack of shared experience and empathy, limiting disclosure to a select few confidants. Being imputed as the “model minority,” particularly relative to the Latino face ascribed to “illegal immigrant,” uniquely shaped the friendships of Korean respondents, who often only shared their status with select confidants unless prompted to disclose their status identity.

Being Forced to Disclose

To add to this, the salient culture of “saving face” in the Korean community (Chung 2016; Lee 1999) led to even greater security work to protect themselves and their family members from potential judgment and shame, particularly among co-ethnics. I find that some Korean respondents were prompted to disclose in their conversations with friends when their social reputation was on the line. They provided their immigration situation as an explanation for another potentially more injurious source of shame, namely their lack of engagement in international Christian mission trips or more ambitious academic pursuits, which are considered normative behaviors and achievements in their predominantly Christian and high-achieving Korean community. I find that the weight of the success frame (Lee & Zhou 2015) within their co-ethnic community, therefore, shapes their pathways of disclosure. They seem to conduct a quick cost-benefit analysis in their minds as they confront these vulnerable moments, deciding that being perceived as academically incompetent or lacking faith is more shameful than their undocumented status. Particularly in densely connected social networks such as the Korean immigrant population (Min 1990), these dominating norms and values greatly influence personal decisions and behaviors (Coleman 1988).

When I asked 24-year-old Julie how she eventually divulged her legal situation to her friends from high school, she described feeling “forced” to explain why she was not applying to the

competitive colleges and universities that were assumed to be part of her imminent future. This was a recurring theme with some of my Korean respondents. “Why aren’t you going to college again? Why are you *aiming* for a CC [community college]?” or “Why aren’t you applying to places out of state or private schools?” were not uncommon reactions confronted by these individuals who were expected to excel academically and matriculate into the most prestigious of higher education institutions. In order to extinguish the shame of attending a lower-tiered school, they were forced to expose the shame of their undocumented status, feeling obligated to explain why they could not achieve the Asian “success frame” like their documented counterparts (Lee & Zhou 2015).

Kevin was able to overcome all odds and attend a top-tier university, but due to his family’s financial difficulties and inability to pay for his college tuition he unexpectedly had to leave school in the middle of his first semester. In order to help his friends understand what was an atypical predicament for his social circle, he was motivated to share about his legal situation:

“So my first semester [in college,] I got kicked out of school because of financial stuff. . . . I was like telling my close friends, just like hey just letting you know, this is my situation. So that’s generally when my close friends from college found out [about my status.]”

In addition to discussions about college, several respondents who were involved in church mentioned that the first time they shared about their status with friends was during conversations about overseas mission trips. In the Korean Christian church, participating in mission trips abroad is an expected rite of passage in the high school and college years (Ecklund 2006). Serving and evangelizing to marginalized communities in developing countries has been constructed as a sure demonstration of being a “model” Christian. Consequently, those who elected not to participate risked being judged and questioned about their decision. “Church friends would be like, ‘why are you not able to go on missions to Mexico?’ Yeah, that’s how it really came up,” 24-year-old Elizabeth told me.

The disassociation of illegality with the Korean community contributed to a lack of support even from those considered confidants. Twenty-seven-year-old Rachel shared her experiences of feeling isolated and abandoned even among her close friends who knew of her legal situation. The profound disappointment she felt when none of her friends was willing to give her a ride home despite knowing about her car-less, license-less situation left a lasting scar for Rachel. After a late monthly church meeting in Koreatown, Los Angeles, she needed to find a ride home to Pasadena. Absorbing the shame of her predicament, she mustered the courage to ask multiple friends for a ride, albeit being well aware that none of them live in the same direction. However, after being rejected more than once, she was left no choice but to eventually give up and catch a cab home, an exorbitant expense. As evident from the experiences of individuals like Julie, Rachel, Kevin, and Elizabeth, there is a substantial added challenge of finding social belonging, due to the invisibility and unawareness of the presence of the Asian undocumented population as well as community expectations for their academic achievements and religious activities.

Conclusion

Legal violence goes far beyond public spaces, extending into the most personal and intimate parts of undocumented immigrants' lives. The tenuousness of status significantly informs feelings of interpersonal ease, leading undocumented young adults to engage in security work in order to manage stigma and protect themselves from potential harm. Scholars have demonstrated that immigrants living in legal precarity exercise different strategies in order not to draw attention to themselves and thereby minimize risk of being detected by interior enforcement (Dreby 2015; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi & Suárez-Orozco 2011). Security work is a framework that allows us to understand the multitude of strategies enacted by marginalized individuals as a response to both potential affective and physical violence. One significant strategy that undocumented young people adopt to manage the social and physical ramifications of their legal status is selective disclosure. They navigate their social worlds, even their friendships, with heightened strategic acumen and discernment. For this vulnerable population, the disclosure of their immigration status could have affective and material implications; to disclose one's status is not simply to risk losing dignity and respect, but also to open oneself to existential harm. This affective-material duality is unique to these individuals who tread liminality, leading them to place security work in the form of selective disclosure as a priority in their everyday lives.

Within this context of fear and vulnerability, undocumented young adults practice security work through intentional boundary making based on perceived understanding and shared experience. All respondents, both of Korean and Mexican origin, found symbolic belonging, a "subjective sense of social similarity" (Schachter 2016), with individuals who shared their immigrant and ethnic identity, while maintaining distance from those who are racially white. Within this overall pattern, pathways of vulnerability diverged between Korean and Mexican respondents. For the former group there was an added challenge of finding social belonging due to the invisibility and unawareness of the presence of Asian undocumented immigrants. Being doubly invisible – passing as legal because they are U.S. raised *and* because of the racialization of Mexicans as "illegal" – also meant a doubly layered barrier to personal disclosure with friends. To add to this, the salient culture of "saving face" in the Korean community (Chung 2016; Lee 1999) led to even greater security work to protect themselves and their family members from potential judgment and shame, particularly among co-ethnics. Given this context many respondents of Korean origin often distinguished between those with whom they could discuss their legal situation and those solely reserved for less vulnerable interactions and activities. Being more private and cautious with status disclosure perpetuates their experiences as a hidden undocumented minority, contributing to their unique social location of invisible illegality.

Exploring these friendship formation patterns brings greater nuance to our understanding of the social worlds of undocumented youth and young adults. The national "Coming Out of the Shadows" platform has empowered many youth to resist fear and stigmatization of their immigration status through the public disclosure of many undocumented activists. This chapter sheds light on the mechanisms by which nonactivist youth and young adults exercise agency through their own acts of disclosure in personal relationships and how these pathways vary by ethnoracial background. Security work is central to the lived experiences of diverse undocumented youth and young adults, and it is achieved through selective disclosure – vigilantly and strategically placing and withholding trust to ensure affective and material safety.

My analysis focuses on how security work is shaped by race and ethnicity, but it is likely that other factors, such as educational background and gender, also affect how young undocumented immigrants practice security work. For example, while my respondents are overwhelmingly college-educated, we might expect “early-exiters” (Gonzales 2016) to exercise more security work by insulating their social network, as they do not have the protection of the social status of an educated background (Abrego 2008). On the other hand, finding themselves in the low-wage labor sector that employs a disproportionate number of undocumented workers, they may be able to locate and disclose their status to fellow early-exiters in a similar precarious situation. Gender has been found to matter for security work as well, especially in the family formation process (Cebulko 2016; Enriquez 2017; Pila 2016; Schueths 2015). In the realm of friendship formation, we might expect similar gendered trends, particularly in light of broader social networks scholarship that has demonstrated that women disclose more personal information in general than their male counterparts (e.g., Dindia & Allen 1992). Further research must be done on how diverse axes of stratification, personal social conditions, and local political contexts shape the security work of undocumented immigrants.

This work also contributes to broader scholarship on homophily, stigma, and network specialization, informing our understanding of how the intersection of a stigmatized identity and ethnoracial background affects confidant tie formation and selective disclosure. Particularly in this era of heightened legal violence against immigrants, it is becoming increasingly important to consider citizenship and documentation status in the list of demographic variables that shape social networks. For undocumented young adults, friendships are not simply a result of accessible opportunity structures (McPherson et al. 2001) but a domain of life where they exercise agency to manage stigma and protect themselves and their loved ones. They make intentional choices that maximize interpersonal security, protect their sense of dignity and worth, and combat legal violence for both themselves and their family members. Moreover, while existing research demonstrates that homophily is found to be particularly salient on race (e.g., Lincoln and Miller 1979; Marsden 1987, 1988; Uslaner 2002), these findings suggest that race may be serving as a proxy for immigration status or a more nuanced intersection of race and immigration status. For undocumented youth and young adults, it is not solely race nor solely the lack of documentation that shapes the formation and trajectory of their friendships, but rather the confluence of these very palpable axes of stratification.

This research also points to the importance of examining selective disclosure through an intersectional analytical lens, particularly for those who may bear the weight of a socially stigmatized experience or identity marker. While in this study case, selective disclosure as a form of security work is a direct response to legal violence inflicted on immigrants living with undocumented status in the U.S., diverse populations grappling with various social and physical stigmas implement strategies to mitigate affective and physical harm. Our understanding of selective disclosure comes largely from individuals with HIV (Shelley et al 1995), medical issues such as miscarriages (Cowan 2014; Lee 1969), and the LGBTQ community ((e.g., Bradford & Ryan 1987; Corrigan & Matthews 2003; Jordan & Deluty 1998; Morris et al. 2001; Ullrich et al. 2004). In all of these situations, the stigma is not readily observable or seen, visibility and invisibility of stigmatized markers and experiences being an important distinction presented by

Erving Goffman (1963) when considering stigma management. Furthermore, the objective of selective disclosure and the care taken in revealing or withholding information is primarily to manage the stigma. While this chapter primarily focuses on the practice of selective disclosure by examining the case of undocumented young adults, I show that it is important to consider this strategy within the framework of security work as it more accurately captures a broader conception of self-management that undocumented immigrants engage in to minimize both affective and physical harm. Studying this vulnerable population therefore has broader implications for our understanding of friendship, social network formation, and disclosure in the midst of severe adversity and perceived shame in general. Further research must examine how other communities who occupy socially marginalized spaces engage in security work to protect themselves from potentially negative consequences.

CHAPTER 6

Korean Community Members: Source of Shame and Sanctuary

Given that young Korean undocumented immigrants feel more constrained in their capacity to cultivate deep friendships, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, where do they find support and community? In this final empirical chapter, I focus on the Korean case, examining a significant site of social interactions for Korean respondents – the Protestant church. Nearly half of Mexican respondents indicated that they were Catholic for their religious affiliation (the rest writing ‘N/A’), but the role of religion was barely mentioned during interviews. More than 75% of Korean respondents, however, wrote that they were Christian, and church emerged organically in the vast majority of interviews as occupying an important social function in their lives.²⁴ Given their social location as undocumented minorities who are peripheral to dominant narratives of illegality and therefore invisible to both those who can hurt and those who can help, what is the role of the church in their lives?

In this chapter, I explore the Korean immigrant church as a significant ethnic organization (Ramakrishnan & Bloemraad 2008), rather than a religious institution, and the multi-faceted role of this co-ethnic community on the lives of community members living in legal precarity in the United States. Examining co-ethnic ties within the undocumented Korean community through the Korean ethnic church is appropriate, as the church has been called an extension of the Korean immigrant family due to the significant function it plays in and for the Korean American population (Min 1992). The Catholic Church in the U.S., with its growing Latino presence, has been found to be a powerful mobilizing force for the undocumented Latino immigrant community, reaching out to its members in an era of heightened uncertainty and trepidation. Research on undocumented youth and young adults has also pointed to the importance of grassroots and nonprofit advocacy organizations in positively shaping the experiences and outcomes of the undocumented community (Nicholls 2013).

Religion in Immigrant Communities

Studies have shown that religion and religious organizations play a critical role in providing a sense of home and belonging for immigrant communities. Ethnic religious organizations in particular have served significant nonreligious social functions for immigrant populations in the U.S. throughout its history. These spaces have been the social hub for families and co-ethnic communities at large, and offering a sense of collective identity in a society where they are minorities (Chen 2008; Hirschman 2004; Levitt 2003; Portes & Rumbaut 2006).

Religious life is a significant part of the Korean and Mexican American narrative in particular. Religious organizations have been found to play a consequential role in the civic life of first- and second-generation Korean American communities (and Asian American communities more broadly) (Kwon, Kim & Warner 2001; Min & Kim 2002). The United States is currently home to the largest South Korean immigrant population in the world, with roughly one million Korean immigrants currently residing in this country (Zong & Batalova 2017). A significant proportion

²⁴ Church came up organically even though I did not recruit through church networks

of this population, nearly 8 out of 10 Koreans, are Protestant Christians affiliated with the Korean ethnic church, and more than 80% are very devout, attending church at least once a week for a worship service, Bible study, or another program (Min 1992; Min & Kim 2002; Kim, Warner & Kwon 2001). About 50% come to the U.S. already affiliated with Christianity and the rest convert upon settlement due to the tight-knit, institutionalized social network, the Korean immigrant church provides (Min 1991). Evangelical Protestantism in particular, a branch of Christianity that focuses on bringing others into the faith through the sharing of testimonies, is popular among Korean Americans (Kim, Warner & Kwon 2001; Min 1992; Min & Kim 2002). Today there are about 4,000 Korean churches in the United States (2007).

While religious institutions have also assumed an important role in the civic and political integration of Mexican Americans, research shows that church attendance is waning. In the U.S. today 61% of immigrants of Mexican descent self-identify as Catholic and 18% are Protestant (Pew Research Center 2014). 1.5- and 2nd-generation Latino millennials are also found to be less religious than their parents' generation and older immigrants (Pew Research Center 2014). Hence, while Catholicism and the Catholic institution have been instrumental in motivating political participation among the Mexican American community, the Catholic church is losing prominence as an ethnic organization serving a central social and material resource (Cadge & Ecklund 2007; Ecklund et al 2013).

These broader trends were apparent in my study as well. I did not ask specific questions about church or religion in my interview guide. However, due to the importance of church in their lives, church involvement came up organically in most of my interviews with Korean respondents. On the other hand, even though the vast majority of Mexican respondents who indicated a religious affiliation wrote that they were Catholic, religion surprisingly only emerged in two of my interviews with Mexican undocumented young adults.²⁵

Those of Mexican background who mentioned the church did so in a broad sense, identifying religion and faith in God as emotionally supportive. For instance, one respondent, 26-year-old Julio, who was working in Oakland thanks to DACA, briefly mentioned that knowing that his mother regularly prays for him is a source of comfort and support. Another, 33-year-old Diego, a very fervent person of faith, discussed “[spending] years praying, trying to figure out how [he and his family] can let go of [their] fear to feel like, ‘Oh the U.S. immigration system dictates my life.’” In contrast, as I outline in the rest of the chapter, those of Korean origin actually did not discuss the spiritual benefits of religious life but instead pointed to the indirect effects of church as an organizational entity.

This final chapter therefore focuses mainly on the Korean sample, drawing on in-depth interviews with 33 Korean American respondents in their 20s and 30s, as well as interviews with two staff members of Korean community-based organizations (not faith-based). The vast majority, more than three-quarters of them, identified themselves as Christian and, of these,

²⁵ After coding interview transcripts into broad categories, those of Korean respondents were further coded inductively based on emergent themes around co-ethnic organizational resources and the role of the Korean immigrant church.

most of them were actively involved in local Korean churches that were composed primarily of 1.5-generation and 2nd-generation Korean peers.²⁶ Collectively, they attended church regularly, participated in Bible study groups, led music for worship services, and socialized with fellow church members outside of structured spaces.

My findings reveal that the Korean church, the primary space where undocumented Korean young adults interact with their co-ethnic community members, functions as a source of implicit social-emotional and material support, while concurrently being a place where feelings of shame and isolation are reinforced. The church therefore is a space of tension and ambiguity for those on the margins of Korean American society, such as immigrants without legal residency status. For these individuals, their experiences with the church and the social actors that comprise it are characterized by amplified risk and amplified reward due to the stigmatized and precarious nature of their legal situation.

Church in the Undocumented Korean Community

The Korean immigrant church in the U.S. has been shown to play important social functions for its members, including providing community for church members, offering social services for the Korean community at large, and maintaining Korean traditions (Min 1992). Korean American congregations, moreover, have been found to often use religious discourse to uphold cultural values of achievement and prestige (Chai 2001; Chong 1998). In her study comparing Korean American young adults attending predominantly second-generation Korean churches with those attending multiethnic churches, Ecklund (2005) found that the “model minority” trope is reproduced by religious interpretations in Korean churches but not in multiethnic churches. For example, Ecklund provides an example of pastors telling congregants that “acting like a victim” and “acknowledging discrimination or poverty” takes their focus away from God and on themselves. At the same time, leaders and congregants alike would speak of their ambition for education and wealth as “inherent.” This discourse of discrimination and poverty as well as achievement and prosperity lead individuals to implicitly distance themselves from ethnoracial groups from those they perceive as less successful. This rhetoric in the Korean American church may thus affect the sense of identity and belonging of its congregation members, particularly those individuals who do not meet this standard of the model child of immigrants, such as those who face the obstacle of undocumented immigration status.

The practice of “saving face” within East Asian societies can also shape how Korean undocumented immigrants navigate and negotiate the challenges of living without immigration status (e.g., Chung 2016; Lee 1999). Particularly in a highly concentrated co-ethnic context such as immigrant churches, it could be even more critical to ensure that one does not “lose face” at the risk of jeopardizing one’s reputation across the community. We may expect individuals who are undocumented to struggle with finding support within this space that is otherwise a lifeline for their community. On the other hand, given that it is a religious institution that holds doctrines of compassion and care for the marginalized and disadvantaged, we may expect that some individuals would feel more comfortable being their authentic selves, finding acceptance

²⁶ Five Korean respondents indicated that they were Agnostic for their religious affiliation, and one indicated Buddhist

and belonging in the midst of their stigmatized legal circumstances.

My findings show that Korean undocumented young people have a complex, tension-ridden relationship with their co-ethnic community, who they primarily interact with through an ethnic organization that is central in the lives of Korean Americans – the Korean church. Korean churches, assume a multi-faceted, at times contradictory role of concurrently providing a space of relational, interpersonal safety, while continuing to reify the stigma and shame of undocumented status on both an interactional and broader structural level. Specifically, some individuals find that status disclosure is a risk even within the purportedly nonjudgmental, accepting church community, which can further exacerbate a sense of isolation and loneliness. However, at the same time, the support system that stems from immigrant churches in the U.S. (e.g., Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Ecklund 2006; Hirschman 2004; Min 1992) serves as a significant anchor for some undocumented young adults, giving them a sense of belonging and dignity that is otherwise elusive. Specifically, the Korean church can be a haven where they can more readily be their authentic selves and be open about their legal situation, compared to other social spaces; and where they can find a greater sense of meaning and hope in their lives as they entrust themselves to a sovereign, divine power in the midst of legal liminality. However, institutionally, the Korean Protestant church, unlike the Latinx Catholic Church (Heredia 2011; Mora 2013) in the U.S., refrains from addressing issues of immigration as an organization, which has broader implications for the stigmatization of illegality within their respective ethnic communities, as well as the limited political and civic mobilization around immigrant rights in the Korean community at large.

To clarify, in this chapter I examine the Korean immigrant church as an ethnic social organization, and not as a religious entity per se. Ethnic non-profit organizations in general have been found to assume significant roles in facilitating the incorporation and integration of undocumented immigrant communities. These entities have offered spaces of respite and healing for individuals (Gonzales et al 2013; Gonzales, Terriquez, Rusczyk 2014), provided information and resources for education and employment (Cho 2017), and led major advocacy and activism efforts across the country (Nicholls 2013). However, less is known about non-Latinx ethnic organizations that assume a critical role in the day-to-day lives of their co-ethnic participants. Especially given that undocumented Asian immigrants remain hidden and isolated, it is important to understand how their own ethnic organizations and communities shape and address experiences of illegality.

Church as Haven

The Korean ethnic church served a comprehensive social function for respondents, who received support and guidance in social-emotional and material ways through the relationships they formed in their community. The church was also a critical hub of relationships where important information, at times which was essential to their survival, was shared and circulated. Their church occupied a core aspect of their lives, offering a strong sense of community through a network of similarly situated individuals of Korean immigrant background. Their lives revolved around the church, from the friends they made and how they spent their time on the weekends. It was where many of them felt most “at home” and felt a general sense of safety and solace. Julie, who was 24 years old at the time of interview, seemed to be a very gregarious and disarming

individual who had a diverse group of friends spanning various ethnic and racial backgrounds and walks of life. However, ultimately the foundation of her social identity stemmed from the Korean church that she had attended since she was a young girl.

“[Church] has kinda been like the center of my community and my family for life... Korean people are very rooted around church, [it’s] kinda like the anchor of our society and everyone else kinda shifts around it... I’ve been going to the same church since I was 10 so I built a lot of strong relationships, everyone knows my family so.”

Julie recognized that church was not only a critical aspect of her and her family’s social life, but that it is a cornerstone of her broader Korean community in the Los Angeles area.

In addition to being an organizational context where their social lives were anchored, for some of my respondents, the church also served as a sacred space where they could be vulnerable and open about their tenuous legal situation. In general, undocumented immigrants are incredibly vigilant and private in social situations, taking immense care to make sure that their immigration status does not fall into the hands of untrustworthy individuals. In a different chapter, I show how young undocumented immigrants strategically navigate their friendships, disclosing their status selectively based on perceived markers of minority background and understanding of the immigrant experience. Undocumented Korean young adults in particular take greater caution than their Mexican counterparts. Not all of their close friends are considered confidants whom they trust with their illegality. In the Protestant evangelical church at large, however, congregants are encouraged to invite their community members into their personal lives. Being in a shared religious community entails discussing authentically their trials and tribulations, in addition to their joys and celebrations.

When 25-year-old Joanne from the San Francisco Bay Area heard a young man at her college church openly share his story of being undocumented and “always feeling alien” with the whole congregation, “it really shocked [her].” She grew up hearing from her parents that even extended family members were not to be trusted. “Just be careful,” they would always warn her. Joanne was so accustomed to staying silent, both within her family and at her home church, but she had a transformative experience after joining a new church in college.

“The fact that he [Mark] was able to really open up about this, it was unheard of — it wasn’t in my frame of reference. Like that would never happen in my world. And it was before a huge group of people, both regulars and non-regulars to church and so I was like, wow, you’re willing to share this story with everybody. He was sharing about how he had this feeling of isolation, of secrecy, of never being able to trust anybody, but then he made his decision some time sophomore year [of college], something like that. And [he shared about] the security he gained through belief in Christ and the community that he was welcomed into and the fact that everywhere he turned, he received acceptance not condemnation, and so I think that really resonated with me.”

Because of the cultural framework of “face saving” (Chung 2016) that Joanne and her community operated in, when one of her church’s congregants so publicly revealed his immigration status, it

was an incredibly life-changing moment for her. For the first time she had heard someone else dare to utter the feelings that she had grappled with alone for years. Despite having been in the same congregation for years, they had not been aware at all of their shared vulnerabilities around their immigration situation. Furthermore, Mark's public testimony was the beginning of a shift in her own thinking of her immigration status, destigmatizing both the nature of her immigration status as well as the act of disclosing it. In the evangelical church space, sharing one's testimony is valued and lauded as a way to publically acknowledge divine sovereignty and will in places of burden, helplessness, and struggle. Through the embrace that Mark had experienced in the church community, when the expectation was rejection, he had found more freedom and acceptance around his immigration status in a society that refused to welcome him as their own. Joanne was inspired. She could not open up about her own story immediately, but just a couple weeks after the evening of Mark's testimony, she was compelled to take this step.

“Some of the girls [at my church] invited me to their place for like a brunch, and it was there where two girls in the same situation as me were talking about that, and then I was like, oh wait, I'm actually like that too. And I think that was the first time I ever opened up about it. And we had this huge moment of like, oh my gosh, we knew each other for like a whole semester and we didn't even know about this about each other, and so, yeah, it was like a huge bonding moment.”

Mark's testimony had catalyzed openness and transparency for Joanne and her friends. Despite having been a part of the same Christian community for a semester, they had kept their immigration statuses private. However, at the risk of losing face, they divulged this significant aspect of their lives, and in turn found even deeper understanding and belonging. Since this pivotal moment, Joanne shared that she has been able to “even share it to people not in the church.” The social-emotional support she had discovered in her church had given her the agency and courage to share her experience with less shame and fear of judgment.

Twenty-two-year old Daniel from Koreatown, Los Angeles, told me that he had always been pretty open about his status with friends and church members, even writing a public blog about his experiences at times. Unlike many other respondents, Daniel was well acquainted had several Korean undocumented friends. “We are the undocumented ones,” he told me, when describing his friends. Other undocumented families in his Korean immigrant church were not as transparent as he was, however. They would privately write about the struggles surrounding their undocumented status on prayer request cards, which would only be read by a select few members of the prayer committee. Daniel, however, would find out about the children in these families from his pastors, leading him to cautiously support these students who were struggling with the barriers surrounding their status.

“At my church I worked with a lot of kids that have the same problems, so I kind of just like mentored them... Usually pastors will let me know. Because you know like their parents would write it in like prayer requests, and [the pastors] know that I've been through it and stuff so they're like “oh can you kind of [help], you know.”

Because of the magnified culture of “saving face” in the Korean community coupled with the constant reminders from their parents to hide this socially stigmatized part of their lives, they had often been left with no choice but to struggle in silent solitude. Such was the paradox of this spiritual and religious context. While the faith framework placed great value on sharing openly and accepting one another unconditionally as one spiritual family, in some ways their Korean culture of preserving one’s reputation and family honor operated more powerfully due to fear of shame and judgment. The pressure to be the model child of immigrants and achieve the American Dream extended into the church (e.g., Chai 2001).

Church as Resource

In addition to church serving as a sanctuary for the Korean undocumented young adults I interviewed, I found that the church also served as a significant material resource through the member base it provided them (e.g., Kwon 1997; Menjívar 2000). Many scholars have shown that Asian Americans and immigrants at large gain access to economic and social capital through religious organizations, which facilitate upward mobility (Hirschman 2004; Portes & Rumbaut 2006; Warner & Wittner 1998). It was no different for the undocumented young people who I talked to and their families – that is, if they were willing to share their stigmatized immigration status with their church members. For those who felt safe enough to open about their legal situation and chose to do so, they proceeded selectively with a specific need and objective. Taking the risk of revealing their status to key actors in their church community was a critical step to garnering information and resources that could significantly mitigate barriers that come with being undocumented, as Patler found in her work with undocumented students in the education system (2018). My respondents and their family members gained important information on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and in-state tuition, employment, and even access to healthcare through their church.

Esther: So they found out about DACA through their friends or...?

Joseph: Yeah. So like in our church we had other families who were undocumented who came...who are more advanced in their life here in the States. So they gave us tips and...they had their children go to college with DACA, so yeah.

Joseph found out about DACA through his parents, who were first informed about it through other church members with undocumented children. For those individuals who were open about their immigration status with their church community, they were able to support one another by sharing valuable knowledge such as the opportunities available through DACA. For Joseph and his family, as well as other respondents, the primary motivation for these discussions was to access higher education and earn a college degree. Operating within a “success frame” (Lee & Zhou 2015) within which educational and professional achievement are prioritized, Korean parents, despite their difficult circumstances, went to great lengths to mitigate the barrier that immigration status posed for their children’s prospects.

Undocumented children did the same for their parents, especially when it came to their parents’ health. Daniel had graduated top of his class in high school, getting accepted into prestigious

colleges and universities across the country. However, because his family could not afford the tuition nor take out loans, he went to a local community college and then transferred to a nearby state university. His second semester there, his mom fell severely ill, causing Daniel to take a year off of school working 70 hours a week to help make ends meet. When I asked how his mom got treated, he responded that “she didn’t really get treatment [and] just stayed home.” The undocumented population not only has lower rates of access to health insurance and medical care due to public health insurance ineligibility, but also the fear and apprehension that visiting the doctor could put them at risk of deportation (Carrasquillo, Buckley & Sakamoto 2000; Hacker et al 2015; Pitkin Derose, Escarce & Lurie 2007; Prentice, Pebley, and Sastry 2005). With further probing, Daniel shared that his mom went to a Korean medical center for some form of treatment. While about half of low-income undocumented immigrants qualify for Medi-Cal in the state of California, and federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), hospital emergency departments, and community clinics provide free or reduced-price healthcare coverage for undocumented immigrants (McConville, Hill, Ugo & Hayes 2015), his mom likely did not want to risk putting her family in such a precarious position.

Daniel: She went to a clinic through someone from church that knew her position, so like full confidence...it was like all confidential. Everything was paid in cash but that’s also the reason that I work, because you know if you pay in cash, you gotta pay up front. So like I was working a lot.

Esther: How did she know that person?

Daniel: Church.

Esther: Oh okay.

Daniel: My mom serves in church too. We’ve all served in church ever since we were born.

Without divulging her legal situation and compromising her residential security, Daniel’s mom was able to receive some semblance of medical treatment that otherwise would not have been easily accessible, because of the community she had formed in their church. Through their connection with this church member, they received the opportunity to pay “under the table” with cash as well and not worry about the lack of health insurance.

Similar to barriers to the healthcare system, in the absence of legal access to the labor market, informal methods of employment are critical (e.g., Cho 2017). For the vast majority of Korean respondents, the availability of jobs through their co-ethnic networks was a presumed reality that provided basic material benefits despite their legal situation. Christine, who was attending local community colleges and steadily working towards a bachelors degree, attributed the facility of finding work to the cultural sentiment of 정 (*jeong*). Christine seemed to imply that *jeong*, which roughly translates to a deep emotional bond stemming from shared experience and social

responsibility, operates strongly within the Korean American community because of their shared struggles as immigrants and minorities in the U.S.

Through the hub of the Korean church, where individuals of all classes and socioeconomic situations intermingle, respondents were able to more readily draw on the capital of their co-ethnics. Several of my respondents who managed to overcome educational hurdles and excel academically tutored the children of more affluent families in the church or their networks. One respondent Yoonkyung shared that her mother worked as a full-time receptionist at the dental office that was owned by one of their congregation members, despite not having any training in the area. For a couple summers Yoonkyung herself worked there as well, supporting the office with her fluent English language skills for their few English-speaking clients. The church network therefore allowed many respondents to access employment through Korean ethnic labor market niches despite the lack of documentation (Cho 2017). Willing to pay under the table and in the process lend a hand to a fellow church member, congregants in the church with greater capital were a vital lifeline for undocumented respondents who requested the help.

The Hostility of Church

Extant scholarship has demonstrated that Korean ethnic churches have been the most central ethnic organization for Korean immigrant communities in the U.S., serving an important nonreligious civic function in their lives. This historical role was prominent in the lives of the undocumented Korean young adults I interviewed, but their relationship to the community they found in church was not solely as positive as we might expect. A segment of respondents also experienced hostility and shame in this environment where they expected and yearned for acceptance and comfort. Despite the church being a religious institution where openness and vulnerability and unconditional love and acceptance are espoused in core teachings, church members' perception of undocumented immigration status seemed to parallel dominant stigma-laden narratives of "illegal immigrants" as immoral and undeserving. Some respondents were therefore careful not to disclose their undocumented status "even at church," as 34-year-old Karen shared with me.

"You know, I was really embarrassed about the situation and so I never brought it up with my peers. Even at church, I just knew, or I assumed that nobody would really understand the situation or what I was going through, and I don't know why but I felt really, really embarrassed and ashamed of the fact that we weren't legal residents."

While respondents had hoped that they would be able to bring this aspect of themselves to the church space, they upheld the same protective strategies in this purportedly safe environment, in order to shield themselves and their family members from shame. The young undocumented Koreans I interviewed seemed to have internalized negative tropes about undocumented immigrants themselves, and, in addition, assumed that there would be a lack of empathy from fellow congregation members. Many respondents shared that they felt that they were alone in the struggle, thinking that they were the "only Korean undocumented immigrants." Adding to this perceived lack of understanding due to limited awareness of the plight of illegality in the Korean community, some respondents were also very skeptical of the kind of support they would receive from the church.

“Like at the end of the day, even other Korean families even at church were like, ‘that’s kind of your problem and like not mine. And hope things work out for you, but there’s nothing that I can or will do to kind of help that way.’ So that kind of cold interactions among the community.” (Paul)

When Paul and his family had solicited help from their fellow church members in times of trouble, they received rejection instead of the support that one would expect from a religious organization. Despite the communal virtues of the Christian faith, an individualistic mentality seemed to exist among the church members Paul encountered. Hurt by the boundaries that were constructed by his own co-ethnic people because of their status, he compared the lack of support and understanding he had experienced within the Korean community with the Latino community, where “[he sees] Latinos watching out for each other more.”

The church was also a place where respondents felt prompted, almost forced, to disclose their immigration status with their peers, and it was often to explain why they could not go on evangelical mission trips abroad. Generally, respondents were very private about their legal situation, because of a perceived lack of shared experience and empathy, limiting disclosure to a select few confidants. However, at times they were prompted to divulge their status in the church context to explain away another potentially more injurious source of shame, namely their lack of engagement in international Christian mission trips, which were considered normative behaviors and achievements in their religious context. Participation in short-term international mission work is a symbol of sincere faith in the Korean evangelical church, and therefore a rite of passage for any youth or young adult that is expected by the broader community (Ecklund 2006). Hence, 20-year-old Eric described divulging his immigration status for the first time with his friends, because they were confused about his lack of participation.

“Yeah I mean oh, for my church friends, when we talk about missions and stuff, I can’t go to missions because I can’t leave the country so it’d always come up during those times and people would always be like hey, are you going on missions this year? And I’d be like no and they’d be like why? And I’d just be like oh because I’m not a citizen.”

Note, that while Eric describes himself “not [being] a citizen,” instead of saying, “I’m undocumented” or “I don’t have papers.” He leaves his immigration status vague as to not get further questioning from his peers.

Institutionally, Korean ethnic churches seem to be wary of any formal or public demonstrations of immigrant rights advocacy. They generally “want to stay out of this political immigration stuff,” a staff member at a major Korean community based organization (CBO) in Los Angeles shared with me. In fact, one organization in the Bay Area had conducted information sessions on the Affordable Care Act (ACA) for a local Korean church, which garnered a positive response by its members. However, when they reached out to the church to ask if they could also hold sessions about DACA, the church was not interested and refused. Even though the Korean immigrant church was willing to tackle issues within their community regarding healthcare access, they were reticent when it came to education around immigration issues. While these are

solely the experiences of two organizational leaders, they have significant implications for outreach practices among Korean CBOs to adequately support the undocumented Korean community and work towards destigmatizing their legal situation.

These interviews complement the research of scholars such as Janelle Wong and Angie Chung on evangelical protestant churches and civic engagement and advocacy. Contrary to studies that have demonstrated the strong role of religious organizations on civic and political participation, this phenomenon has been found to be more complicated for conservative, majority immigrant religious contexts. Asian American and Latinx evangelical Protestant churches do not as readily engage in the civic sphere like their Catholic counterparts, unless they are issues they deem are more directly related to healthy Christian living (Wong, Rim & Perez 2008). Korean churches in particular, which tend to have conservative and traditional leanings, are also shown to be politically disengaged as organizations (Chang 1999), though individual leaders are often politically active outside of the church sphere (Chung 2007).

While Korean churches may choose to focus on spiritual and religious matters as organizations, there are glimpses of efforts to mobilize the immigrant community through religious coalitions. A national Korean American Sanctuary Church network has been formed and is slowly gaining traction. This movement, which began in New York in Spring of 2017 with a small gathering of pastors of Korean American churches, has grown into an ecumenical effort of nearly 100 churches across the East Coast and its Facebook page has more than 400 followers.²⁷ A 2018 article²⁸ written about this movement states its goals as the following: “to help immigrant brothers and sisters, Korean and non-Korean alike, avoid deportation; to bring attention to the issue of immigration; and to promote the sanctuary movement and rights of the immigrants.” However, the author of the piece makes sure to begin with an argument rooted in religious values: “The Bible is our ultimate immigration values handbook.” While Korean churches do not play a prominent role in immigrant advocacy, there is evidence that a gradual movement by church leaders may at least begin to be a symbolic sign of co-ethnic support for Korean undocumented immigrants.

Conclusion

In examining the functional role of the Korean immigrant church on the well-being of undocumented Korean young adults in California, I highlight the complex, often contradictory role of this ethnic organization on their members. These findings on the role of the Korean ethnic church, which has been found to be critical in facilitating the integration of Korean immigrants in general, is particularly illuminating when considering the diversity of the population by legal status.

Scholars have highlighted the ways in which religious entities have been at the forefront of the immigrant rights movement, most recently with the Catholic Church among Latinx immigrants

²⁷ Number of followers on July 26, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/SanctuaryChurchNetwork/>.

²⁸ “Korean-American Sanctuary Movement,” Camille Bianca Manangan. October 3, 2018. <https://www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/korean-american-sanctuary-church-movement-736>

in the U.S.²⁹ A recent study by the Center for Migration Studies finds that Trump Era policies have increased demand for services by Catholic faith-based organizations, but that fear of deportation is impeding participation (Kerwin & Nicholson 2019). However, while research has revealed the civic function of the ethnic church for the integration of Korean immigrant community at large, the extent to which the church plays a role in the everyday lived experiences of the most marginalized of the immigrant community is less understood. Being connected to immigrant advocacy organizations helps cultivate a sense of belonging and empowerment among undocumented young people (Vaquera et al 2017) but undocumented Asians are also less likely to find support through these community organizations (Gonzales et al 2014). Invisible illegality, is, therefore, a double-edged sword for undocumented Asians. Possessing at least some capacity to “look away” from their immigration situation, as Sangwoo described, allows them to hide from being recognized as a deportable criminal and stigmatized “illegal” by enforcement officers, friends, and others. However, it also keeps them hidden from resources that could be instrumental to their overall well-being. Without institutional supports, undocumented immigrants of Asian origin will continue to be elided not only of material resources but of trusted confidants, community, and a sense of belonging. Particularly for these individuals who are on the ethnoracial periphery of the undocumented population, finding social support and a sense of collective identity is critical for sound psychological and mental-emotional health.

²⁹ The Bishops of the U.S. and the Bishops of Mexico collaboratively wrote a statement called “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope” / “Juntos en el Camino de la Esperanza Ya no Somos Extranjeros” on the pressing need for immigration reform in 2003.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

Undocumented immigrants of Asian origin occupy a unique social location in the United States because what “illegal” conjures in the American consciousness is not what “Asian” looks like. They must navigate and negotiate master tropes with dissonant images and valences. On one hand, they live in a context where they are primarily racialized as non-threatening “model minorities” leading to perceptions of success, achievement, and docility (e.g, Lee 1994, 2015; Osajima 1988; Wong et al 1998). However, simultaneously, they carry the burden of their criminalized undocumented immigration status but this status, and both the stigma and burden that come with it, is invisible. Not only is legal status undetectable to the naked eye, unlike race or gender, but Asians do not fall into the racial imagery of an “illegal immigrant” that is conflated with “Mexican” (e.g., Chavez 2008). Living in the U.S. as someone who is Asian and undocumented is, in essence, a double-edged sword.

By exploring the understudied experience of contemporary Asian undocumented immigrants, my dissertation shows the ways in which residing at this race-legality intersection uniquely informs the bounds and parameters within which they navigate and negotiate their relationships with themselves and others. My findings reveal the far-reaching consequences of racialization by juxtaposing the lived experiences of Asian and Latinx undocumented young adults, highlighting that undocumented Asian immigrants experience *invisible illegality*.

Race operates to simultaneously protect Asian undocumented young adults from and expose them to the precarious nature of their immigration status, and these mechanisms vary across institutional and relational contexts. Specifically, I highlight racialized interactions with four key sets of actors: state agents, friends, other undocumented immigrants, and co-ethnic community members. Asian undocumented young adults experience their deportability with more “abstract anxiety” than “experiential fear,” because ascriptions given to their appearance do not fall into the stereotypical character profile that immigration enforcement targets. As such they are more likely to be able to lead their lives without a stark confrontation of one of the most dehumanizing aspects of illegality. Intergroup boundaries constructed by both Asian and Latinx respondents due to prevailing monolithic racialized perceptions of who is undocumented also renders undocumented Asians “different.” Having an exceptional sense of illegality could prevent them from accessing institutionalized supports for the undocumented population. They also more readily hide their legal situation from others, including good friends, contributing to a greater sense of isolation and shame. Being both Asian and undocumented therefore leads to a unique position of invisible illegality that is produced by multiple co-constitutive processes of racialization. Through these interactions, differential experiences and processes unfold to together contribute to the construction of invisible illegality for young Asian undocumented immigrants.

These findings have several significant implications for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers aiming to understand and address diverse experiences of illegality conditioned by the landscape of racialization in the U.S. With undocumented immigrants of Asian origin beginning to outpace

those of Mexican origin in terms of growth, engaging in this work is particularly timely and critical.

Empirical and Theoretical Contributions

First, my findings offer a few important contributions to sociological literature on race and immigration. Immigration incorporation scholars have historically studied the integration pathways of immigrants by focusing on the effects of demographic markers such as race, educational background, and income in isolation. Only in recent years have scholars begun to examine how citizenship and immigration status mediates trajectories of incorporation, and, in doing so, they have almost exclusively focused on 1.5-generation Latinx youth and young adults.

By conducting a comparative analysis of Asian and Latino undocumented young adults, my work holds empirical leverage in shedding light on how the legal context of reception intersects with the racial context of reception to shape their pathways of incorporation. Furthermore, by honing in on lives of Asian undocumented young adults, a community that has existed on the demographic and discursive periphery of the undocumented population, I extend and nuance our understanding of what it means to be undocumented in the U.S. today. Scholars are beginning to reveal that lived experiences of undocumented youth and young adults vary by race and ethnicity. Asian undocumented young adults are less likely to find a sense of belonging and participate in undocumented activist movements and advocacy organizations (Dao 2017; Zepeda-Millan 2014), more likely to leverage direct and indirect DACA benefits once becoming DACAmented (although they are less likely to apply) (Buenavista 2013; Gonzales, Terriquez & Ruszczyk 2014), and less likely to find social support from co-ethnic peer networks (Cho forthcoming; Patler 2016) although ethnic networks are instrumental for finding employment (Cho 2017).

While it is important for research to further explore how the incorporation of undocumented immigrants varies by ethnoracial background, the field has yet to critically examine the impact of their racialized identities in particular on these day-to-day experiences of illegality (Asad & Clair 2018; Patler 2014). My work therefore contributes to our understandings of diverse undocumented young adults by centering their racial context of reception, that is, the role of racialization processes in the U.S., in shaping these lived experiences. Race arguably remains the most defining organizing axis of social life in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Omi & Winant 1994), and given, the conflation of race and “illegal immigrant” status in this country, it is apparent that we cannot understand one without the other. I have shown that the degree and character of the impact of legal status varies across contexts for Asian and Latinx undocumented immigrants precisely due to the ways Asian and Latinx communities have been racialized in this country.

One in five Korean immigrants, one in six Filipino, one in six Chinese, and one in six Vietnamese immigrants are undocumented (Hoefer, Rytina & Baker 2012), and the numbers are more concentrated in the states of California, New York, and Texas (Gelatt & Zong 2018). Given that a consequential proportion of the Asian community at large lives without legal immigration status, our understanding of the undocumented population in our country would be much more comprehensive and robust if our scholarship reflected the vast heterogeneity of the population. Scholars have explored how the consequences of illegality change over time, over one’s life

course, across space and place, by age at arrival, gender, etc. By examining the intersection of race and legal status, my research builds on this scholarship, illuminating how illegality is refracted through the prism of racialization in the U.S.

Second, in focusing on the lives of young undocumented immigrants, much of what we know concerns their experiences within the educational system and the transition into the labor market as they enter adulthood. Despite the evidence-based significance of schooling in social incorporation, it is critical to recognize that their lives go beyond their academic and educational experiences. That is, immigration status has deep-seated and long-lasting consequences that are often neglected in broader discourse. My work therefore also contributes to the youth illegality literature by broadening our understanding of their identities beyond that of students. My findings on their self-perception of deportability, their friendships and patterns of status disclosure, and their sense of collective belonging provide a more complex and holistic representation of the insidious impacts of undocumented immigration status. The implications of these findings also reach beyond the field of illegality, extending to and informing scholarship on intergroup relations, social networks, and religious organizations.

Third, by taking an intersectional approach to the study of illegality and centering the lives of 1.5-generation Asian undocumented young adults, I extend Erving Goffman's theories of passing and stigma management. Goffman made a distinction between how social stigmas that are detectable to the naked eye and those that are not are managed. Undocumented immigration status is an invisible stigma in contemporary society that is stereotypically associated with visible attributes, and these race- and color-based characteristics are incongruent with dominant racialized tropes surrounding Asian Americans. Simply put, undocumented Asians are able to manage the invisible stigma of their immigration status differently because their visible identity as "model minorities." I have shown that being able to doubly "pass" as legal due to their identities as acculturated 1.5-generation immigrants and their identities as Asian significantly shapes their everyday lives. My work therefore underscores how the ways in which one navigates stigma is as much about other prominent identity markers as it is about the visibility or perceptibility of the stigma itself. This unique intersection, in turn, shapes how one protects oneself from its potential harmful effects. My research contributes to long-standing conversations about social stigma and expands avenues for further research on marginalized communities navigating diverse manifestations of invisible-visible intersectional identities.

In sum, my research highlights not only how race intersects with legal status to lead to different burdens of illegality, but furthermore how the racialization of undocumented status is a powerful mechanism that produces and reproduces the broader stratified landscape of our society. Legal status and citizenship have re-emerged as consequential axes of inequality. In recent years the residency status of immigrants with documentation has been threatened, even leading to the deportation of individuals who have legally resided in the United States for decades. Being undocumented and living in mixed-status families have been shown to have long-lasting detrimental inter-generational effects, shaping socioeconomic, educational, and cognitive, developmental trajectories. This work therefore has broad and exigent applicability in the field of sociology, from our understanding of race and stigma to immigrant incorporation and social inequality.

Looking Ahead in Policy and Practice

The restrictionist Trump administration has changed the political climate into a more hostile one for immigrants, and liminally legal immigrants in particular. However, given that this study presents a story of majority college-educated, DACAmented, Korean and Mexican young adults from the relatively pro-immigrant state of California where there is a density and diversity of ethnic groups, the experiential patterns captured could be considered the “best case scenario” for undocumented youth and young adults in the country.

In light of these contextual realities, I will highlight a few broader implications of my dissertation beyond academic discourse.

First, we must take seriously that individual lives are shaped by multiple, intersecting social processes and institutional entities. The same mechanisms of racialization that may provide relative protection to those who are “invisible” to immigration enforcement also renders them unseen and unreached by potentially valuable institutional and organizational actors. Relatively speaking, Asian undocumented young adults seldom encounter threats to their personal safety but being a significant minority of the undocumented population also often connotes exclusion from shared narratives in broader discourse, intensifying feelings of shame and stigmatization and perpetuating a sense of exceptionalism perpetuated by both themselves and Latinx undocumented immigrants.

With scholars illuminating that the most positive mechanism to foster overall social and emotional well-being among undocumented young adults is membership in immigrant advocacy organizations (Vaquera et al 2017), it is critically important that undocumented immigrants of non-Latinx origin are further supported so these minority populations find such spaces and opportunities for empowerment and belonging as well. Federal and state agencies and organizations must invest funds into widening access to government services and programs by ensuring that diverse Asian populations are adequately supported. The lack of utilization of public programs among Asian immigrant communities is not a new problem. What is evident, however, is that many undocumented immigrants of Asian origin will continue to struggle in silence if they face challenges in learning about and accessing vital resources. Only a disproportionate fraction of DACA-eligible Chinese and Korean undocumented youth and young adults actually applied for the program. While the underlying mechanisms remain speculative, improved circulation of information in their languages of origin would likely have increased application rates. Although those who directly benefit from DACA are U.S.-raised American English speakers, my research shows that many of these young people found out about DACA through their parents, who in turn learned of the program from ethnic language media. Translating materials into the top most spoken Asian languages among undocumented immigrants (Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog) and having trained, informed interpreters at state and federal agencies such as USCIS Application Support Centers, would facilitate communication and access for undocumented minorities.

Second, these findings also have significant implications for the work of community-based and faith-based organizations. Ethnic CBOs often suffer from a dearth of human and financial

resources, therefore unable to continue forging such institutional ties. Government entities and funders must recognize the diversity of the undocumented population and the associated diversity of needs and circumstances of these different communities, and then invest in non-profit organizations that directly interface with the individuals they aim to reach. For instance, Korean community-based organizations have made great efforts to partner with local Korean ethnic churches to educate their communities on various services and resources available from the existence of DACA to college scholarships, but often battle severe hurdles due to a lack of awareness, interest, and investment by religious organizational leaders. Some Korean American churches are also beginning to create alliances in support of their undocumented community members.³⁰ By developing collaborative partnerships with local and state government, Korean immigrant churches may have a greater capacity to engage in tangible efforts that would support their undocumented members, making the church more of a haven and resource rather than a space of subtle hostility and exclusion, and thereby contributing to the overall mental and emotional well-being of less resourced, more socially disadvantaged individuals in the community.

Third, institutions of higher education must develop more targeted outreach efforts to reach undocumented Asian students. In the University of California system, for example, roughly half of the undocumented student population is of Asian origin but the individuals walking through the doors of undocumented student support centers are predominantly Latinx (UC Berkeley 2013). My research has revealed that relationships built from these organized support communities can dispel myths and stereotypes about racially categorized groups in addition to cultivating a sense of belonging and community. By conceiving of creative ways to welcome Asian origin undocumented students that would minimize shame and exposure, higher education officers can reach the full spectrum of undocumented young adults on their campuses. Professors of stratification, migration, and racial/ethnic relations can also participate in these efforts by ensuring that assigned readings address intersections of illegality and the associated diversity of lived experiences, simultaneously dismantling entrenched monolithic perceptions about “illegal immigrants” and ameliorating personal feelings of isolation and loneliness.

To put it succinctly, any practitioner who may interact with immigrants without legal status must be cognizant of the cultural and linguistic diversity of undocumented immigrants. Whether you are a teacher, a nurse, or a lawyer, consider that there are non-Latinx undocumented immigrants who can benefit from extant policies and programs as well as your attentive support and guidance. This is particularly imperative in our current historical moment. While scholarship has shown disproportionate removal rates among the Latinx community, recent journalistic accounts detail targeted raids of Asian immigrants. Cambodian and Vietnamese immigrants, many who have resided in the U.S. legally for many years, are now facing threats of detention and deportation, with dozens of individuals having already been forcibly removed in the last couple of years (e.g., Dooling 2019).

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/SanctuaryChurchNetwork/>
<https://www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/korean-american-sanctuary-church-movement-736>

In detailing potential courses of action among practitioners and policymakers, this work ultimately reveals the insidious effects of undocumented status that temporary and local remedies such as DACA, in-state tuition, and driver's licenses cannot rectify. While strides have been made to provide critical opportunities for employment and higher education for 1.5-generation undocumented youth and young adults, these policies and programs cannot bring sustained relief to the myriad ways in which status constrains their feelings of safety and security, the trajectories of their personal relationships, and their overall mental-emotional well-being. Immigration status is indeed a personal matter, but the solution extends far beyond the personal. Illegality is a sociolegal construction of the state that has deeply personal and deeply private implications for millions of vulnerable lives.

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APPENDIX A: Methodological Appendix

Conducting research on undocumented immigrants is a multi-faceted ethical and political issue. First, I believe it is a moral imperative for social scientists to study and understand who are arguably among the most disenfranchised populations of our country. Second, in shedding light on these members of the community, who are our neighbors, our students, our coworkers, our housekeepers, and our employers, we must flip the script. Comprehensive immigration reform must also involve comprehensive discursive reform that ceases to dehumanize, homogenize, and normalize the “illegal immigrant.” Third, in this particular investigative endeavor in which the “human subjects” occupy a delicate position in the legal-political landscape of American society, the ethics of the research process becomes of foremost importance. Here I therefore describe in detail how I grappled with each stage of the research process, as I wrestled with my own social location relative to those I sought to get to know.

I am a Korean American heterosexual, cis gender, female child of immigrants born and raised in California, a beneficiary of the jus soli policy of the United States. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I tried to consider how my positionality in relation to Korean and Mexican young adult respondents would affect their experiences, namely, their willingness to participate in the study, their engagement with me and my interview questions, particularly their level of comfort, ease, transparency, and openness. From initial email contact to the conclusion of the in-person interview, I asked myself the following: What role does my positionality (especially as a citizen and as an Asian American) assume in studying the experiences of undocumented immigrants? How does my positionality influence the interactions I have with undocumented Koreans? How does it influence my interactions with undocumented Mexicans? In multiple aspects of my identity, I am incredibly privileged, which I felt could potentially lead to guardedness and satisficing on the part of respondents.

To mitigate these effects on the “data” and demonstrate my scholar-activist stance, I employed a few strategies: explaining the motivation for my project which was activated by my friends’ receipt of DACA benefits, exhibiting a warm and friendly demeanor, using colloquial language for the interview, not printing out any research materials and receiving oral consent (and explaining why) as to not leave a paper trail, and identifying myself as a graduate student at UC Berkeley. With Mexican origin respondents, I found myself instinctively amplifying these approaches. However, my first few interactions revealed that in reality it was Korean respondents who needed more assurance that their information was safe with me, as they were much more likely to be “in the shadows.” Overall, it seemed that my being a young woman of color from Berkeley, California worked towards my advantage in building trust and rapport in my interviews with undocumented young adults. I sensed that I was generally perceived to be a peer, most likely from being in a similar age group, having aligned political views when it comes to immigration, and sharing the experience of being a child of immigrants. Furthermore, many respondents were highly educated, so while none of them were getting a doctorate degree, they were somewhat familiar with academia. Ultimately, therefore, my being a peer in many senses appeared to allow respondents to feel more comfortable and transparent during the interview.

Conception of the Project

When I entered graduate school, I knew that my research interests were at the intersection for race/ethnicity and (im)migration but was still open to the exact line of research that I would immerse myself in for a large chunk of the subsequent years. That year was 2012 – an incredibly important one for immigration. In response to the years of persistent efforts of many immigrant rights activists, President Barack Obama announced Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) on June 15, 2012, and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) began accepting applications two months later on August 15th. DACA’s termination was announced by the Trump Administration in September of 2017, but in the five years of its active operation, it granted two years of renewable protection from deportation and work authorization for hundreds of thousands of young people who had grown up in the U.S. but did not have legal residency status. (Current beneficiaries are still able to apply for renewal, thanks to judicial action by the courts.)

It was in these first few months of DACA that I was also beginning to delve into the literature on immigration in one of my courses that fall semester. A couple of friends from my hometown in Southern California shared with me their excitement over DACA - this long awaited opportunity that did not offer the more permanent security that so many had been fighting for, but was an opportunity nonetheless. Hearing my friends talk to me about their plans for school and work and a future that now seemed to be slightly more within grasp, I noticed a discrepancy between their narratives and the ones I was reading in the literature. The stories and experiences of my Asian American undocumented friends were not reflected in the articles I came across in academic journals of sociology. While the vast majority of the undocumented population is of Latino descent, it was clear though that the issue extended beyond this community. How did undocumented young people in the Asian American community navigate and negotiate their status when they were not only far from being perceived as “illegal immigrants,” but were in fact seen as “model minorities” in the U.S.? As my own taken-for-granted conceptions of illegality were being challenged as I got into deeper conversations with my friends about their journeys, it was at this point that I resolved to join other scholars, advocates, and activists in the work of excavating and unearthing those voices that were peripheral to the conversation.

Research Site and Study Cases

This study was conducted in the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Areas of California, where I was doing my graduate studies. California is the state with the largest share of immigrants with unauthorized legal status in the United States, home to approximately 3,034,000 undocumented immigrants or almost a quarter of the total number of undocumented immigrants in the country (Migration Policy Institute 2014). Of the 3 million undocumented immigrants residing in CA, 70% are from Mexico (about 2 million), 3% are from China (82,000), and 2% are from South Korea (63,000). California is home to 336,000 Korean immigrants, which comprise 31% of the total number of Korean immigrants in the U.S. (Migration Policy Institute 2014). Moreover, it has been the primary destination for both Korean and Mexican immigrants, with a third of all Korean undocumented immigrants as well as a third of all Mexican undocumented immigrants in the U.S. having settled in CA. While in absolute numbers there are more undocumented immigrants from China than South Korea, statistics also show that nearly half (44%) of the South Korean unauthorized population in CA are DACA eligible, while it is

much less (31%) for the Chinese origin population. With my interest being Asian undocumented young adults, who fall within the age parameters of DACA, I inferred that it would be more appropriate to investigate the case of the Korean population in California than the Chinese for the purposes of my research questions. Being Korean myself and having greater access to the Korean American community also facilitated recruitment, which is important given the vulnerable nature of the sample population.

Recruiting Hard-To-Reach Populations

Because my study population is a hard-to-reach and vulnerable population due to their tenuous legal circumstances, I conducted snowball sampling to recruit participants. In doing so, however, I was inspired by respondent-driven sampling (RDS), which is a technique that attempts to achieve diversity in a non-random hard-to-reach sample (Heckathorn 1997). Many studies on undocumented youth and young adults draw on study samples recruited from community-based organizations and activist groups. With the desire and goal of capturing individuals who have not taken this bold step of organizational involvement, I did not reach out to activist or advocacy agencies. I eventually did end up with a few respondents who had been involved in student groups and/or local organizations for undocumented immigrants, but they were reached through individual referrals.

I carefully drafted a call for recruitment that was as clear and concise and inviting as possible. I then began selectively reaching out to a broad network of friends and colleagues, who spanned socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and asking them to pass along information about my study to anyone who would be eligible and interested. This recruitment method yielded respondents who did not have a college degree, were working more physically laborious jobs, and appeared more reticent about being interviewed.

To my surprise, I also unexpectedly got connected to potential respondents through casual conversations at various gatherings completely unrelated to the topic of my study. By simply sharing about myself and my work, individuals would offer to help with recruitment by connecting me with people they know who happen to be undocumented. At one happy hour with a lot of techies, the last place where I thought I would find a contact, one conversant “came out” about his status to me and volunteered to be interviewed. As expected, respondents who I found through this unintended method, in addition to the connections I made through my closer network ties, yielded respondents who tended to be more highly educated.

At the end of each interview, both verbally and by following up via email, I always asked for referrals. The vast majority of the time, respondents would tell me that they would be able to refer an individual or two. What was interesting, however, is that with Korean respondents, it would often not culminate in a successful referral. A few Korean respondents followed up by telling me that the persons they had in mind did not feel comfortable doing the interview after all. Two of these potential participants were siblings of respondents who were also undocumented. Recruiting undocumented Korean young adults, therefore, was much more challenging than undocumented Mexican young adults, not only because of the sheer difference

in numbers, but also due to the fact that Koreans seemed less likely to be open to participating in a research study even if they were asked by someone they knew.

From the call for recruitment to the post-interview thank you note, I took intentional steps, whatever was in my power and control, to mitigate harm on study respondents. I tried to make sure that (potential) study respondents always felt a sense of agency and safety, that the ball was always in their court. In the steps leading up to the face-to-face interview, I employed a few strategies to minimize coercion, including (1) asking them to choose a date, time, and location that was most convenient and comfortable for them, (2) giving them my mobile number but not ask for theirs, (3) sending them the interview guide in advance, so they were fully aware of what to expect, and (4) offering to address any and all questions and concerns before the interview. When study respondents had other potential participants in mind, I asked them to check with the individuals and pass along my information, so that contact would be initiated by them and not myself.

Interviewing Vulnerable Populations: Comfort and Confidentiality

I carried these efforts into my face-to-face interactions and interviews with study participants as well, trying to center the safety and ease of respondents throughout the process without compromising the primary research objective of the meeting. (A brief note: I often get asked if my interviews were in Korean or Spanish, or in English. Since I focused on undocumented youth and young adults who migrated as children with their parents, they are generally linguistically and culturally indistinguishable from their native counterparts.)

First, I made a lot of effort to minimize a paper trail that could potentially be used to identify the respondents. I printed out consent forms, but did not collect any signatures. Respondents were asked to give oral consent, which was audio-recorded.

Initially I had respondents fill out a paper demographic survey which included identity markers such as age, birthday, place of birth, etc. I had not included “name,” but only an option to write down a preferred pseudonym. However, a few interviews in I realized that, had I somehow misplaced the sheets, the information available collectively could still be sufficient for anyone with malicious intentions to track the individuals and their communities down. Therefore, I switched to bringing my laptop, having them fill out the form electronically, and saving these documents in a password-protected folder instead.

Second, while I had purchased a highly-rated digital audio recorder off Amazon for interview recording purposes, I was concerned that the recorder would attract the attention of bystanders, placing respondents in a compromising situation. From conversations with other colleagues, it was clear that having such a conspicuous recording device on the table not only could make respondents feel unsafe and uncomfortable, but that this could in turn affect “the data” collected. To ensure the ease of respondents and that our interviews felt as much like free-flowing conversations as possible, I therefore chose to use a recording app on my smartphone instead. From the very step of saving the audio recording onto my phone to transcription files, I used respondent IDs that I had created for anonymity purposes.

Third, I began each interview by making some small talk and conversation. By getting to know the respondent a little outside of the interview schedule, I aimed to build rapport and trust and convey my care and concern for them as a human being outside of merely being a research participant. A few minutes at the start of establishing a conversational rhythm allowed the actual interview to go more smoothly and effectively.

Establishing rapport and facilitating comfort while maintaining a professional interviewer role was not easy, especially given the difficult topics that frequently came up. My advisor Irene Bloemraad would remind me that I am a researcher, not a therapist. Despite the temptation to ask tangential questions or to respond with words of sympathy and compassion, I instead would make an effort to convey my feelings through intent listening and strategic follow-up questions. For example, when a respondent shared about a very challenging period in their lives, I would respond with a question such as “Did you have anyone in your life support you as you went through these hard times?” This response implicitly demonstrates care while simultaneously eliciting more information.

Interview respondents took their safety and comfort in their own hands as well. One Korean male respondent called me first to ask me questions about my research goals and the interview process. It was very evident to me even from our short phone call that there was at least a hint of trepidation around talking to a complete stranger about his legal situation. I recall his telling me over the phone that he feels “like a criminal.” Another respondent, also a Korean male, requested that we converse over an online chatting platform; even the phone felt too exposed for him. While Google Chat was not an ideal mode of interviewing, I appreciated his desire to share his experiences with me despite his reservations, and I wanted to ensure that he felt completely at ease. And one Mexican female respondent brought along a family member for the interview. The relative’s presence most likely affected the interviewer’s responses. However, I believe that it actually facilitated the rapport-building process, allowing the interviewee to talk with me more openly and vulnerably.

Incentives

I waffled quite a bit regarding offering incentives to study participants. Is any amount “enough” compensation for the time and energy these individuals were volunteering? I could not imagine placing a numerical value on the risks they may have taken to be vulnerable and share their story to a complete stranger. For the first several respondents I treated them to coffee or tea, as we typically met at a café for the interview. However, it did not sit well with me that I could not offer more. After a few conversations with other researchers and undocumented friends about their thoughts on the matter, I decided to provide \$25 electronic gift cards to Starbucks or Amazon (giving them the choice) as a small token of my gratitude. While I noticed a slight increase in interest in study participation, it is difficult to say whether the incentives actually made recruitment easier. Interviewees in general appeared to be primarily motivated by the broader goal of the study, seeing the importance of the research project and the need for a diversity of voices and narratives to be understood. A few respondents declined the gift card, saying that they were simply happy to help and appreciated having their experiences heard.

Quick Tips for Future Researchers

In closing, these are ten recommendations for researchers of undocumented youth and young adults, based on the lessons that I learned through my years of engaging in this work.

- 1) Check your motivations, and check them again: Are you conducting research to serve yourself or serve the population you are examining?
- 2) Be mindful and aware of your social location and how it could impact your interactions with your data, from recruitment and interviewing to analysis and writing
- 3) Remember that study participants are not just research subjects but humans
- 4) Be sensitive but don't be condescending; undocumented immigrants are marginalized in our society, but there is more to their identities and experiences than their immigration status
- 5) Minimize coercion and discomfort by inviting them into the research process, allowing respondents to choose interview parameters and offering to share research findings
- 6) Be grateful to study respondents and show it with authenticity
- 7) Convey empathy and care while focusing on the research tasks and objectives at hand
- 8) Remove all identifying information as early in the data collection process as possible
- 9) Resist the temptation to counsel during the interview
- 10) Instead, lastly, embed sympathy and compassion in the interview process, such as the way you transition to and formulate follow-up questions