UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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An Asset Based Approach to the Mental Health of Undocumented College Students

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

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2024

DEDICATION

To
my mother
my sisters
and *mi abuela* Tina for always taking care of us

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Protecting your mental health is a practice that requires you to commit to the healing of both you and your community. This is a lesson that I learned from the undocumented college students that shared their stories with me throughout the past ten years. They not only disclosed their personal challenges that they have experienced, but they also entrusted in me with their optimism and motivation to work towards a brighter future. They taught me that holding and having hope is a task that requires us all to have empathy towards each other, practice humility considering the struggles of our ancestors, and make a commitment to improve the spaces we are a part of. This meant that collaboration and communication with the undocumented student community was essential to ensure that research translated into practice that could uplift our marginalized community of students. This dissertation was inspired and guided by this powerful community of undocumented college students.

This research was supported financially by various entities. I want to thank the Eugene-Cota Robles Fellowship at UCI, and the Ford Foundation for providing me pre-dissertation fellowships that facilitated my transition into graduate school as a first-generation graduate student which allowed me to focus on my research. I would also like to thank the UCI DREAM Center for awarding me a fellowship that gave me the opportunity to translate my research findings into programming that has now become institutionalized in the space. Finally, I am grateful to the Spencer Foundation/National Academy of Education who awarded me a dissertation fellowship that further allowed for me to work on this project.

My advisor, Laura E. Enriquez and I met sometime in 2015, when I enthusiastically (and naively) suggested that along with other students we should pursue a research project assessing undocumented student program usage and availability at all 9 undergraduate UC campuses. For

some reason, she agreed. Despite the trials and tribulations of undertaking an expansive research project – the long hours, the difficulties in securing funding, the patience to mentor graduate and undergraduate students, the undergraduates demanding her time (mostly me) – she presented me with the idea of pursuing a doctoral degree. While I was hesitant, here we are seven years later. Her expertise and mentorship arguably are the reason that this dissertation project is complete and cohesive. She asked difficult and critical questions that encouraged me to reflect on how to strengthen the project. She was willing to listen to my ideas but more importantly she was committed to supporting these ideas in hopes that they would come to fruition. This dissertation is but one illustration of her dedication to mentoring women of color scholars and ensuring that they produce meaningful and important research.

This project was further guided by a dissertation committee of female scholars. Annie Ro's mentorship began while I was an undergraduate; her expertise on health disparities among immigrants shaped my approach to studying mental health among a legally vulnerable group of students. Kristin Turney has enthusiastically supported me since the first time I met with her and expressed wanting to study mental health among undocumented college students. Rachel Goldberg's introspective questions on inequality and health greatly enhanced my work. Irene Vega's socio-legal lens shaped the dissertation's focus to investigate how socio-legal contexts shape mental health. Finally, I wish to acknowledge Lisette Moran Del Villar, Aura Navarro, Alejandra Garcia Ceja, Jazmin Serrano Martinez, and Giovanni Tovar who provided research assistance. It was a privilege to work with you and learn from you all.

When I began my undergraduate studies at UCI in 2013, I had absolutely no idea that I would remain here for next decade. I want to thank Ruby Solórzano-Guerrero, James Espinoza, and Claudia Verduzco Hernandez for their critical and unconditional support during my final

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Arriving to UCI, I was quickly intimidated by the movement and feel of a large public research university. Thankfully, I met the amazing community of allies and undocumented college students at UCI that made me feel like I had a home away from home. I want to give thanks to Andrea Mora (my UCI *madre*), Boonyarit Daraphant, Diana Soto-Vazquez, Alejandra Jeronimo, Edelina Burciaga, and Anita Casavantes Bradford who all encouraged and inspired me to continue in my studies. Being a student at UC campus allowed for me to meet amazing women at other UC campuses who were committed to uplifting other undocumented students and making the UC a more inclusive space for undocumented and immigration impacted students. I want to give special thanks to Cristina Echeverria Palencia and Mariel Islas Lopez for their friendship, support, and seamless ability to be caring and empathetic towards others.

I owe many thanks to my UCI community and support system throughout my graduate studies. First, I must acknowledge Nalya Rodriguez, my cohort mate who was my main support throughout my early years in my program. I have the upmost admiration for her as a scholar and I am thankful to have had such a supportive peer during the more difficult years. Second, I want to thank Janelle Levy and Liliana Ramirez whom I began graduate school with and have witnessed them flourish into insightful and upstanding scholars. Their friendship got me through the toughest of times. Third, the intellectuals, practitioners, and organizers at the UCI DREAM Center - Angela Chuan-Ru Chen, Joseph Labagnao Ligunas, Diana Carreño Gomez, and Barbara Martinez-Neda – challenged me to think about how to approach my research and helped me

imagine mechanisms in which the research could best service the undocumented student community on campus. Lastly, Jenniffer Perez Lopez, Jose Gutierrez, Elisabet Barrios Dugenia, Darnell Calderon, and Barbara Pham all provided feedback on drafts of dissertation chapters, articles, and my job talk.

While I had a vast support system at UCI, I also had an array of support from colleagues off-campus. I first want to recognize Josefina Flores Morales who has supported me from the inception of this project to completing the final draft of the dissertation. She remained consistent and present throughout our working sessions where she would help me refine my ideas and arguments, exchanged feedback on materials, delivered honest advice, and even provided emotional support. I uniquely got to pursue my graduate studies alongside friends from my undergraduate studies. I must give thanks to Yareli Castro Sevilla, Daisy Vazquez Vera, and Miroslava Guzman Perez. I am blessed to have you all in my life. I could not have made it this far without you. Special thanks for Christian Gonzalez Reyes who provided support and feedback during my final years of graduate school. Finally, I wish to acknowledge Kim Fernandes and Javier Muñoz who have been with me either in-person or virtually as I have completed this dissertation. Without their willingness to hold me accountable, I believe I would not have finished.

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VITA

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EDUCATION

M.A. Sociology, University of California Irvine 2019

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SELECT PUBLICATIONS

Articles

Morales Hernandez, Martha, Josefina Flores Morales, and Laura E. Enriquez. "Centering Agency: Examining the Relationship between Acts of Resistance, Anxiety, and Depression Among Undocumented College Students." *Society and Mental Health* (2024): 21568693241241296.

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SELECT FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Fellowships

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Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship	2020-2023
UCI Dream Center Graduate Student Fellowship	2018–2019
UCI Eugene Cota Robles Fellowship	2017-2024

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UCI Latino Excellence and Achievement Award, Graduate Student Excellence 2020

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UCI Lauds & Laurels Outstanding Undergraduate Student 2017

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2024

"Centering Agency: Examining the Relationship Between Acts of Resistance, Anxiety, and Depression Among Undocumented College Students" at the American Educational Research Association meeting. *April 2024.*

2023

"'It's a rollercoaster": Legal Vulnerabilities' Effects on the Mental Health of Undocumented College Students" at the American Sociological Association meeting. *August 2023.*

2022

"'It's a Rollercoaster': Mapping the Consequences of Legal Insecurities and Uncertainties on the Mental Health of Undocumented College Students" at the California Sociological Association meeting. Online. *November 2022.*

"Examining the Role of Resistance on Emotional Distress and Psychological Well-being of Undocumented College Students" at the American Sociological Association meeting. Los Angeles, CA. *August 2022.*

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"The Complex and Multi-Dimensional Nature of Psychological Well-Being of CSU and UC Undocumented Students" at the Pacific Sociological Association meeting. Online. *March 2021*.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

An Asset-Based Approach to the Mental Health of Undocumented College Students

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Associate Professor Laura E. Enriquez, Chair

My dissertation, "An Asset-Based Approach to the Mental Health of Undocumented Students" is a three article-based dissertation that examines how undocumented students experience their mental health and promote their psychological wellbeing in an exclusionary and unpredictable socio-legal context. I address the following questions: 1) How do undocumented students experience emotional distress and psychological wellbeing? 2) How do undocumented students practice agency to promote psychological wellbeing? and 3) To what extent is engaging in acts of resistance associated with emotional distress, measured as anxiety and depression? To answer these questions, I conducted 66 in-depth interviews and analyzed a unique survey data set composed of 1,277 Californian undocumented college students. I argue that, despite a multitude of legal barriers and vulnerabilities, undocumented students practice agency to protect their wellbeing. While previous work has highlighted undocumented students' poor mental health outcomes, I take an asset-based approach to illustrate how undocumented college students take action to manage their mental health and promote their psychological wellbeing. Throughout, I advance the concept of *acts of resistance* to capture undocumented students' agency in navigating and contesting their structural marginalization.

My first chapter establishes the process through which undocumented students experience coexisting feelings of emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. I build on my interviewees' descriptions of their mental health as a rollercoaster to illustrate how this process is shaped by both the socio-legal context and students' agency. I find that as students confront their legal realities, they experience emotional distress which leads them into downward motions (i.e., spirals and plunges). These downward motions are comprised of students' feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty. However, students promote their psychological wellbeing by employing their agency which in turn allows for them to experience upward motions. Student agency encompasses students drawing strength from their undocumented immigration status, and envisioning opportunities for themselves to experience upward motions or psychological wellbeing. Yet, these emotions collide because of structural constraints of the socio-legal context, leaving students feeling like they are in a perpetual rollercoaster ride. Contrary to prior research which has focused on adverse mental health outcomes, this manuscript sheds light on the multidimensional nature of mental health and shows how it is shaped by socio-legal barriers.

My second chapter examines the agentic actions employed by students to resist structural constraints and foster their psychological wellbeing. I find that students utilize undocumented student programs on their campus, engage in political actions, expand their critical consciousness, and practice self-care to mitigate the negative consequences associated with their legal status. These actions promote wellbeing by demystifying the constraints imposed by exclusionary immigration policy and helping students reframe their negative thoughts. I conceptualize these efforts as acts of resistance, or actions taken to resist structural inequality and socio-legal barriers and theorize these as a unique dimension of the stress process. Whereas stress process theory focuses on coping actions as a critical pathway to protect mental health by

buffering against the effect of stressors, acts of resistance are unique actions taken to mitigate legal vulnerabilities.

My third chapter is a quantitative analysis that examines undocumented students' political engagement, critical consciousness raising, and undocumented student programming usage to see if these acts of resistance are associated with mental health outcomes. I use 2020 survey data collected by the UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE), for which I served as a graduate student researcher allowing me to add measures of interest. Findings suggest that students who report higher political engagement and critical consciousness raising report higher depression and anxiety symptomatology. This work highlights that undocumented college students' efforts to navigate and contest their marginalization harms their mental health outcomes. The complete manuscript is published in *Society and Mental Health;* I am first author with co-authors Dr. Flores Morales who aided with data analysis at the revision stage and Dr. Enriquez who is PI on the UC PromISE study.

INTRODUCTION

> *"If you're a student and you don't have time to attend the organizing events, doing well in school is another form of resistance. Self-expression is another form of resistance. I feel like it's a good thing to resist, especially now." – Bryan*

I spoke with Bryan in 2017 shortly after the inauguration of former President Donald Trump. During our conversation, he discussed his exhaustion in pursuing higher education while experiencing multiple legal vulnerabilities such as experiencing financial insecurity because he does not have Social Security number to legally work or growing increasingly worrisome over deportation threats because of the state does not acknowledge him as lawfully present. Nonetheless, he also highlighted how he exercises his agency to resist this legal violence. I remain with the question: How does resistance fit into how we understand undocumented individuals' mental health experiences?

My dissertation focuses on undocumented young adults - individuals who migrated to the U.S. as children and are living in the country without permanent legal status. Of the estimated eleven million undocumented populations living in the U.S., there are approximately three million young adults (Zong et al. 2017). Like Bryan, these undocumented young adults attended K-12 educational institutions within the U.S.; however, upon transitioning into adulthood, they experience exclusion as their rights are less protected (Gonzales 2011). Experiencing these legal vulnerabilities have been shown to have significant implications for their mental health. found that anxiety was more prevalent among undocumented college students than their documented peers because of their status.

While previous work has highlighted undocumented students' poor mental health outcomes, I take an asset-based approach to illustrate how undocumented college students take

action to manage their mental health and promote their psychological wellbeing. Specifically, I investigate the relationship between psychological well-being and emotional distress. In doing so, I contribute to a more holistic understanding of their mental health experiences. Further, I consider how the socio-legal context contributes to these relationships.

My dissertation addresses the following questions:

1. How do undocumented students experience emotional distress and psychological wellbeing?

2. How do undocumented students practice agency to promote psychological wellbeing?

3. To what extent is engaging in acts of resistance associated with emotional distress, measured as anxiety and depression?

I argue that, despite a multitude of legal barriers and vulnerabilities, undocumented students practice agency to protect their wellbeing. I conceptualize these everyday actions taken to navigate and resist structural inequality as *acts of resistance.* My three substantive dissertation chapters elucidate this argument by 1) tracing the dynamic nature of their mental health, 2) enumerating the acts of resistance they practice, and 3) testing the association between three acts of resistance with anxiety and depression.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal Vulnerability as Detrimental for Mental Health

Preceding literature has identified that immigration status is consequential in determining mental health outcomes (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013, Suárez-Orozco

and López Hernández 2020). Specifically, immigration laws and policies dictate accessibility to resources for undocumented immigrants because they are not formally recognized as legal residents of the state which in turn subjugates them to experiencing legal vulnerabilities (Menjívar and Abrego 2012, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013). One such example of being barred from resources, is that lacking legal status can bar undocumented individuals from accessing medical or health care (Berk, Schur, Chavez and Frankel 2000). As such, experiencing legal vulnerability results in structural stressors which have negative consequences for the mental and physical health of undocumented immigrants (Ayón and Becerra 2013, Enriquez, Morales Hernandez and Ro 2018, Hacker et al. 2011, Hatzenbuehler et al. 2017, Philbin, Flake, Hatzenbuehler and Hirsch 2017).

A notable stressor associated with legal vulnerability is fears surrounding deportation. Undocumented individuals experience concerns of deportation or deportability as a result from not being recognized as legal residents which deems them removable from the state. This exclusion results in an increased sense of policing and fear of removal among undocumented immigrants (De Genova 2002). Among Latino families, anticipation and threat of a family member being detained or deported results in an increased sense of fear, and emotional distress (Ayón and Becerra 2013, Ayón 2014). Stressors of deportability manifests in their day to day lives as they take precautions to minimize the risk of being deported. These actions include choosing to not partake in social activities or refusing to travel (Menjívar 2011). Further, they can be directly consequential for health outcomes as undocumented communities have also been shown to skip medical appointments and overall receive less healthcare access in minimizing their travel and movement (Hacker et al. 2011).

Immigration laws and policies also restrict undocumented immigrants' lives because they cannot access legal employment. They have limited mechanisms to formally obtain a Social Security Number which complicates their ability to secure employment. As a result, individuals become vulnerable to experiencing being underpaid in their job(s) and enduring unsafe work conditions (Fussell 2011, Gleeson 2010). These financial strains can manifest to multiple stressors and ultimately compromise health outcomes (Chang 2019, Kopasker, Montagna and Bender 2018, Patler and Pirtle 2017)

Educational opportunities for undocumented individuals are also limited. Research has assessed the unique experience of illegality among undocumented young adults in the educational system as they benefit from inclusionary laws and policies that facilitate their incorporation into educational institutions which foster their senses of belonging (Abrego 2008, Gonzales, Heredia and Negrón-Gonzales 2015, Olivas 2012). Yet, academic barriers persist due to salient challenges created by their undocumented status (Abrego 2006, Enriquez 2011, Gonzales 2011). One example of a persisting academic barrier is limited or no access to financial aid due to not having legal status (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2015). Although recent work on undocumented students in California have demonstrated that the state's inclusive policy on financial aid and support has greatly alleviated financial strain, there are remaining challenges to fund educational expenses which results in heightened stress among students (Enriquez, Morales Hernandez, Millán and Vera 2019).

Factors that Buffer the Relationship Between Legal Vulnerability and Emotional Distress

Recent research has found that prevalence of emotional distress among undocumented young adults vary despite not obtaining permanent legal status. Specifically, distinct social locations have been investigated in their relation to legal vulnerability to provide explanations as

to why these variations exist. For instance, state context (Enriquez and Millán 2019, Enriquez, Vera and Ramakrishnan 2019, Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018) contributes to legal vulnerabilities being experienced differently because they impact accessibility to resources such as state financial aid to pursue a higher education or state identification/driver's licenses. This is also displayed in a recent study with undocumented college students from the University of California that found that among students concerns about deportation did not manifest for themselves, but rather for their families (Enriquez et al. 2019).

Obtaining a liminal legal status (Menjívar 2006), such as DACA, have also been shown to buffer the effects of legal vulnerability and in turn influence mental health outcomes. Patler and Pirtle (2017) found that among DACA beneficiaries, their work authorization reduced financial strains and deportation concerns which results in decreases in their stress (Venkataramani et al. 2017). Aligned with these findings, another study demonstrated that obtaining DACA allowed for beneficiaries to access more resources which in turn promoted feelings of belonging and engagement with peers (Siemons, Raymond-Flesh, Auerswald and Brindis 2017). Further, protections through the DACA program also fostered decreases in poverty (Pope 2016) and increases in employment (Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman 2016).

Research has established that accessing and utilizing social support serves as a buffer between the effects of stress and health outcomes (Pearlin 1989). Studies on undocumented students have reaffirmed this. For example, social support was found to serve as a protective factor against anxiety (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020). One such display of this, that among undocumented students in spaces of higher education, they rely on peers and mentors as sources of social support that in turn result in increased feelings of belonging and decreased senses of isolation (Gámez, Lopez and Overton 2017, Perez 2009). However, the extent to which

social support buffers the consequences of legal vulnerability on emotional distress is limited. Although a recent survey study of undocumented college students in California revealed that legal vulnerabilities (i.e., discrimination, social exclusion, financial insecurity) and social support have effects on depression and anxiety, there were limitations onto the moderating effects of social support (Velarde Pierce, Haro, Ayón and Enriquez 2021).

These buffers demonstrate the importance of not only federal policy, but also institutional and state policy. This is important to consider because they allude to how multiple contexts contribute to emotional distress and go beyond assessing individual characteristics that may be influencing mental health.

Examining Positive Health and Wellbeing

Although scholars have directed their attention to studying negative mental health outcomes among undocumented communities, it is now imperative to move toward examining positive mental health outcomes. Doing so would move beyond the assumption that positive psychological wellbeing cannot occur while emotional distress is present. To further clarify, I am not conceptualizing prevalence either of emotional distress or psychological wellbeing to occur in absence of the other. Rather, I move towards assessing new dimensions of mental health, including resilience, flourishing, and other measures of positive mental health to recognize mental health as multi-dimensional. In other words, I am conceptualizing emotional distress and psychological wellbeing as different coins, not two opposing sides of the same coin.

Despite challenges experienced by undocumented individuals they still manage to thrive (Contreras 2009, Perez et al. 2009). Indeed, a recent survey of California undocumented college students reported that although a third of students reported significant depression that would

warrant clinical treatment, yet flourishing scores were notably high (Enriquez et al. Forthcoming). The average flourishing score among undocumented students was (M=44.31), which is in line with other studies assessing flourishing among college students (Enriquez et al. 2020). In all there is evidence that suggests that both negative and positive mental health outcomes occur but we have limited understanding on how and if they co-exist but also what factors contribute to each.

In addition, there are also various opportunities to address what factors are contributing to the development of positive mental health. It is clear that the current structural constraints of legal vulnerability create a reality in which undocumented immigrants experience an immense amount of strain. Yet scholars of resilience find that despite substantive hardship, positive psychological wellbeing can prevail. Michael Ungar (2008) offers that this occurs because an possesses the capacity to navigate their environment to identify resources that sustain their wellbeing. Further, he adds that persons could negotiate for resources in their environments to be provided or experienced. These interventions serve as a starting point to investigate how structural inequalities that create precarious environments compromise an individual's efforts to optimize identification of resources to sustain and foster their mental health. As the population of undocumented young adults continues to live in the U.S. without permanent legal status, this is an important opportunity to explore in depth their experiences in developing their positive mental health under challenging circumstances.

Acts of Resistance as an Asset-Based Theoretical Framework

Although this study is timely in addressing mental health disparities among undocumented immigrants, the project also aims to build on and extend current theories of resilience. I first present resilience theories to establish that studies of mental health have largely

focused on identifying individual factors to understand what contributes to recovering from mental health strain. I briefly discuss flourishing, a significant measure of positive mental health that has been developed to illustrate a more holistic picture of mental health – one that is not solely negative but can be positive. Next, I draw on the work of feminist theories of resistance and empowerment to account for their individual agency in responding to systems of inequality. I suggest that employing these theories can be used to study strengths, or assets, that some individuals hold to investigate how they are connected to the development of positive mental health.

Resilience, Flourishing, as Indicators of Positive Psychological Wellbeing

Zautra, Hall, and Murray (2010) defined resilience as "an outcome of successful adaptation to adversity." To further assess resilience, they also suggested that researchers must ask about an individual's process recovering from risk and subsequently their ability to sustain their resilience. Definitions within the field of psychology offer individual level factors as explanations to why some individuals develop resilience more than others. Some of these factors that have been found to foster resilience are personality traits, positive outcomes/forms of adaptation despite high-risk, factors associated with positive adaptation, processes, sustained competent functioning/stress resistance, and recovery from trauma or adversity (Zautra, Hall and Murray 2010). These definitions place an emphasis on an individual ability to recover from adversities, but do not engage with disentangling a person's actions to resist the sources of adversity (Bonanno 2004).

A significant measurement of positive mental health is flourishing. Flourishing is defined as an individual being filled with positive emotions and to be functioning well psychologically and socially (Keyes 2002). This approach moves past psychopathology and identifying what

sources of stress are to shed light on the positive characteristics of mental health. Although flourishing investigates dimensions of positive functioning, such as engagement in activities and optimism, it is primarily assessed as an outcome (Diener et al. 2009). There is limited knowledge about the processes through which flourishing occurs.

Despite its emphasis on successful adaptation or recovery, theories of resilience and flourishing do not hold existing systems of inequality accountable for their role in creating adversities (Bourbeau and Ryan 2018, Denham 2008). For example, resilience literature does not critique the ways in which these sources of oppression should be changed (Hickman 2018). Moreover, there is limited knowledge on the role that actions of agency play in not only challenging systems of inequality but potentially how they influence psychological wellbeing.

Agency, Resistance, and Empowerment as Strategies to Challenge Structural Inequalities

In light of the individual and outcome-based approaches that currently exist to study positive mental health, research needs to pivot to explore processes that foster strengths, resilience, and flourishing. Feminist theorists are integral in the development of scholarship that considers the strengths of marginalized communities. Women of color scholars have refocused the sociological lens by contending that researchers should center and uplift the knowledge that individuals who experience structural inequalities have (Collins 1986, Solórzano and Yosso 2002, Tang 2008). Patricia Hill Collins (2002) honored and practiced this by allowing Black women she was working with to reflect on the theoretical issues that she claimed were affecting them. In this way, she found that a holistic understanding of the power structures that they encounter and how they ultimately manage them. This work not only recognizes that individuals can experience positivity in their lives, but it also allows for a thorough investigation into the

unique ways in which multiple power structures operate to create distinct experiences of marginalization (for further reading see (Crenshaw 1991).

Feminist scholars advanced resistance to contradict previous scholarship that focused on individual deficiencies and instead shift attention to structural inequities. bell hooks (1991) theorized marginality beyond being a site of deprivation, but rather as a site of resistance. In doing so, feminist theory illuminated on the acts of agency that marginalized individuals could invoke to enact changes to structural injustices (Yosso 2005). One form of agency presented by Yosso is *resistance capital*, which recognizes that individuals and communities possess knowledge and skills fostered through their actions of opposition to inequality. This is further displayed in resistance literature that shows that knowledge and capacity building is gained in marginalized communities as they navigate social injustices directly (Cox 2015, Tang 2008). This work is significant and inspires the development of thriving as a concept because it recognizes that aside from managing the strain of structural inequalities, individuals also find a way to resist and find fulfillment and purpose. Most recently, women of color theorists reflected that despite being presumed incompetent by their non-person of color faculty members, they still managed to resist and find joy in their work as minority and/or underrepresented scholars (Harris 2020).

Building on resistance, employing agency is another factor that can promote health and wellbeing. Personal agency occurs when people are making choices or decisions, acting intentionally or deliberately, formulating and following their plans of action, or setting goals and pursuing them (Bandura 2001, Thoits 2006). Although, there are various definitions for the term agency, all aim to capture individuals as determined and able to make choices. This will be a central lens of analysis for developing acts of resistance as a framework because it engages

moving beyond just assessing sources of strain and instead focuses on the importance of human agency. It also raises the question, what promotes or facilitates an individual exercising their agency.

Notably, theories of empowerment have been long used to develop interventions to promote health among individuals, organizations, and communities (Rappaport 1987). Scholars have centered empowerment around individuals who focus on taking control over issues that are the most importance to them. Subsequent work has focused on disentangling empowerment at the individual level. Specifically, Zimmerman (1995) offered three components to achieving individual-level empowerment. Interpersonal addresses a person's sense of control in life, interactional concerns itself with a person's awareness of socio-political factors that shape distribution of power and resources, and behavioral encompasses participatory actions taken by an individual. Further, Pacheco (2012) argues that groups of people can engage in collective actions that support efforts to negotiate demands within their politically charged contexts. This is important as it advances empowerment theory to consider the strength of marginalized communities despite their circumstances.

Research Methods, Data, and Analytic Plan

My dissertation draws on qualitative and quantitative data. I conducted 66 qualitative interviews with undocumented college students to address Research Questions 1, and 2. I will conduct secondary data analysis of a 2020 survey of 1,277 undocumented college students to address Research Question 3 by investigating the extent to which acts of resistance inform emotional distress and psychological wellbeing.

Qualitative Data (RQ #1, #2)

My primary comparison group is institutional context. California hosts three public university systems: University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC). The UC and CSU are four-year universities with differing institutional commitments and admissions selectivity and the CCC are 2-year colleges. A secondary comparison will be immigration status; only about one third of my sample has DACA, reflecting national and state trends in this shrinking student population due to ongoing court injunctions. However, I have enough DACA recipients to compare across status which will allow me to explore variations on experiences of legal vulnerabilities. See table 1 for interview sample characteristics.

Table 1. Interview Sample Characteristics

	University of California	California State University	California Community College	**Total**
DACA	9	10	2	21
No legal status	17	15	13	45
Total	26	25	15	66

Recruitment and Selection Criteria

I recruited participants through two mechanisms. First, my personal network within the undocumented student community which I have built over the past eight years through my participation in and support for undocumented student advocacy efforts. Second, I relied on

snowball sampling where I asked interviewed students to forward a copy of my project information sheet to other students they thought were eligible and interested.

The state of California is the ideal site for this research. California hosts 20% of the nation's undocumented students (Feldblum et al. 2020). California has not only implemented inclusive policy for undocumented college students, but it is home to campuses that have developed undocumented student resources to address barriers created by legal vulnerabilities (Enriquez et al. 2019, Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018).

Interview Procedures and Content

Interviews lasted approximately one and a half to two hours. They were guided by a semi-structured interview guide. I conducted the majority of interviews via zoom. Participants received $30 for their time. Prior to the start of each interview, participants completed a pre-interview intake form that inquired about demographics, and administered the PHQ-9, GAD-7, and flourishing scales.

The first section served as an introduction and source for background information. Students established their narrative and elaborated more on their experiences in higher education. I asked students to describe their mental health and how they think their immigration status affects it. The second section focused on emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. To address emotional distress, I asked about key symptoms of depression and anxiety (derived from the PHQ-9 and GAD-7 scales). Questions on psychological wellbeing encompassed feelings of thriving, growth, and flourishing (derived from the flourishing scale). For both dimensions of mental health, students were asked about the frequency of these experiences, what they think contributes to them, and to what extent they interfere with their everyday activities. The last

section asked students about their engagement with resistance. I asked about each act of resistance that I have previously identified and whether there were other acts they partake in.

Qualitative Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. After each interview, I wrote a post-interview memo that summarized key points. I used HyperResearch, a qualitative data management program to systemically code my data and facilitate identifying patterns. I used a "flexible coding" approach throughout my qualitative analysis (Deterding and Waters 2021) and completed the initial round of index coding necessary to make the transcripts more easily searchable for future analytic coding. Analytic coding followed for each chapter. I reviewed my memos alongside reports of texts from relevant index codes to develop a codebook for each respective chapter. Codes were applied and reviewed to identify themes. I also compared across institutional context and immigration status to determine how these factors play a role in the mental health process.

Quantitative Data (RQ #3)

We conducted a series of linear regression models to examine the association of three acts of resistance and emotional distress – as measured by depression and anxiety. Multiple ordinary least squares regression is appropriate for this analysis because it has been used in the past on studies that examine depression (Ganong and Larson 2011) and anxiety (Culatta and Clay-Warner 2021). My dependent variables are depression and anxiety score. Political engagement, critical consciousness raising, and undocumented student program use are my independent variables. This analysis will facilitate assessing the primary relationship between acts of resistance and emotional distress – as measured as depression and anxiety

symptomatology. The first set of models (Models 1-3) within each mental health outcome includes each act of resistance regressed by the mental health outcome. Subsequent models include each act of resistance and sociodemographic covariates (Models 4-6). Finally, the last model (Model 7) includes a model with all acts of resistance and sociodemographic covariates.

Survey Data Collection Procedures

The UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE) administered a 418-item online survey from March to June 2020. The survey included questions about academic performance, educational experiences, health and wellbeing, political engagement, the immigration policy context, institutional context and resource use, and self and family demographics. All items were previously piloted to ensure face validity.

Recruitment for participants took place at all nine UC undergraduate campuses and nine of the twenty-three CSU campuses. CSU campuses were selected to match the geographic location of the UC campuses. Announcements to recruit participants were distributed widely, this included emails and social media posts from each campus' undocumented student support services office, faculty teaching large general education courses and ethnic studies courses, departmental and university office newsletters, and undocumented student organizations.

Survey responses were collected via Qualtrics and had an estimated completion time of 25–35 minutes. To be eligible for the study, participants had to self-identify as being over age 18, having at least one immigrant parent, and being a currently enrolled undergraduate student at a UC or CSU campus. To be categorized into the undocumented subgroup, students had to identify as being born outside of the United States and having no permanent legal status (e.g. no current legal status, DACA, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or some other status they

considered to be undocumented). Upon completion, respondents were emailed a $10 electronic gift card. All completed surveys were reviewed for validity; incomplete responses, ineligible respondents, and suspected fabricated responses were removed using a detailed protocol.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent implementation of shelter-in-place policies in California, the research team temporarily paused recruitment during the second half of March to adjust their recruitment plans. They also revised their survey instrument to incorporate pandemic related survey items. Data collection resumed after March 30 and students were instructed to answer the questions based on what was typical prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

Sample

The sub-sample of undocumented students consists of 1,277 respondents. 667 attended UC and 610 CSU. Sample sizes at the nine UC campuses ranged from minimum of 26 to a maximum of 147 and from 30 to 106 at the nine focus CSU campuses. Additionally, 28 responses came from nine other CSU campuses, with a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 10. Participants in the survey were distributed across class standing, with approximately a third in their first or second year, a third in their junior year, and a third in their senior year.

The respondents in the sample are primarily (94%) migrants from Latin America with approximately eight out of every ten participants identifying as coming from Mexico. In total, they identified from 36 countries of origin. The next largest groups came from El Salvador, Guatemala, and South Korea. Notably, more than half of the countries reported were only represented within UC students.

Almost three quarters of the undocumented student subgroup identified being beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and

approximately a quarter responded as having no current legal status. Further, around two thirds of students arrived in the U.S. before the age of five years old.

Majority of survey respondents identified as coming from a mixed-status household and lived with at least one U.S. citizen. Additionally, most students reported having one or more parent or legal guardian without legal status. Further, household income varied among students. About a quarter of students reported that their household earned less than $20,000 and a third earned more than $40,000. As such, a little more than half of students identified as working for some form of financial compensation.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Mental health is conceptualized as experiencing emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. However, to answer RQ#3 I measure - ***depression*** and ***anxiety***. The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) was used to assess depression (Kroenke, Spitzer and Williams 2001). Sample items include, "little interest or pleasure in doing things" and "feeling tired or having little energy." Respondents rated the frequency of each feeling on a scale of 0-3, corresponding to not at all, several days, more than half the days, and nearly every day. The responses were summed across all scale items, resulting in a score that ranged from 0 to 27. Depression score is used as a continuous measure ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Anxiety is measured through the validated Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale which consists of seven items which are summed as a score ranging from 0 to 21 ($\alpha = .931$) (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams and Löwe 2006). This scale asks respondents to indicate how often they have been bothered by various problems over the past two weeks. Similar to depression,

answers are scored as follows: “not at all” (0), “several days” (1), “more than half of the days” (2), “nearly every day” (3). Sample items for anxiety are: “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge,” “trouble relaxing,” and “becoming easily annoyed or irritable."

Independent Variables

The independent variables are organized around three constructs: political engagement, critical consciousness raising, undocumented student program usage.

Political engagement was assessed with four items. These four statements were retained after completing a confirmatory factor analysis with the full nine item scale. These include “Sign a petition regarding an issue or problem that concerns you,” “Buy a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company,” “Wear buttons or display stickers with social or political messages,” “Expressed a political point of view during a class discussion.” Each response ranged from 0-3, representing never, rarely, sometimes, often. A mean score was tabulated for the scale ($\alpha = 0.740$).

Critical Consciousness is measured with one scale. The scale is an eight-statement measure of critical consciousness, and it assesses the extent to which participants engage in conversations about immigration. After running a confirmatory factor analysis five statements were retained. The items used to assess critical consciousness; “Spoken up when you have heard people make false statements about immigrants,” “Talked with someone about overhearing others make demeaning comments about immigrants,” “Confronted someone because you heard them use the word ‘illegal’ or other derogatory terms for immigrants,” “Wanted to change the subject when you have heard people talking about immigrants in a demeaning way,” “Talked with others about what immigration policy means for immigrants.” Each response ranged from

0-4), representing never, rarely, sometimes, often, and almost all the time. A mean score was tabulated for the scale ($\alpha = 0.760$).

Undocumented Student Program Use was assessed with a single question, "Please identify how frequently you have done the following this academic year:" "visited the undocumented student program office/center." Responses ranged from 0-4, representing "never," "a few times a year," "about once a month," "about once a week," or "more than once a week."

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

My first chapter, "Emotional Rollercoaster: The Consequences of the Socio-Legal Context on Undocumented Students' Mental Health Processes," establishes the process through which undocumented students experience coexisting feelings of emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. I build on my interviewees' descriptions of their mental health as a rollercoaster to illustrate how this process is shaped by both the socio-legal context and students' agency. I find that as students confront their legal realities, they experience emotional distress which leads them into downward motions (i.e., spirals and plunges). These downward motions are comprised of students' feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty. However, students promote their psychological wellbeing by employing their agency which in turn allows for them to experience upward motions. Student agency encompasses students drawing strength from their undocumented immigration status, and envisioning opportunities for themselves to experience upward motions experience psychological wellbeing. Yet, these emotions coincide because of structural constraints of the socio-legal context, leaving students feeling like they are in a perpetual rollercoaster ride. Contrary to prior research which has focused on adverse mental health outcomes, this chapter illuminates the multidimensional nature of mental health and shows how it is shaped by socio-legal barriers.

My second chapter, "Acts of Resistance: An Asset-Based Lens to Examine Mental Health," examines the agentic actions employed by students to resist structural constraints and foster their psychological wellbeing. I find that students actively use campus and community resources, practice self-care, engage in political actions, and expand their critical consciousness to mitigate the negative consequences associated with their legal status. These actions promote wellbeing by demystifying the constraints imposed by exclusionary immigration policy and helping students reframe their negative thoughts. I conceptualize these efforts as acts of resistance, or actions taken to resist structural inequality and socio-legal barriers and theorize these as a unique dimension of the stress process. Whereas stress process theory focuses on coping actions as a critical pathway to protect mental health by buffering against the effect of stressors, acts of resistance are unique actions taken to mitigate legal vulnerabilities.

My third chapter, "Centering Agency: Examining the Relationship between Acts of Resistance, Anxiety, and Depression Among Undocumented College Students," is a quantitative analysis that examines undocumented students' political engagement, critical consciousness raising, and undocumented student programming usage to see if these acts of resistance are associated with mental health outcomes. We use 2020 survey data collected by the UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE), for which I served as a graduate student researcher allowing me to add measures of interest. Findings suggest that students who report higher political engagement and critical consciousness raising report higher depression and anxiety symptomatology. This work highlights that undocumented college students' efforts to navigate and contest their marginalization harms their mental health outcomes. The complete manuscript is published in *Society and Mental Health;* I am first author

with co-authors Dr. Flores Morales who aided with data analysis at the revision stage and Dr. Enriquez who is PI on the UC PromISE study.

My conclusion synthesizes all the findings, offers potential policy implications for practitioners working with undocumented college students, and outlines directions for future research. My research highlights the role of agency and acts of resistance in shaping mental health among undocumented college students navigating an exclusionary socio-legal context. While I find that emotional distress persists among students despite their acts of resistance, this work affirms the importance of examining mental health in consideration of structural inequalities. Further, it underscores the value in taking an asset-based approach to investigate why mental health outcomes vary.

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CHAPTER ONE

Emotional Rollercoaster: The Consequences of the Socio-Legal Context on Undocumented Students' Mental Health Processes

Luca Ruiz, an enthusiastic 20 year old undocumented college student, expressed his aspirations to pursue a doctorate degree. While he described the structural barriers created by his immigration status, he also reflected on how it affects his mental health. He then shared his description of his mental health:

> *"Okay, I would say my mental health is a roller coaster … Because I have so many ups and so many downs. Like my mood can change in like one second. … Right now, I'd say it's like, really high."*
>
> -Luca

He, like all the other students I interviewed, highlighted that immigration laws and policies are immensely unstable and unpredictable – which had resulted in Luca feeling overwhelmed about his future, because he has not status. Luca did not qualify for DACA and wonders if he will be able to use his college degree to get a job in the future. However, he also talked about his optimism for the future because he reflects that being able to even pursue higher education is a unique privilege for him as an undocumented immigrant and he also believes that eventually earning his degree ultimately will position him to be successful. His metaphor of mental health as a rollercoaster suggests that the insecure and uncertain socio-legal context is actively shaping everyday experiences which are consequential for wellbeing. In this paper, I trace how undocumented college students experience mental health as a rollercoaster.

Research on undocumented student mental health suggests that immigration laws and policies negatively affect mental health because the unpredictable and uncertain nature of immigration laws and policies result in experiencing emotional distress (Enriquez, Morales

Hernandez and Ro 2018, Hamilton, Patler and Savinar 2021, Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020). Scholars have focused on shedding light on adverse mental health outcomes. This work has established that they have high rates of anxiety (Cadenas, Nienhusser, Sosa and Moreno 2022b, Flores Morales and Garcia 2021), depression (Cadenas and Nienhusser 2021, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021), and suicidal ideation (Hagan, Morales Hernandez, Enriquez and Ayón 2023). These outcomes have been largely described to be a consequence of immigrant illegality. While this work further cements immigrant illegality as a source of social stratification, we know little about the process in which these adverse outcomes are produced and how undocumented students practice agency to protect their wellbeing. To fill this gap, I take a holistic approach that examines both positive and negative mental health experiences.

Drawing on 66 interviews with undocumented college students in California, I contend that the socio-legal context structures a process in which students exercise agency to negotiate emotional distress and promote wellbeing. I found that immigration laws and policies shape students' wellbeing because the ever-changing and unpredictable socio-legal context create feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty. I build onto Luca's description of a rollercoaster to trace the mental health processes of students. First, I discuss downward motions of the rollercoaster, in which students detail their emotional distress as emotional spirals and plunges. Second, I describe upward motions in which student discuss experiencing psychological wellbeing through utilization of their agency. Lastly, I demonstrate how emotional distress and psychological wellbeing coexists among students resulting in an unsteady rollercoaster ride. Specifically, I argue that student's utilization of agency promotes feelings of psychological wellbeing, but the socio-legal context limits their efforts to protect their wellbeing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-Legal Contexts Shaping Mental Health Among Undocumented Students

Prior research on undocumented students' mental health has focused on adverse mental health outcomes. This work has established that undocumented college students have worse mental health outcomes than their U.S. citizen student counterparts (Cadenas et al. 2022b, Castañeda et al. 2015, Hagan et al. 2023, Nienhusser and Romandia 2022). For instance, undocumented college students have been found to have heightened levels of anxiety and found that in this prevalence in anxiety is higher in comparison to national representative studies (Cadenas et al. 2022b, Enriquez et al. 2020, Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020). One study found a direct association between experiencing legal vulnerabilities (i.e., the threat of deportation, financial concerns, discrimination, and social exclusion) and depression (Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). Further, recent work has also found that evidence of high levels of suicidal ideation among undocumented students (Hagan et al. 2023). As they are more likely to have thoughts of suicidal ideation in comparison to their U.S. citizen with lawfully permanent resident parent peers. These negative mental health outcomes have largely been explained to be a consequence of immigrant illegality.

Immigrant illegality centers immigration laws and policies as structural forces that perpetuate inequality and in turn are consequential for the everyday lives of undocumented immigrants. Exclusionary immigration laws and policies create four significant dimensions of legal vulnerabilities which implicate their wellbeing: threat of deportation/detention, financial insecurity, barriers to educational attainment, and social participation. One of the most extensively researched legal vulnerabilities is threat of deportation/detention (De Genova 2002). Without legal status, undocumented individuals are at risk of being removed from the U.S. the possibility of being forcibly removed creates feelings of fear and uncertainty as it could lead to

family separation (Ayón and Becerra 2013, Ayón 2017, Hagan, Lara and Montanes 2021). Financial insecurity is another form of legal vulnerability which transpires from the lack of pathways into securing legal employment. Specifically, undocumented immigrants cannot access work authorization and/or a Social Security Number (Amuedo-Dorantes and Bansak 2012, Chang 2019). This structural barrier results in undocumented immigrants having to work jobs that are often unconventional, underpaid, and consist of unsafe workplace conditions (Fussell 2011, Gleeson 2010). An undocumented immigration status also limits pathways and success in institutions of higher education (Enriquez et al. 2019, Kreisberg and Hsin 2021). Finally, social inclusion and participation ensue as a legal vulnerability because immigration laws and policies experienced by undocumented immigrants limit their social interactions (Dreby 2015, Enriquez 2020, Licona and Maldonado 2014).

While I have elaborated on the material risks of lacking legal status, another significant consequence of illegality are the feelings of uncertainty that persists among undocumented individuals in their everyday lives. Socio-legal scholars highlight that immigration laws and policies create a multi-layered and multi-dimensional socio-legal context. Specifically, Silver (2018) writes that, "the social institutions in which they are involved, and the institutional, local, state, and federal policies that determine their access to resources, all act as tectonic plates, sometimes moving them toward incorporation and other times shifting them farther toward the margins" (11). Through these shifting laws and policies undocumented immigrants experience tectonic incorporation in which their membership and feelings of belonging are affected. In other words, we know that inclusive policies improve outcomes and exclusionary ones worsen them, but tectonic incorporation highlights that federal, state, and local policies can move and pull in opposing directions. Tectonic incorporation is instrumental in investigating how immigration

laws and policies shape mental health among undocumented college students. This is timely as researchers have found evidence that varying mental health outcomes emerge among undocumented communities.

The case of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program demonstrates how the uncertainty experienced by students has consequences on mental health. Established through executive authority by President Obama in 2012, DACA grants beneficiaries work authorization and temporary protection from deportation. DACA lessens the consequences of their undocumented immigration status which promotes their mental health. Obtaining work authorization through DACA reduces financial strain by facilitating the process to gaining legal employment (Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman 2016). Accordingly, DACA has also been shown to provide access to more resources (Siemons et al. 2017), and is also credited with fostering decreases in poverty among undocumented individuals (Pope 2016). In minimizing these material risks of illegality, students with DACA report decreases in their feelings of distress, and improvement with their psychological wellbeing (Patler and Pirtle 2017). While this affirms the positive effects of DACA, threats to terminate the program quickly jeopardize these outcomes.

Ongoing court injunctions and threats to terminate the program have thwarted the positive effects of DACA and instead yielded negative mental health outcomes. While the DACA program is the most inclusionary federal policy in recent years, the program is not a permanent law, but rather a presidential executive order. This is consequential because the sitting president has jurisdiction on whether to uphold the order. Threats to remove the DACA program create feelings of uncertainty as beneficiaries must worry about how they will secure or maintain employment should the program be revoked (Hamilton, Patler and Savinar 2021). This is especially consequential among college students with DACA because these threats to terminate

the program produce feelings of concern as students contemplate if and how they would use their degrees in the future (Morales Hernandez and Enriquez 2021). Further, the potential of removing the DACA program increased worries among beneficiaries of being prioritized or targeted for deportation (Burciaga and Malone 2021, Patler, Hamilton and Savinar 2021).

The case of DACA illustrates the sensitive nature of immigration laws and policies and implicates that mental health is not experienced in a unilateral process. These laws and policies can be both inclusionary and exclusionary. While the findings on mental health further establish immigrant illegality as a source of social stratification, we still have limited knowledge on the process in which these adverse outcomes are produced. Indeed, this reinforces the need to understand mental health as a process. In doing so, we can also investigate how positive mental health experiences emerge.

Undocumented Student Positive Mental Health: Agency

While previous work has established that undocumented students experience negative mental health, there is also emerging evidence to suggest that they also experience positive mental health. There is novel research which has examined the agentic actions of undocumented students. Specifically, these actions have all been conceptualized as protective factors that support undocumented students' wellbeing.

Undocumented students employ their agency by accessing and utilizing social support which protect and ultimately promote their wellbeing. However, studies on undocumented students and social support have yielded mixed results. For example, social support among undocumented college students was found to serve as a protective factor against anxiety (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020). One such display of this, that among undocumented

students in spaces of higher education, they rely on peers and mentors as sources of social support that in turn result in increased feelings of belonging and decreased senses of isolation (Enriquez 2011, Gámez, Lopez and Overton 2017, Perez et al. 2009). However, the extent to which social support buffers the consequences legal vulnerability on emotional distress is limited. In contrast, another study on undocumented college students found only partial evidence that social support served as a moderator between legal vulnerability (i.e. discrimination, social exclusion, financial insecurity) and mental health and not in favor of promoting mental health (Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). Their findings were similar to broader studies on immigrants that have found that social support could exacerbate anxiety and depression among undocumented students (Chadwick and Collins 2015, Guntzviller, Williamson and Ratcliff 2020).

Undocumented students use coping to promote their mental health. For example, scholarship on coping has focused on understanding how specific coping actions buffer the effects of immigration-related stress on mental health. One study found that students practiced diverging, reframing, and/or normalizing (Kam, Pérez Torres and Steuber Fazio 2018). Another study found that critical agency and vocational outcome expectations functioned collectively as protective coping actions from everyday discrimination and contributed to decreases in anxiety (Cadenas et al. 2021).

Ultimately, these protective factors present evidence despite the exclusionary socio-legal context undocumented students do experience positive mental health. This is important to consider because this work alludes to the multiple factors and contexts that are actively shaping emotional distress. In addition, this work goes beyond assessing individual characteristics that may be influencing mental health. This paper aims to explore both negative and positive mental health experiences of students to holistically trace their mental health process. Examining this

full process is necessary to both understanding why social and health inequalities persist and identifying ways to intervene in these inequalities.

DATA AND METHODS

I draw on 66 interviews that I conducted with undocumented students attending college at one of California's public university systems. California hosts three public university systems: University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC). The UC and CSU are four-year universities with differing institutional commitments and admissions selectivity and the CCC are 2-year colleges. All participants are 1.5 generation immigrants, and about a third of participants are beneficiaries of the DACA program. While the sample was designed to include a comparison on immigration status, the sample reflects national and state trends in this shrinking student population due to ongoing court injunctions. However, I have enough DACA recipients to compare across status which will allow me to explore variations on experiences of mental health. The sample has an overrepresentation of females and Latina/o/xs: 73% (N=48) identified as female and 27% (N=18) identified as male. 95% (N=63) of respondents identified as Latina/o/x and 6% (N=4) did not[1]. Table 1 displays demographic information by university type and immigration status.

Interviews were conducted between March and October 2022. They were guided by a semi-structured interview guide. I conducted most interviews via zoom. To recruit participants, I asked members from my personal network within the undocumented student community which I have built over the past eight years through my participation in and support for undocumented student advocacy efforts, to forward a copy of my project information sheet to their students. I

[1] One student identified as both Latina and Asian

also relied on snowball sampling where I asked interviewed students to forward a copy of my project information sheet to students, they thought were eligible and interested. Participants received a 30 USD cash incentive for their participation in the interview. Prior to the start of each interview, participants completed a pre-interview intake form that inquired about demographics and administered the patient health questionnaire-9 (PdeHQ-9), general anxiety disorder-7 (GAD-7), and flourishing scales. Interviews lasted between 1.5-2 hours. The interview guide had sections on emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. Each of these parts included questions about their experiences with each and asked what hindered or promoted their feelings of each.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded using HyperREASEARCH. Each interview was index coded for significant and common themes (Deterding and Waters 2021). Index codes aligned with the sections from the interview questionnaire which included: emotional distress, psychological wellbeing, and finding resistance. This paper focused on the index codes of emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. As such, a second set of index codes were applied to the data to capture different components of both dimensions of mental health. For emotional distress these included responses to the questions concerning depression, anxiety, appetite, exhaustion/tired, sleep, and worries. Psychological wellbeing outcomes included feelings of happiness, optimism, leading a purposeful or meaningful, and competency. Other responses to questions that were index coded were responses of whether students felt like they experienced positive mental health, and that they have the opportunities they need to succeed. Responses for different dimensions of emotional distress and psychological wellbeing were reviewed to identify common patterns and develop analytic codes.

Two research team members completed the first and second waves of index coding. I then developed the analytic codebook to assess the rollercoaster. I served as the primary coder and trained one research team member and together resolved inconsistencies if they presented themselves. The analytic codebook consists of legal insecurities (i.e., academics, family responsibilities, political climate), legal uncertainties (i.e., losing DACA, never getting DACA, post-college academics), upward motions (i.e., active problem solving, best-case scenario thinking, building themselves up), and downward motions (i.e., mental breakdown, substance use, inability to control worries). I ran frequency reports to identify trends that were most recurrent.

FINDINGS

Downward Force: The Socio-legal Context's Role in Fueling Emotional Distress

To help illustrate mental health as a rollercoaster, I first elaborate on downward motions in which students describe feelings of emotional distress. Students discuss the structural barriers that cause them to spiral. Students describe spirals as instances in which they experience difficulty in controlling their worries – particularly those associated to their status. These spirals occur because their legal vulnerabilities foster feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty. Legal insecurities are created by current challenges experienced by students because of immigration laws and policies. Legal uncertainties arise from anticipated barriers students expect to experience in the future because of immigration laws and policies. Characterizing the similar but distinct feelings created by legal vulnerabilities highlight the unpredictable and unstable socio-legal context and outline why students' mental health experiences are so unique and complex. Students described three legal vulnerabilities that affect their mental health: threatened immigration policies, financial concerns, and deportation worries.

Threatened Immigration Policies

Central to student's everyday lives are the threats to change existing immigration laws and policies. Specifically, all students discussed concerns around if the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program would remain intact. DACA is important for these college students because it provides access to a work permit and protection from deportation. In other words, it minimizes the consequences of an undocumented immigration status. Lucy who a few months before became a DACA beneficiary, discussed her concern over the future of the program:

> *"I just recently got DACA last summer, so I've had it for a year now. And I'm, extremely grateful. And I know last week, DACA went back into court. And that made me like extremely, anxious (tearing up)."*
>
> -Lucy

Lucy was one of the few students that managed to process their DACA applications during the brief period (January 2021 – July 2021) in which President Biden reinstated the DACA program. However, at the time of data collection a federal district court judge in Texas challenged that DACA is unconstitutional and provisionally blocked the approval of new applications. As a result, beneficiaries like Olivia and Lucy felt panicked and afraid because the threat of potentially losing their DACA status would strip them of their ability to work legally and remove their protection from deportation. In efforts to maintain updated on these proposed changes, Lucy was constantly visiting news sites to go over any updates on these threats. Unfortunately, these actions also fueled Lucy's feelings of anxiety which became consequential for her academics as she began having trouble concentrating in class. While not all students had DACA, uncertainties around the program steeped into the worries of those without DACA because they

worried about their own prospects in receiving any kind of legal protection and relief in the future.

Students without DACA expressed concern over never accessing the benefits and protection from deportation from the program. Maricela discussed her worries about never getting DACA. She shared:

> *"That was something that I was looking forward to [getting DACA]. … that was going to be my way of finally being able to help my dad and pay the bills. Ever since, the news came out. … I go back to the thought of, 'okay, whatever, it doesn't come back. What am I going to do then?'"*
>
> -Maricela

Maricela had hope post-Trump that she would be able to apply to get DACA, but the ongoing legal disputes do not allow for herself and other eligible youth to apply for consideration and secure legal work authorization. However, the program remains in effect despite these legal challenges. This caused for Maricela to experience insecurity because she is not able to provide for her family, and she uncertain if she will have the infrastructure to access a social security number in the future. Lacking a social security number hinders students' ability to legally secure a job which increases their likelihood of experiencing financial difficulty. Often, without a social security number, students are forced to seek employment and economic support through unconventional means which makes them vulnerable to unsafe and underpaid work conditions which increase feelings of weariness and exhaustion.

Financial Concerns

Threats to remove existing legal work authorization pathways strained students' mental health by fostering feelings of weariness around their financial futures. Ana, a fifth year student, discussed concerns over her financial uncertainty:

> *"I would like for us to own a house in like a safer environment. And so, that's kind of stuff that worry me, even now … I just really want family and I to live in a safer, healthier environment."*

-Ana

Approaching her final undergraduate term, Ana had begun to think about her transition out of her UC campus. Ana is one of the few students that has work authorization, but still feels nervous over whether she will be able to provide for her family in the future because of unstable and unpredictable immigration laws. The consequences of these political threats on mental health aligns with previous work that has identified that these threats limit the protective effects of inclusionary policies – such as DACA – and instead create new legal strains for undocumented college students (Morales Hernandez and Enriquez 2021). This legal vulnerability makes students feel anxious and to address these unsettled feelings students seek out opportunities to manage their current and anticipated financial hardships.

Underlying legal constraints compromise student's post-college educational opportunities which further contributed to students' feelings of uncertainty. A little over half of all students expressed interest in pursuing some form of post-college academic program. While California has implemented inclusionary laws to facilitate accessibility to higher education for undocumented students, undocumented college students still experienced financial challenges while pursuing their degrees. Natalia, a senior who wanted to go to graduate school shared her financial concerns:

> *"I think first, I want to continue my education (pause) how am I going to pay for it? … I think throughout my education, I've always been like thinking about, 'how am I going to fund?' 'How am I going to be able to stay in school?'"*

-Natalia

For Natalia, she is not only thinking about how to fund her current educational expenses – which include funding her academic supplies and living expenses – but she is also trying to plan how she could continue funding her graduate studies. Despite inclusive state policies in the state of California and efforts from undocumented student programming to demystify attending graduate school without legal status, funding sources are not readily available. Consequently, the pathways into graduate programs for undocumented students are complex and oftentimes on a case-by-case basis which creates senses of doubt and nervousness for students. Meeting these financial concerns for Natalia have also limited her availability to participate in opportunities that prepare her for graduate school.

Deportation Worries

Lastly, deportation concerns were a significant structural barrier created by immigration laws and policies. Among students interviewed, it was not common for they themselves to be the subject of a potential deportation or detention. However, this was the case for Jacob, he shared:

> *"In 2021, I was detained by ICE, and I had to spend three months in court and detained. .... I currently have an open case, by the government against me, and I'm in removal proceedings. ... That puts a heavy burden on me and my family."*
>
> -Jacob

His ongoing immigration case caused him to feel concerned and insecure because he was having to manage removal proceedings. He also had feelings of fear and uncertainty because he does not know if he will eventually be deported and be separated from his family.

While it was uncommon to worry about their own deportation, most students talked about the concern they had for their family members. Emmanuel shared:

> *"I'm more scared about my parents. Because they don't have, they don't have any status. … I have three siblings, so I'd have to take care of them in any case of the deportation. And that actually worries me."*
>
> -Emmanuel

This creates insecurity because students have instances where they feel unsettled and worry if their parents have been apprehended. They also have feelings of uncertainty as they think about the potential consequences of their parent's deportation such as taking care of siblings. These trends align with existing work – Specifically Enriquez and Millán (2019) found that deportation concerns for oneself are not as common among undocumented college students because of their positionality as college students, and because they more generally have access to more legal protections as young adults who have completed their K-12 education in the U.S.

The Spiral

Exclusionary immigration laws and policies create structural barriers which result in undocumented students' experiencing spirals. Legal vulnerabilities create feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty which then complicate student efforts to control how much they worry about their undocumented immigration status. Within these spirals students experience feelings of hopelessness, disruption in their everyday activities, and in some dire cases substance use.

Legal insecurities and uncertainties resulting from the unstable socio-legal context filled student thoughts with worries and doubts. Throughout our conversations, students frequently mentioned that their constant worries contributed to them "spiraling." I then began asking them to describe what that meant to them. Olivia shared:

> *"When I think of spiraling, I think like a tornado. Because everything's up in the air, it all intersects within each other. It's all bouncing back and forth moving around constantly, there's no grounding to it."*
>
> -Olivia

These constant and unavoidable thoughts were fueled by fears that she would lose her DACA status creating feelings of financial uncertainty around whether she would be able to work in the future to provide for her child. For Olivia, these unfortunately led to having panic or anxiety attacks. Tómas further detailed the thought process of a spiral:

> *"The first thing that happens, I start overthinking things, and the first thing that will always come up is, 'oh, you're also this [undocumented],' and then that causes me to spiral down even worse. ... I think that intensifies it. ... I just ended up feeling worse because of my status."*

-Tómas

Struggling to control feelings of uneasiness towards threatened immigration laws and policies, Tómas later discussed how it fuels his feelings of emotional distress– he mentioned that they previously resulted in him having frequent headaches, losing his appetite, and feeling extremely tired, tense, and restless. While different immigration statuses (i.e., DACA, undocumented) uniquely shape how students experience the socio-legal context, feelings of insecurity and uncertainty persist because all students experience the structural barriers associated with not having a permanent legal status. Indeed, spirals was common among both undocumented students with DACA and those without.

Experiencing spirals had detrimental consequences for students, one of which was that it made students have feelings of hopelessness. Leah recounted how this affected her:

> *"A few weeks ago, where I had no energy. ... I was kind of depressed, I had a whole week, just being sad. ... I was really sluggish. I kind of considered, what if I just drop out? ... How would I even be able to go into the career field that I'd like to go into without a social? How would I get a social on time for graduation? It's like pretty unpredictable."*

-Leah

Balancing academic insecurities, financial insecurities, and uncertainties, along with insecurities and uncertainties around whether immigration laws and policies would change negatively

affected her wellbeing. It resulted in Leah feeling exhausted and questioning whether her pursuit of a higher degree as an undocumented student was worth it.

This exhaustion left students vulnerable to experiencing physical disruptions in their lives. Maria shared:

> *"I didn't have any pleasure in life. And then I noticed that I didn't really want to do anything, I didn't want to get out of bed, I didn't want to leave my house, I wanted to stay in, even taking my dogs out was a chore."*
>
> -Maria

Students who recount this experience like Maria, all recognize that this experience is not reflective of who they are. However, breaking through the dark thoughts around legal uncertainties proved to be difficult. In some cases, some students resorted to coping mechanisms that were not necessarily the best for their wellbeing. One such mechanism was substance use. Carmen shared:

> *"I was smoking [marijuana] five times a day, almost dropping out of college because I could not cope with my own brain because these thoughts were always there. They never ever left. Even when I tried to sleep, I couldn't. I was thinking, 'Where am I going to get money?' I can't work."*
>
> -Carmen

Carmen along with a few other students described substance use as an action that would distract them from thinking so many negative thoughts about what could happen with immigration laws and policies. However, engaging in substances did not yield healthier results, for Carmen she realized that it worsened her mental health because she became lethargic and restless. While this readily available coping strategy provided temporary and short-term relief, it can also contribute negatively to mental health. Another coping strategy with similar results is political engagement. Undocumented college students engage with political actions in efforts to address their marginalization, but it consequential because it increases prevalence of depression and anxiety

(Cornejo, Ayón and Enriquez 2022, Morales Hernandez, Flores Morales and Enriquez 2024). Counterproductive mechanisms like this, along with others, led for students to seek alternate ways to promote their mental health.

Upward Motions: Agency to Promote Psychological Wellbeing

The next portion on the rollercoaster are the boost or upward motions. All students experienced these upward motions. Upward motions of the rollercoaster consist of students' psychological wellbeing (or positive mental health). This motion characterizes the positive feelings students gain from their efforts focus on meeting their aspirations and goals and shifting their perspectives on their status. Students accomplished this by drawing strength from their immigration status, envisioning opportunities, and employing their agency to better their circumstances.

Drawing Strength from Immigration Status

Critical for all students is to reframe their negative thoughts on their status and instead draw strength from their status. I asked students how their immigration status harmed their mental health, as such it was fitting to also ask them how it affected their mental health positively. Sabrina shared:

> *"It's what made me so strong. It's what made me so resilient. It's what made me so hard working. It's what made me have that feeling of indestructible-ness. And my confidence is because of that. At first, I thought, 'I'm not gonna be able to do anything, nothing is possible.' And then I started doing so much. And then I started seeing everything I was capable of."*
>
> -Sabrina

Sabrina reflected that despite the challenges created by her status, herself along with other undocumented students at her school still managed to keep pursuing their degrees. Instead of

focusing on the limitations around her status, she recognized that she actively made decisions to address her academic insecurities, found ways to address her financial insecurity, and ultimately made some peace with not being able to control the uncertainties around her status. Students were able to draw strength by continuing or reaching their academic goals. Naomi shared:

> *"Graduating from community college and getting accepted to all of the colleges that I applied to, was definitely a big motivation and also made me feel good about myself ... I think my curiosity keeps me flourishing or growing in my mentality. That makes me excited to learn about things more in depth."*

-Naomi

Naomi, like all other students, characterized their academic goals as a way for them to improve their psychological wellbeing. This is because meeting their academic goals resulted in them feeling capable and accomplished.

Undocumented students employed active problem solving in which they actively engage in seeking resources to support their educational goals. This has previously been found in research on undocumented students. For Leah, she engaged in active problem solving before she transferred to her college. She shared:

> *"My final semester [of community college] I reached out to the coordinator of the [Undocumented Student Services] at this campus, and I asked him where resources are available to undocumented, and AB540 students on campus."*

-Leah

Leah identified as an undocumented student without DACA. Knowing that her employment options were limited she took initiative to seek out resources that could potentially lead to her securing economic and academic support while being a student at a 4-year school. She credits this with supporting her mental health because she was able to build ties with the staff at the campus' undocumented student program and ended up securing an internship at the program. Ultimately, participating in these undocumented student spaces made her feel optimistic for her

future because she was engaging in activities that supported her community but also allowed for her to gain professional development to support her getting a job in the future.

Other students engaged in active problem solving outside of undocumented student spaces. Samuel said:

> *"I had applied to [research program] … they told me that I didn't qualify [because of immigration status]. … I started talking to my professors, and building relationships and I told them what had happened. And they asked me if I wanted to work with them on research. Now I work with in three different projects with the three different faculty."*

-Samuel

Samuel later reflected that this experience ultimately ended up being more fruitful for his professional development than the research program would have. It also affirmed his desire to pursue research as a career. Receiving these research opportunities made Samuel feel empowered and it made him feel motivated and hopeful to pursue graduate school. Despite these legal constraints, students still chose to employ active problem solving and advocate for themselves in efforts to prepare for their futures. Institutions are important to facilitate student's processes in looking for solutions.

Envisioning Opportunities

For Maricela employing her agency inspired her to make an impact. She shared:

> *"I have all these different opportunities [as a student] … and it has helped me feel that I'm doing good, and I can still do this in the future."*

-Maricela

Reflecting on her positionality as a student, Maricela felt gratitude. This allowed for her to see beyond her struggles and instead felt motivated to contribute to making her campus an inclusive space for undocumented college students. For Nina, her experiences on campus have inspired her

career goals. In particular, she participated in a program that provided her with $4500 for a fellowship placement. She said:

> *"I think the [Undocumented Student Fellowship] was a program I was trying to start in community college. And I remember at the time, it felt so unrealistic to me. … And then when I transferred here, I was like - they have it here! … I always had this mentality that I was going to come back to my community college and bring a program like that someday, or even be a counselor specifically for us."*

-Nina

Participating in this fellowship program allowed her to see how she could have career opportunities despite not having DACA. This made her feel hopeful and prepared because she now has career relevant experiences. The program empowered her and inspired her to make an impact. Not only could she envision career opportunities for herself, but she aspires to create similar opportunities for others.

Ultimately, students must continue to pursue opportunities in hopes that systemic changes will occur. Javier, shared:

> *"I never think I'm not going to do it, because I might not have pay or might not have some kind of status. I'm going to work up to it and try my absolute best. So that if I do get a status, that's great, I did everything that I could and it's going to be worth it. … I could think about how I really have no certainty, or I can just try my best and hope that I do."*

-Javier

All students have to hold out hope that their status could change and by extension that there will eventually be a structural change/answer. Despite experiencing fear, they are just as hopeful and willing to work hard and move forward.

The Rollercoaster Ride: Coexistence of Emotional Distress and Psychological Wellbeing

While students negotiate their emotional distress and utilize their agency to promote their psychological wellbeing, the underlying socio-legal context does not allow for students to solely experience psychological wellbeing. Structural barriers that disrupt students' everyday lives inevitably result in a rollercoaster ride in which emotional distress and psychological wellbeing are present. However, the ever-changing and unpredictable socio-legal context bolsters an unstable rollercoaster ride which results in students experiencing the coexistence of emotional distress and psychological wellbeing.

Noah illustrates how swiftly changes to immigration laws and policies affect his mental state. He discussed:

> *"Joe Biden got elected and he was democratic, he was saying that he was going to do all these things for dreamers.*
>
> *In 2021, … beginning of August, … after the Texas [DACA] ruling, new applicants weren't allowed into the program. I definitely was, … very sad … that was definitely … a very … depressing time."*
>
> -Noah

Noah was experiencing upward motions in psychological wellbeing, for a brief moment it seemed that the socio-legal context would shift in his favor. He was feeling hopeful that he would be able to apply for DACA which would allow him to financial support himself during college. However, the quick shift to the socio-legal context abruptly sent him in a downward motion. He reverted to experiencing emotional distress and a plunge. These sudden changes felt like whiplash with sudden ups and downs. These were disorienting and harmed his mental health by feeding feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty.

The unstable and unpredictable socio-legal context can lead to co-existence of emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. Sebastian shared:

> *"When you start to think bad, it's like you enter this spectrum of darkness, and you want to find the light, and you dig yourself in more. Because you're thinking about it, you're trying to find a solution. … Working out and studying or thinking of ways to not think about it's the best way to get rid of them temporarily, but you know, they come back."*
>
> -Sebastian

Much like other students, Sebastian experiences this bumpy rollercoaster ride. When students are experiencing a downward plunge, they are feeling this spectrum of darkness. However, they practice their agency and look for solutions to bring themselves out of this and promote their wellbeing. However, the negative feelings can quickly return. Students are aware that something else can trigger feelings of insecurity or uncertainty or immigration laws and policies could become more exclusionary. These thoughts bring them back to darkness as they face structural realities of their exclusion. As a result, agency is not always enough to eliminate the presence of legal insecurities and uncertainties that create emotional distress. This leaves them feeling the whiplash of perpetual ups and downs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of undocumented college students' mental health by examining experiences of both emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. I accomplish this by examining how undocumented students employ agency to manage the consequences of their undocumented immigration status. I contend that these agentic actions have direct implications for their mental health experiences. I find that ever-changing and unstable immigration laws and policies result in students experiencing mental health as a rollercoaster. Students utilize their agency to negotiate their emotional distress and promote their psychological wellbeing. However, the unpredictable and ever-changing socio-legal context

hinders their efforts, and instead puts them in a perpetual rollercoaster that feels unstable because of aggressive downward plunges and invigorating upward motions.

The precarious socio-legal context creates emotional distress which sends students in a downward spirals and plunges. Previous work has found prevalence of anxiety (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020), depression (Velarde Pierce et al. 2021) and suicidal ideation (Hagan et al. 2023) among undocumented college students. My findings extend on this work by capturing the processes that in which emotional distress is produced. I find that the socio-legal context creates feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty. These feelings were consequential as they fostered negative thoughts that students oftentimes described would overwhelm them and cause them to spiral. In efforts to control these negative thoughts students did engage in coping (i.e., substance use), but not all coping strategies positively contributed to overall health and instead resulted in them plunging downward. This could be because coping actions such as substance use, do not directly support students in addressing their structural marginalization. Despite these downward motions, students persisted to exert their agency in alternative ways that would address barriers created by their undocumented immigration status and by extension better their mental health.

Practicing agency can yield positive mental health outcomes in the face of exclusionary socio-legal contexts. An important catalyst for promoting psychological wellbeing among students was drawing strength from their status. This is distinct from alternative coping strategies because they shifted from fixating on what hindered their success, and instead acknowledged the courage and tenacity they exerted while pursuing their education (Cadenas et al. 2021, Kam, Pérez Torres and Steuber Fazio 2018). This served as a mechanism to have more positive thoughts about themselves. Relatedly, students also described that having the ability to envision

opportunities for themselves positively affected their psychological wellbeing. An explanation for this, is that the students I interviewed all had access to an undocumented student practitioner on their campus. Public universities in the state of California have moved towards providing undocumented student centers or programming on their campuses. These centers and programs may be facilitating conversations in which students could validate and uplift each other's experiences. This aligns with previous work that has found that undocumented student centers on campus are instrumental in empowering students (Cisneros and Rivarola 2020). They could also be utilizing undocumented student center space to build their social support which may in turn foster connections in which they could learn from pro-staff about resources and share this knowledge with each other. This is in line with previous work on undocumented college students' social support serving as a protective factor for their mental health (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020).

Co-existence of emotional distress and psychological wellbeing emerges because of an exclusionary socio-legal context. Despite student efforts to reframe their negative thoughts about their undocumented immigration status, sustaining their psychological wellbeing cannot be solely addressed by their agentic actions and agency. This is because immigrant illegality remains a source of social stratification that dictates all aspects of their lives (Enriquez 2020, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013). This finding directs future research to build onto existing individual approaches of studying mental health by incorporating a structural analysis. In other words, highlighting structural constraints and agency are both necessary to understand complex mental health experiences and why adverse mental health outcomes persist.

I center immigrant illegality and the experiences of undocumented college students to elucidate how the socio-legal context constraints mental health, but this work also is applicable

to the mental health of other legally vulnerable college students. My work contributes to our understandings of undocumented mental health by elaborating on their experiences of emotional distress, highlighting their agency in promoting their psychological wellbeing, and ultimately showcasing how the socio-legal context compromises student efforts to promote their mental health. Importantly, the findings from my work suggest that socio-legal contexts can serve as both a constraint or promoter of mental health due to their potential to be unstable and ever-changing. For example, LGBTQIA+ identifying students, can also experience their own rollercoaster. This is especially significant as the rise of threats and eventual implementation of anti-LGBTQIA+ laws across federal, state, and local contexts make them vulnerable to experience prejudice and discrimination (Tran, Loecher, Kosyluk and Bauermeister 2023). While there are existing legal rights for LGBTQIA+ individuals, this rise of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation is consequential because they have to confront and negotiate the stigmas perpetuated by the state through these re-emerging exclusionary laws and policies (Kline et al. 2022, Schmitz et al. 2020).

My study has several limitations. First, my work examines the experiences of undocumented college students in California, a state that has implemented inclusionary laws and policies (i.e., state access to financial aid, undocumented student programming) which facilitates incorporation into educational institutions. Undocumented college students in less inclusive contexts may experience barriers to accessing financial aid, increased exposure to immigration enforcement, or absence of undocumented student specific programming and support. Future work should consider variations by socio-legal contexts of immigration. Second, and relatedly, my study does not explicitly explore how other social locations (i.e., gender, racial/ethnic background, sexuality) affect students' rollercoaster. This is especially significant, as different

social locations also contribute to student experiences of legal vulnerability. Finally, my work illustrates mental health during a particular socio-legal context that was absent of a presidential election. This is important because the rise of threats to limit or remove protections for undocumented immigrants could become more prevalent and have consequences for their mental health rollercoasters.

Importantly, this work has implications for college campuses serving undocumented students. Institutions and by extension practitioners working with undocumented college students can intervene to promote their mental health. Campuses can develop programming with the goal of empowering students to recognize the strength they possess and in doing so encourage them to use their agency. This should be accompanied with an acknowledgement of the institutional opportunities available to students and the structural constraints associated with their undocumented immigration status. Including opportunities and constraints is instrumental for students to gain holistic insight into how they could move towards their academic and professional goals. While these efforts do not fully address the instability of the socio-legal context, they could ultimately propel students into experiencing psychological wellbeing despite their feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty. This is especially important as we are at the heels of a shifting socio-legal landscape and an upcoming presidential election.

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CHAPTER TWO

Acts of Resistance: An Asset-Based Lens to Examine Mental Health

> *I often find myself mentally and emotionally exhausted … because of my non-DACA status I always find myself thinking ahead or worrying about what's next for me … implementing self-care and breaks has been important. I'm not always consistent though, I'm still working on paying more attention to my well-being.*
>
> -Natalia

Throughout our conversation, Natalia expressed the desire to continue in education but maintained that without having DACA to work, she is unable to form a clear goal on what she wants to pursue. This legal reality fostered feelings of financial insecurity and uncertainty that complicated her efforts to control her emotional distress. However, she discusses how she employs self-care to manage her emotional distress and instead focus on tending to her wellbeing. Engaging in self-care allowed for students to feel present. This was a feeling many took for granted, especially while balancing their academic stress and finding solutions to barriers created by their undocumented immigration status. As a result, students must be intentional about reclaiming time for themselves to protect their wellbeing. Her decision to prioritize her health and wellbeing ultimately served as an act of resistance to the structural marginalization created by exclusionary immigration laws and policies. I remain with the question: What agentic actions do undocumented college students employ to resist the structural constraints they experience?

This chapter examines the actions employed by students to resist structural constraints and foster their psychological wellbeing. Students present and display personal, creative, and strategic solutions to the barriers that immigration laws and policies create. I focus on four acts of resistance that arose among students that I interviewed. They are using undocumented student

programs on campus, engaging in political actions, expanding their critical consciousness, and practicing self-care to mitigate the consequences associated with their undocumented immigration status. I find that these actions promote wellbeing by demystifying the constraints imposed by exclusionary immigration policy and helping students reframe their negative thoughts.

I conceptualize these efforts as acts of resistance, or actions taken to resist structural inequality and socio-legal barriers and theorize these as a unique dimension of the stress process. Whereas the stress process theory focuses on coping actions as a critical pathway to protect mental health by buffering against the effect of stressors, acts of resistance are unique actions taken to mitigate legal vulnerabilities. In taking this shift, I argue that we are not only exploring what reduces detrimental mental health outcomes, but we instead consider what factors protect and support mental health.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Acts of Resistance: Agentic Actions Among Undocumented Students

Research on undocumented students has highlighted their agency while pursuing their education (Contreras 2009, Perez 2009). In addition, work on college student mental health has highlighted the ways in which students promote their mental health. Bridging these two important findings, I outline potential acts of resistance that may be relevant among undocumented college students. First, campus belonging, and resource use are central to undocumented students as they navigate institutions of higher learning while managing the consequences of their undocumented immigration status. Second, political engagement and

critical consciousness are both mechanisms in which students can confront the structural inequalities they experience.

Campus Belonging and Resource Use

Undocumented young adults seek out a college education in hopes to advancing their family and own social mobility (Gándara 2012, Martinez 2014). Preceding research has demonstrated that this will to reach their life goals facilitates succeeding academically because students are more likely to be engaged in learning (Olivier, Archambault, De Clercq and Galand 2019). However, this intent to success does not assure a positive relationship with their university campus. This is significant as emotional engagement, refers to a student's sense of connection and attachment to their campus (Lei, Cui and Zhou 2018). A student experiencing this sense of belonging has been shown to serve as a protective factor not only in their academic performance, but also in reducing strains to their mental health (Bond et al. 2004).

Although previous research has established that universities can serve as unsafe or hostile environments for undocumented students. Campuses can also offer multiple opportunities for students to engage in campus life which would foster their comfort while completing their college education (Kahu 2013). Notably, multicultural centers have been found to function as a *counterspace* (Keels 2020) in which wellbeing and collective resistance is promoted for students who experience marginalization. These spaces take up the mantle of creating programming that foster cultural leadership, critical pedagogy, civic identity, and community-building (Jehangir 2010). Further, in having a visible place for students who have experienced some form of marginalization, they also have the opportunity to develop networks with peers, staff, and faculty (Enriquez et al. 2020, Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020). Although spaces like these

have been shown to have a positive effect on students, there is limited knowledge as to what the relation is to positive mental health outcomes among students.

The state of California, is home to campuses that have intentionally developed undocumented student resources and programming to address the barriers created through their legal vulnerabilities (Enriquez et al. 2019, Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). However, A California university study found that not all university systems and institution types provided the same resources to address undocumented student needs on their campuses (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2015). This would influence not only student's feelings of belonging, but it may also jeopardize various other factors of their college experiences. For example, the usage of resources on college campuses have been associated with greater academic engagement, retention, and more positive mental health outcomes (Astin 1984, Gopalan and Brady 2020, Strayhorn 2018, Tinto 1993).

Political Engagement and Critical Consciousness

Participating in social causes on campus are one of the most traditional sources of empowerment for students, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds (Speer and Peterson 2000). An explanation as to why these particular activities promote such growth is because these actions could foster opportunities to engage in collective leadership (Maldonado, Rhoads and Buenavista 2005). Through this experience, students are able to partake in collective rather than individual efforts that facilitate their development of a greater sense of agency in which they are directly giving back to their community and connecting with peers who may be experiencing the same sense of marginalization (Harper and Quaye 2007). Political participation among college students is also addressed in the literature of youth leadership. Specifically, scholars have demonstrated that aside from increases in agency,

students also acquire an array of skills and knowledge which service their ability to later apply them in meaningful ways (MacNeil 2006, Redmond and Dolan 2016).

Scholars have also begun to decipher the distinct actions taken by undocumented individuals to manage their health. A study on undocumented young adults, illuminated on individual and family level coping strategies employed to alleviate negative emotions and in turn foster positive ones (Kam, Pérez Torres and Steuber Fazio 2018). Similarly, a recent study, found that undocumented student success in building relationships with institutional agent(s) at universities served as buffers between students' anxiety (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020).These findings nuance the understanding of health outcomes among undocumented communities as they consider the varying impacts of immigration laws and recognize the agency that undocumented individuals have.

Paolo Freire (1970) defined critical consciousness as the action of an individual in developing an understanding of structural oppression which motivates them to advocate for socially just change (Freire 2018). An example of this, is within research on historical trauma response, which highlights that despite the experience of historical trauma, storytelling and narratives among communities serve as efficient and powerful exercises to grow resilience (Denham 2008). These actions to understand positionality among individuals and how they relate to the others allows for them to better support their mental health as it helps them reframe their thoughts.

Research on critical consciousness within the field of education has shed light onto how university students encounter power dynamics that they aim to understand and navigate to better their own circumstances and at times those of their communities (Rhoads 2016). Development of critical consciousness can occur in a variety of ways. For students from marginalized

backgrounds, learning does not only service completing their higher education but it could also foster learning of their history and the socio-political forces that have shaped their marginality (Hope, Keels and Durkee 2016). However, growth in the critical consciousness of students has also been tied to shaping career aspirations, school engagement, and identity with their universities (Diemer 2015, Heberle, Rapa and Farago 2020, Kornbluh 2021).

I shift to explore acts of resistance to better theorize the relationship between legal vulnerability and mental health. While existing social-psychological conceptualizations of coping investigate how coping mediates the relationship between stress and mental health outcomes, acts of resistance are distinct from coping because they are direct responses to resist legal vulnerabilities. However, they may function similarly. I argue that by examining acts of resistance, we would further our understanding of positive mental health among this marginalized student group. I have identified four acts of resistance undocumented students practice: undocumented student program usage, political engagement, critical consciousness, and self-care. Some of these acts have been previously studied as forms of resistance by undocumented students in educational settings (i.e., political engagement, undocumented student program usage) but others are more novel areas of exploration (i.e., self-care, critical consciousness).

FINDINGS

Usage of Undocumented Student Services

Accessing undocumented student programs is an act of resistance because it is an action taken to address the consequences of the socio-legal exclusion they experience. One significant consequence of this socio-legal exclusion is social isolation. Many students shared that they feel

conflicted and scared about disclose their status despite needing support. Emily discussed how the undocumented student program at her campus helps mediate some of these feelings:

> *"Because we can speak freely outside of our family (at undocumented student services). You know, for some things, it's difficult to talk about these things (immigration-related) with family for many reasons. So just creating friendships with people that understand you. It feels so good (chuckles), it's such a huge support system, seeing these other people work just as hard as you gives you so much motivation. And you create a group of just like constant support, it is like, 'Hey, I understand you perfectly. Well, let's keep going.' That sort of mentality."*
>
> -Emily

Undocumented student services allowed for students to build connections with other undocumented college students. Utilizing these undocumented student spaces on campus also reduced student feelings of disconnectedness. Lucy described the importance of undocumented student program spaces on her campus:

> *"I mean, once you leave (an undocumented student event), it's made me feel like I definitely belong here … and just knowing communities here, even if they're not blood, it's knowing that they're that that group of people will be there for you."*
>
> -Lucy

All students identified as first-generation college students, this along with their undocumented immigration status created unique barriers when navigating their college campuses. Having a visible space of undocumented college students contributed to students' feelings of belonging because it allowed for them to meet their peers and form connections. This further contributes to reducing their feelings of social isolation created by their status.

Having connections with undocumented student programs and other undocumented students alleviated consequences of students' undocumented immigration status. Bella shared:

> *"I guess the community it's creating. Just getting to know other undocumented people. That's been helpful. And then when they helped me apply for DACA and everything and it's good to know that they have like a lot of resources."*

-Bella

For Bella, her financial insecurities are addressed because the undocumented student program at her campus has the resources to financially support her DACA renewal application(s). In having more conversations and community connections students become exposed to the information and resources that could alleviate their legal vulnerability.

Attending undocumented student programming allowed for students to learn and become inspired by their undocumented student peers. Annie shared how programming at her campus impacts her:

> *Annie: "Something that we used to do in the [UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT SERVICES], we have like Saturday Academy, or we have conferences, then we have a few events, where we have graduate students, or [UC CAMPUS] staff that present about their journey as undocumented (students) … I think that is very important to know about other people's journeys"*
>
> *Martha: "Can you think of a thing that you learned from sitting in spaces like that?"*
>
> *Annie: "I think that's something that I learned is how would you say is like taking the initiative, like you cannot be like, sitting down and just waiting for someone to say, 'Hey, do you need Do you need help?' You just have to get up and find that help for yourself."*

-Annie

Storytelling in undocumented student spaces served as a tool for students to connect with one another's experiences. Having to navigate their undocumented immigration status while being students often overwhelmed students. Hearing from others who went through similar struggles and ultimately overcame those barriers allowed for students to feel energized and determined to continue pursuing their academic and personal goals.

Political Engagement

Undocumented students engaged in political actions to advocate for systemic change. For many, they participated in hopes of changing immigration laws and policies to become more inclusive. Despite the constraint of their undocumented immigration status, engaging in individual political actions allowed for students to reclaim their voices and speak out for changes to be made around the injustices experienced by immigrants. Fernando shared what he has gained from being politically engaged:

> *"Definitely advocating for myself. I feel like with those experiences, I've been able to stand up for people, or for people like me … I've learned about resources students can take advantage of. I also learned about myself. I feel that being a role model within my community is essential for my character. Mainly because when I was a freshman, I never really knew anyone that was pursuing the same career…"*
>
> -Fernando

Fernando is an active member of the undocumented student organization on his campus. In being a part of a collective effort allowed for students to directly engage in conversations with other students who were seeking solutions to the challenges they would experience on campus as undocumented students. Another student Luz discussed the impact she's had on campus being a part of larger student advocacy efforts:

> *"I did get involved with, like an advocacy campaign my freshman year. The advocacy campaign was to create a paid fellowship that is inclusive of non DACA students, that both gives financial compensation and professional development and because of the advocacy that I did, with other peers, the fellowship, became a thing and now it's like, in its third year. I think, this year alone, the [UNDOCUEMNTED STUDENT SERVICES] and different sites on campus granted $200,000 in scholarship money."*
>
> -Luz

Actively strategizing and successfully advocating for changes like this on their campuses allowed for students to not have feelings of powerlessness and instead empowered them to continue addressing structural inequalities. For Luz, she even reaped the benefits of this work, and participated in the program and gained professional development. This in turn eased her feelings of anxiety towards her life post-college. In all, by participating in political actions students directly resisted the consequences of their undocumented immigration status and instead addressed the legal insecurity and uncertainty they experience.

Undocumented students all felt some hesitancy in displaying political engagement. The feelings of fear and uncertainty hinder their desires to participate in politics or political actions. Sylvia shared what she thinks about being politically active:

> *"I am scared of what other people will ask me about, or I'm scared that any conversation that I have with somebody else politically, like related is going to lead to, like, the topic of my status, and I don't like sharing that."*
>
> -Sylvia

Common among students was the potential of a political action "outing" their undocumented immigration status and it leading to confrontation of anti-immigrant sentiments. Despite these present fears, students still discussed the importance of finding alternate forms to engage in politics and political action to contribute to advocacy efforts to address injustices around immigration laws and policies.

Encouraging voting among individuals with the privilege to do so was common way for undocumented students to practice political engagement. Mia discussed how she encourages others to vote for change:

> *"I'm not much of a person to go out and protest, because there's the legal vulnerability of my status and uncertainty of me being physically politically active. But I do encourage my boyfriend who's able to vote because he's a citizen.*

> *I try to stay on top of things … learning about the laws, bills, and different things that are on the ballot. Even though I don't vote, I feel like educating my boyfriend might help, even his family members who are eligible to vote."*

-Eva

Engaging family and loved ones on conversations around voting made students feel invigorated and contributed to students' feelings that they could participate in the political process. For many this empowered them to continue having these conversations with more people. This motivated Mia to become involved in student government and work as a senator for engagement. While her position was not strictly to speak on undocumented student issues, she was able to incorporate them into her efforts to encourage student voting. This made her feel inspired and optimistic that she could impact others to participate in decision making that would affect other undocumented students like herself.

Strategically spending money on businesses or products with a social justice mission or without ties to exclusionary policy was another mechanism in which students individually practiced political engagement. Ruby shared:

> *"I'm really vocal when it comes to where I go, where I shop, who I give my business to. For example, In-N -out, they don't support – I believe - gay rights or something. I don't eat In N out anymore … If I can't protest and go to all these protests, then I could do all the small things many people don't know about."*

-Ruby

Determining where they spent their money gave students discretion to exercise their financial power into supporting businesses that support immigrant rights and other causes that mattered to them. This allowed for students to move past feeling hesitant to participating in politics and instead recognize themselves for the power they possess in controlling where their money goes. In other words, it facilitated decreasing student's feelings of hopelessness around participating in political action(s).

Social media advocacy facilitated student engagement with political issues around larger social issues that impact them. Ruby and Patricia shared how and why they participate in spreading news on social media:

> *Ruby: "The only thing I have participated in is that I'm really vocal on social media. When I'm on my Instagram, when I see something that's wrong right now, for example what's going on with abortion, I posted it. And then I think, 'well if I'm going to lose people, I might as well lose them already.'"*
>
> *Patricia: "I think I do the most on social media and just being open about what my feelings are towards certain topics. I think I'm very adamant about posting things pertaining immigration, on my social media."*

Social media allows for students to participate in political conversations around an array of social issues, not just those pertaining to immigration. This relieved student pressures of disclosing their undocumented immigration status and focusing on other issues that matter to them. Posting online allowed for students to vent or express how they feel. Ultimately, students like Patricia and Ruby feel hopeful that in posting (or reposting) on how they feel about social injustices that matter to them, someone may connect with what they have said and gain their support in taking action on similar issues such as immigration.

Resource sharing to other undocumented students was another form of political engagement among students. While many students utilized social media to advocate for social issues, other students used it to spread information on resources for undocumented immigrants. Social media could serve as a tool for students to find information or resources available to them. Dulce discussed her social media usage:

> *"To let other people know that there's resources out there and that they're not alone. Sometimes I felt like I never knew how other people felt about their bodies or about their status. And there's people just like me who go through the same struggles, and they follow me. I did not know anything about that until I posted about it. So, I felt like posting about it made me feel like I can like help other people."*

-Dulce

Student resource accessibility varies because of campus differences in undocumented student programming and ever-changing immigration laws and policies consistently implicate the legal realities of undocumented immigrants. Students interpret sharing resources with other students as a political action because of lack of awareness around resources on campus. As a result, many students like Dulce feel responsible and determined to share important and timely resources that could support other students while they navigate their universities and address the consequences of their undocumented immigration status.

Critical Consciousness

Learning about immigration laws and policies through coursework contributed to students' critical consciousness which empowered students to speak in response to misconceptions around immigration. Alana shared the impact of learning more about immigration:

> *"I have passed on that knowledge to my immediate people that I talked to, or even sometimes correct their ideas, because there are misconceptions. Also (since then) I have been a lot more vocal about it, publicly…I have come to this idea of this slogan "undocumented and unafraid," even though I am afraid and a little, deep down, but I have been trying to get myself more involved … I feel like my status is just this is so important like to me, it's just paving the way somehow."*

-Alana

Being a college student uniquely allowed for Alana and others to learn about immigration laws and policies. In learning about the complexities and injustices around these laws, students were able to reframe their mindset on their circumstance and understand it to be part of a system of injustice, not based on their individual actions. For Alana, breaking past these notions around immigration laws and policies, allowed for her to accept the nature of her status and not allow for

her to feel shame around being undocumented. Instead, she learned how to find power in her voice and appreciate the power in the voices and narratives of her undocumented peers.

Critical consciousness allowed for students to demystify misconceptions around immigration and allowed for student to gain clarity and a sense of control. Julieta explained how being informed allows for her to manage some anxiety that arise from confusion:

> *"At the time when DACA was still relatively new, I would have parents kind of asked me like, "Oh, do you think this is trustworthy?" This and that, and because they know of my background, I would think they would take my advice, like, what I was thinking about DACA, and like, whether they should apply for it for their kid or not? Is the government should they be trusted. And so I think be knowledgeable in that aspect of the program, or be knowledgeable in what to do. In case someone I don't know, like, if I know someone that gets deported, I know what to do. Because I I've retained the information."*

-Julieta

Immigration laws and policies continue to be unstable and unpredictable, which increases feelings of nervousness among students. However, in understanding how and what immigration laws and policies are, students can better prepare for potential detrimental consequences of these laws.

Critical consciousness gave the opportunity for students to reframe their positionality within the undocumented student community and the larger undocumented immigration population in the United States. Previous work has documented feelings of isolation and self-blame that emerge among undocumented students on campus because of their lack of legal status (Cha, Enriquez and Ro 2019, Sudhinaraset et al. 2017). However, exposure into the history of immigration laws and policies minimized these feelings. Victor shared:

> *"Learning about the history with immigrants here in the [CITY IN SOCAL], really helped me see the picture of where we stand in history, where we're standing right now and where we want to go. I did take a Chicano/Latino class*

> *and that was eye opening because before that, I knew I was an immigrant, but I didn't know about the trials and all of the hard work that was put into it. I was like, 'oh, yeah, I got DACA like that's it,' I took it for granted in a way … This is something that I should keep going forward and fighting for it and not only to keep it that way, but like to expand it to open it to others."*

-Victor

Learning about the history of immigrants challenged Victor's perception that his DACA status was secure, and it instead challenged him how to consider how he could participate in efforts that also uplifted others in the community without DACA.

Critical consciousness also allowed for students to understand how their undocumented immigration status is connected to larger structural sources of oppression. Rafael discussed his previous internship where he was placed in a day laborer and women's collective non-profit in which he learned intersectionality and how multiple sources of inequality contribute to experiences:

> *"The main organizer was teaching me the way women think. She said, 'when we (women) think we don't just think in an A to B mindset … we're thinking about our parents and other countries, we're thinking about our children, everybody they have, we're thinking about our partners, we're thinking about our comrades, we're not just like thinking about ourselves we're thinking about everybody the same time.' And that I believe that had an impact in the way I thought."*

-Rafael

Being exposed to this organizing space, shifted Rafael's approach to how he thought about his undocumented immigration status. While he previously internalized his struggles and actively sought out solutions for himself, he now understands that the advocacy he engages to change immigration laws and policies are critical to the larger undocumented immigrant community. Further, he recognizes that as a DACA recipient he is privileged to attain a job in which work conditions and fair pay are available to him. This motivates him to use his privilege to advocate

for undocumented workers' to be treated with dignity, as the history of the United States policies on labor have unfortunately led to work exploitations.

Accordingly, students then were able to feel like they were a part of a larger community and struggle, and this empowered them to contribute to collective efforts to find solutions to exclusionary immigration laws and policies. Mia shared why it is important for students like herself to learn about the history of immigration:

> *"I think it's important and like it has power because not may come from the same country or same city. You can all be categorized as Latino, Latina, or Latinx, and we can all be undocumented, but we all have our different stories and different backgrounds … we should all know about our struggles because we all have similar stories and like similar struggles, but we're all different."*
>
> -Mia

Mia's does not think of differences in immigrant groups as deficits but rather as an asset to identify similarities that would facilitate supporting each other. In recognizing these differences and similarities, students like Mia, expand their critical consciousness to bridge their experiences with other sources of social inequality in efforts to conjure solutions relating to their undocumented immigration status.

Ultimately gaining critical consciousness increased student beliefs that they could contribute to making a change. Melissa expressed how growth with her critical consciousness makes her feel:

> *"I think it I don't want to say if feels good, but I feel like informing other people, especially people who have the power to vote, and to create, like actual not actual change, but like, policy, again, like influence policy. having these conversations with these kinds of people, um I feel I feel like I am doing a part in kind of influencing policy, even if I can't vote, at least I get to talk to people who have the power to do these things, pass laws or whatever. And um I think that it doesn't bring relief to my status, but it makes me feel like I'm contributing in a way."*

-Melissa

Growing their critical consciousness allowed for students to recognize how they contribute to change while taking part in interpersonal efforts to confront misconceptions around immigration and undocumented individuals.

Self-care

Self-care serves as an act of resistance because they allowed for students to focus on protecting their wellbeing. Being students at an institution that constantly reminded them of their lack of status and the challenges associated with it, resulted in students recognizing why it is critical to care for themselves. Practicing self-care increased students' positive feelings about themselves. Ana shared how engaging in self-care makes her feel:

> *"I love doing self-care. It's just usually I don't feel good about it. Like when I have things to get done. I'm not doing it when I'm pushing them away. I mentioned guilt tripping myself out of self-care sometimes. But when I'm able to go through with it. I just get my motivation back. And I just feel encouraged to keep going. And I feel good about myself. And I feel like optimistic about the future. I think I take care of myself pretty well, when I'm in a good mental state."*

-Ana

Descriptions of self-care varied among students, but all recognized that employing a self-care practice or routine was readily available to improve their overall mood. There was also variation on how consistent students were in employing their self-care. Yet, a sole act of self-care was universally understood to beneficial to students' mental health.

Practicing self-care allowed for students to reframe their negative thoughts and instead remind themselves of their own humanity. Clara expressed how self-care allowed for her to feel more grounded:

"I learned that a self-care session goes a really long way because you don't feel like 'oh, you know, you're this, no, you're you hold this, you hold this status.' But that's just status, it doesn't define your whole person, there's so much there's so much more to me than just that and having self-care days and doing things reminds me that there's so many parts of me if that make sense and I don't get stuck on the one (undocumented immigration status)."

-Clara

Clara, like all other students, characterize self-care as a vehicle for reminding themselves that they were not only undocumented, but that they are other pieces of their identity. This allowed for students to improve their mental health because it decreased feelings of unworthiness and instead allowed for them to have feelings of deservingness.

Exercise served as another form of self-care by temporarily pausing their thoughts on their status. Lorena described how exercise facilitates her dealing with stressors around their status:

"I feel more than anything, it will release a lot of tension. I think more than anything it would make me feel better about myself. You know, I think it's because I know how it feels. I know that, just being there, working out, or probably going to yoga, it's a refresher … you get out of class feeling like so relaxed, so calm."

-Lorena

Students like Lorena similarly express that exercising allowed for them to release the stress and tensions they felt in their bodies. Exercise was instrumental for students because it increased their feelings of inner peace and calm. For Ruby, exercising allowed for her to be distracted from thinking about her status. She shared:

"It makes me feel more open than before. It makes me feel as if I'm not a label. When I go hiking, people don't ask me, 'oh, like, are you an immigrant?' They don't ask me that. They're saying, 'Good morning!' … It makes me feel a bit more human than before. Than me just walking around downtown LA, and me asking,

'is ICE here? Are they going to ask me for my ID? Are they going to ask me for this?' I feel like, I'm just a walking target."

-Ruby

Exercising allowed for students like Ruby to be preoccupied with an activity that promoted their health, not harm it. Ruby connected to an activity without thinking about the constraints of her status and instead found feelings of happiness and relaxation.

Reflecting and writing became a form of self-care that gave students the space to focus on healing. Annie discussed how writing helps her deal with her legal situation:

I'm also trying to incorporate doing reflections and just write about it. I love reflection prompts that ask you, 'What are you thankful for? What was something positive that happened today? Or how are you doing?' These kinds of questions really helped me like to deal better with my legal situation.

-Annie

Shifting their questions away from how they were going to deal with the barriers of their status, to instead reflecting on their feelings and strengths contributed to student increases in feeling fortunate and hopeful.

CONCLUSION

Preceding research has documented the agentic actions undocumented students take while pursuing higher education (Contreras 2009, Enriquez 2011, Perez 2009). Specifically, undocumented students have been shown to employ this agency because of the legal vulnerability they experience. However, we know little about the relationship between these agentic responses to legal vulnerability and mental health. Building onto this work and conceptualizations of coping, I examine the acts of resistance taken by students to address their structural marginalization. I contend that these actions are a unique dimension of the stress process because acts of resistance are unique actions taken to mitigate legal vulnerabilities. I find

that using undocumented student programs, engaging in political actions, developing their critical consciousness, and practicing self-care promote wellbeing among students by demystifying the constraints by exclusionary immigration policies. I argue that in examining these actions we can investigate what reduces mental health disparities, but also consider the ways in which mental health is protected and supported.

These findings demonstrate the value in centering student assets when examining their mental health experiences. I build onto existing work that has showcased the political engagement among undocumented students who seek to invoke systemic change, by focusing on the everyday actions that students take to address the challenges created by their undocumented immigration status. In doing so, we affirm the breadth of consequences of illegality (i.e., material, everyday) and learn about why students must employ a variety of actions to address their unique circumstances. Practicing these acts of resistance alleviate concerns around students' immigration status and instead increase feelings of belonging and hope.

My study has two important limitations. First, my data is qualitative, and it does not allow for me to test if acts of resistance are associated to mental health outcomes. Future work should quantitatively test for acts of resistance and their association to both positive and negative mental health outcomes. Second, my study consists of interview data from undocumented college students in the state of California. California has not only implemented inclusionary policies to facilitate educational attainment for undocumented students, but public universities in the state have also taken initiatives to support undocumented students on their campuses. Undocumented college students in a less inclusionary institutional context could have difficulty in employing their acts of resistance because of lack of undocumented student programming, or fear of anti-immigrant sentiments. Future studies should consider different institutional contexts

to understand how they uniquely contribute to the relationship between legal vulnerability, acts of resistance, and mental health.

Ultimately, acts of resistance are tools for navigating an exclusionary socio-legal context. It is important for research to further disentangle how different acts of resistance shape mental health among undocumented college students. This work has implications for undocumented student practitioners who seek to address mental health. Undocumented student programs can create programming that supports student acts of resistance at multiple levels (i.e., systemic, interpersonal, individual). In having programming address these multiple levels of resistance, students may develop the strategies to protect and promote their mental health. This is especially important to consider as immigration laws and policies continue to change, and students eventually have to adjust to life outside of the university.

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CHAPTER THREE

Centering Agency: Examining the Relationship Between Acts of Resistance, Anxiety, and Depression Among Undocumented College Students[2]

Undocumented college students have poorer mental health outcomes than their U.S. citizen peers (Enriquez, Morales Hernandez and Ro 2018, Patler, Hamilton and Savinar 2021, Ro, Rodriguez and Enriquez 2021, Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020); Indeed, a survey of undocumented college students found that they have higher rates of anxiety and depression symptomology than that reported by the general college student population (Enriquez et al. 2021). Research suggests that these outcomes stem from the legal vulnerability created by exclusionary immigration policy (Aranda and Vaquera 2015, Ayón and Becerra 2013, Enriquez, Morales Hernandez and Ro 2018, Enriquez 2020). One study of undocumented students found that higher feelings of legal vulnerability, including the threat of deportation, economic insecurity, social exclusion, and immigration-related discrimination, are all associated with higher depression and anxiety symptomatology (Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). While this work affirms that illegality has negative implications for undocumented immigrants' mental health, it is important to consider the association between practicing agency in the face of structural marginalization and mental health.

Socio-legal research on undocumented students has detailed their efforts to resist structural exclusion and advance the wellbeing of themselves and their community members. We define actions taken to resist structural inequality as *acts of resistance* to center immigrants'

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agency in navigating and contesting their marginalization. Most visibly, undocumented college students led the immigrant youth movement which engaged in political activism for inclusive local, institutional, state, and federal policies (Escudero 2020). They also contest interpersonal exclusion by challenging and reframing discourse around undocumented immigration in public and private spaces (Enriquez and Saguy 2016, Terriquez 2015, Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014, Vaquera, Castañeda and Aranda 2022). For many, navigating structural barriers in their everyday lives can be understood as a form of practicing agency in the face of exclusionary policies blocking access to social institutions, including higher education (Contreras 2009, Enriquez 2011). These acts of resistance are important efforts to resist structural inequality, but we do not know their relationship to mental health.

The purpose of this paper is to determine if and how actions taken by undocumented students to navigate and contest their marginalization are associated with mental health. To meet this goal, we draw on unique survey data with 1,125 undocumented college students in California to examine the relationship between three acts of resistance – political engagement, critical consciousness raising, and undocumented student program usage – and anxiety and depression symptomatology. In doing so, we respond to recent calls for scholarship on immigrant mental health and social determinants of health to examine how structural marginalization contributes to health disparities (Castañeda et al. 2015, Takeuchi 2016). We center structure by drawing on theories of immigrant illegality, which highlight how laws and policies are responsible for making immigration status salient in everyday life and creating social stratification (Dreby 2015, Enriquez 2020, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013). At the same time, we draw inspiration from black feminist theory to advance an asset-based approach that centers undocumented immigrants' agency in responding to an exclusionary socio-legal context that

compromises their mental health (Hooks 1991, Lorde 1992). Ultimately, we contend that structural approaches to studying mental health must also consider immigrants' agency amid structural constraints.

Immigrant Illegality as a Social Determinant of Health

Researchers have established that immigration functions as a social determinant of health, meaning that structural forces that shape immigrant experiences condition a range of health outcomes. In a recent review of this literature, Castañeda and colleagues (2015) write, "Being an immigrant limits behavioral choices and, indeed, often directly impacts and significantly alters the effects of other social positioning, such as race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, because it places individuals in ambiguous and often hostile relationships to the state and its institutions, including health services" (378). They call for research to move beyond behavioral and cultural explanations to explicate how "the institutional practices and policies that limit rights, resources, and sense of security in navigating everyday life" inform health disparities (382). Our study responds to this call by drawing on socio-legal literature to highlight how immigrant illegality functions as a social determinant of health.

Theories of immigrant illegality highlight structural sources of inequality by focusing on how immigration laws and policies make immigration status consequential for undocumented individuals' daily lives (De Genova 2002, Dreby 2015, Enriquez 2020, Gonzales 2016, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013). Specifically, Enriquez (2020) writes, "Structural inequality is produced by immigration law, immigration enforcement and deportation practices, employment policies, and rules dictating access to social services; these restrict undocumented immigrants' everyday activities, shape decision-making, and limit upward mobility" (10). It is through these institutional policies and practices that immigration status is made salient as it feeds fears of

deportation and family separation (Aranda and Vaquera 2015, Enriquez and Millán 2019) creates systemic barriers to securing legal employment (Amuedo-Dorantes and Bansak 2012, Chang 2019), limits pathways to accessing and succeeding in higher education (Enriquez et al. 2019, Gonzales 2016, Kreisberg and Hsin 2021), and constrains social inclusion and participation (Dreby 2015, Enriquez 2020, Licona and Maldonado 2014).

Immigrant illegality hinders undocumented college students' incorporation into U.S. society, which in turn is consequential for their mental health. Mental health scholarship has established that immigration status conditions differential health outcomes; specifically, undocumented students have been found to have worse mental health outcomes than U.S. citizens and lawfully present immigrants (Cadenas, Nienhusser, Sosa and Moreno 2022a, Hagan et al. 2023, Nienhusser and Romandia 2022). This research directs attention to structural barriers by calling attention to immigration status, while scholarship using an immigrant illegality framework demonstrates the ways in which policies make immigration status meaningful in ways that contribute to poor health outcomes. Studies of undocumented students have documented their high rates of stress (Cadenas et al. 2022a, Enriquez, Morales Hernandez and Ro 2018), anxiety (Cadenas et al. 2022a, Flores Morales and Garcia 2021, Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021), depression (Cadenas and Nienhusser 2021, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021), and thoughts of self-harm or suicidal ideation (Hagan et al. 2023). Further qualitative work has documented that exclusionary immigration policy contributes to an immense number of stressors for undocumented individuals, including economic insecurity, deportation or detention fears, threat of family separation, uncertain futures, and social exclusion (Enriquez, Morales Hernandez and Ro 2018, Morales Hernandez and Enriquez 2021, Rodriguez, Enriquez, Ro and Ayón 2023).

While this work affirms that immigrant illegality has negative implications for mental health, it is important to consider how immigrants manage the consequences of immigration status. Some scholarship has examined coping strategies, documenting how undocumented students cope to manage their immigration-related stress, including practicing diversion, reframing, and/or normalizing (Kam, Pérez Torres and Steuber Fazio 2018). Similarly, accessing social support has been found to attenuate emotional distress; for example, having social support from faculty, peers, and mentors was associated with lower depression and anxiety symptomatology among undocumented college students (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). However, some coping strategies may not support positive mental health, such as the use and/or abuse of substances (Cardoso 2018). Immigrant illegality scholarship further suggests that undocumented immigrants are not passive receivers of their circumstances by highlighting how undocumented immigrants can take an agentic approach to learning about, navigating, and adapting to the structural constraints associated with their immigration status. Enriquez and Millán (2019) document how undocumented young adults develop a nuanced understanding of deportation threats, reducing their concerns for their own deportation and thus shaping the extent to which deportability may harm their mental health. Menjívar and Lakhani (2016) and Enriquez (2020) highlight how undocumented immigrants change their behaviors in their personal and civic lives to navigate immigration laws and policies and possibly adjust their immigration status and remove the structural constraints they face. Further, students in particular, have a long history of political action to challenge exclusionary immigration policies and expand access to social inclusion (Terriquez 2017, Zepeda-Millán 2017). This scholarship suggests that undocumented young adults are consistently taking action to negotiate or resist their structural marginalization. Drawing inspiration from the immigrant

illegality literature, we seek to consider the extent to which practicing agentic resistance in the face of structural inequality may be associated with the mental health outcomes of undocumented college students.

Exploring Agency and Acts of Resistance

We explore acts of resistance to advance an asset-based approach that centers undocumented immigrants' agency in responding to an exclusionary socio-legal context that compromises their mental health. Pushing back on work that uses a deficit orientation, we use an asset-based approach in which we focus on students' strengths and agency. This definition is informed by existing education research which has posited that marginalized students' employ their assets to navigate the social inequalities present in schools and schooling (Yosso 2005). Accordingly, we define *acts of resistance* as actions taken to resist structural inequality. This paper examines the case of undocumented immigrant college students as they resist the exclusionary socio-legal context that creates immigrant illegality. However, other marginalized groups can also practice acts of resistance. For example, the U.S. citizen family members of undocumented immigrants may practice acts of resistance as they experience and negotiate the socio-legal context (Dreby 2015, Enriquez 2020, López 2021, Vega 2023). Acts of resistance can be practiced by anyone negotiating one or more structural inequalities such as those tied to race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Our conceptualization of acts of resistance is informed by black feminist scholars who have drawn on lived experience to theorize marginality beyond being a site of deprivation to envision it as a site of resistance. bell hooks (1991) writes that marginality is "a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (20). Further, Audre Lorde draws our attention to everyday

forms of resistance wherein one's existence and survival are forms of resistance in the face of the structural inequalities that harm wellbeing. Specifically, in coping with health challenges she writes, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde 1992). Faced with interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 2002), black women, and other marginalized populations like undocumented immigrants, engage in everyday forms of resistance to claim space for themselves and protect their health and wellbeing. This black feminist lens shifts attention to acts of agency that marginalized individuals invoke to challenge structural inequality in their everyday lives. Studies on resistance have outlined the knowledge and capacity building processes that marginalized communities gain through their collective experiences navigating societal injustices (Cox 2015, Tang 2008). This theorizing encourages us to adopt an asset-based approach wherein acts of resistance are important indicators of what marginalized individuals do to combat structural marginalization, rather than simply suffer from it. Our study's purpose is to examine how mental health is associated with three acts of resistance commonly practiced by undocumented college students as they exert their agency in exclusionary socio-legal contexts: political engagement, critical consciousness raising, and undocumented student program usage.

Political engagement is a common form through which college students, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds, exercise their agency to seek systemic change (Speer and Peterson 2000). Undocumented immigrants are motivated to engage politically by exclusionary immigration policies and perceived legal vulnerability. Scholars have documented how undocumented college students pioneered an immigrant youth movement that campaigned for inclusive institutional, local, state, and federal policies and was moderately successful in mitigating the negative effects of illegality in everyday life (Enriquez et al. 2019,

Escudero 2020, Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014). Undocumented college students are also politically active in other movements that seek to advance social justice by addressing intersectional inequalities (Terriquez and Milkman 2021). Existing work on political engagements' impact on college student mental health has mixed results. For example, Ballard, Li and Brocato (2020) found that various forms of political engagement can support wellbeing; specifically, signing a petition or participating in a protest march were negatively associated with loneliness and voting in a local or national election or contacting a representative were positively associated with self-esteem and happiness. Studies of sexual minority activists suggest that the frequency of attending a community organization meeting is associated with positive mental health outcomes as collective action can buffer the negative association between heterosexist discrimination and wellbeing (Velez and Moradi 2016) and reduce symptoms of depression (Ramirez-Valles et al. 2005). A study of Latinx and Black students found that Latinx students who have higher levels of political activism (i.e., donating to causes, volunteered at a social or political action, joining a protest, march, or meeting, boycotting, buycotting, and campaigning) have higher levels of depressive symptoms, but Black students who were more politically involved did not have a significant association to depression and instead reported higher levels of stress (Hope et al. 2018). Further, students who are politically active on social media report higher levels of stress (Hisam et al. 2017). Among undocumented students, those who more frequently engage in advocacy communication or who engage most via social media report more severe depression and anxiety symptoms than infrequent advocators while those who engage in political organizations have lower rates of anxiety (Cornejo, Ayón and Enriquez 2022).

While political engagement focuses on addressing systemic exclusion, critical consciousness raising targets interpersonal level exclusion by challenging and reframing the

discourse around undocumented immigration. Paulo Freire (1970) conceptualized critical consciousness as the result of an individual developing an understanding of structural oppression which ultimately motivates them to advocate for socially just change. Critical consciousness raising captures how undocumented students exert agency by drawing on their awareness of the socio-legal context to engage in interpersonal conversations when confronted with anti-immigrant sentiment and exclusionary immigration policies. Undocumented students and youth often engage in these conversations, rather than more public political action, due to threat of deportation (Enriquez and Saguy 2016). Such critical consciousness raising efforts seek to attenuate the interpersonal exclusion fostered by an exclusionary immigration policy context. Research shows that social exclusion due to the immigration policy context is associated with increased depression and anxiety (Ayón and Becerra 2013, Salas, Ayón and Gurrola 2013, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). If successful, efforts to reduce interpersonal social exclusion through critical consciousness raising may reduce exposure to social exclusion and thus improve mental health outcomes. Alternatively, engaging in such conversations may increase exposure to anti-immigrant sentiment and heighten feelings of social exclusion, further harming mental health.

Finally, accessing undocumented student programs is an agentic action undertaken to address and resist socio-legal exclusion on the individual level. Unlike political engagement and critical consciousness raising which focus on changing the socio-legal context, this act of resistance centers students' attempts to mitigate the effect illegality has on their everyday life by accessing resources. At the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU), where our study took place, all campuses have a center and staff dedicated to serving undocumented students. These institutional spaces help students navigate exclusionary socio-legal contexts by providing resources designed to address students' legal vulnerability (e.g., legal

services, services to mitigate financial insecurity), operating programs that help students cope, and creating an empowering space of belonging (Cisneros, Valdivia, Reyna Rivarola and Russell 2021, Enriquez et al. 2019, Sanchez and So 2015). Accessing these resources can be seen as pushing back against socio-legal exclusion given that anti-immigrant narratives frame undocumented immigrants as a drain on social services and discourage them from accessing resources (Cha, Enriquez and Ro 2019, Huber 2010). Prior research on college student resource use suggests that accessing these types of programs can promote feelings of campus belonging, which is positively associated with mental health (Gopalan and Brady 2020, Strayhorn 2018). Yet, some qualitative research suggests undocumented students who use these services may experience heightened feelings of legal vulnerability which may drive them to use these services and may be reinforced when these resources cannot fully address underlying constraints associated with undocumented legal status (Enriquez et al. nd); thus, it is possible that undocumented student service usage may be associated with poor mental health outcomes.

This study uses primary survey data to explore whether the acts of resistance described above – political engagement, critical consciousness raising, and undocumented student program usage – are associated with depression and anxiety symptomatology among undocumented college students. These three acts of resistance represent three types of agentic actions that undocumented students can take to address socio-legal exclusion at the systemic, interpersonal, and individual levels. We do not advance explicit hypotheses as to the direction of the association between each act of resistance and mental health outcomes due to the varying results of prior studies on political engagement and the limited research on critical consciousness raising and undocumented student service usage.

Data and Methods

This study draws on survey data collected from 1,125 undocumented undergraduate students in California by the UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE). Participants were recruited from all nine University of California (UC) undergraduate campuses and nine of the 23 California State University (CSU) campuses. CSU campuses were selected to match the geographic location of the UC campuses. Given the lack of systematically collected and publicly available population level data on undocumented college students, a sampling frame from which to randomly recruit participants did not exist. Instead, we established quotas and recruitment strategies to ensure we reached a wide range of students and had a sample size sufficient for statistical analysis. Announcements to recruit participants were distributed widely through emails and social media posts from each campus' undocumented student support services office, faculty teaching large general education courses and ethnic studies courses, departmental and university office newsletters, and undocumented student organizations.

Survey responses were collected online via Qualtrics and had an estimated completion time of 25–35 minutes. Eligible participants had to self-identify as being over age 18, having at least one immigrant parent, and being a currently enrolled undergraduate student at a UC or CSU campus. Students had to identify as being born outside of the United States and having no permanent legal status (e.g., no current legal status, DACA, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or some other status they considered to be undocumented). Upon completion, respondents were emailed a $10 electronic gift card. All completed surveys were reviewed for validity; incomplete responses, ineligible respondents, and suspected fabricated responses were removed using a detailed protocol. All project activities were approved by the University of California, Irvine IRB.

The online survey was administered from March to June 2020. Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent implementation of shelter-in-place policies in California, the research team temporarily paused recruitment during the second half of March. Data collection resumed after March 30. At several points throughout the survey, including when responding to questions about their psychological state, participants were instructed to answer the questions based on what was typical prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

Variables

Mental Health Outcomes

Depression and anxiety symptomatology are our two outcome variables. Depression is measured through the validated and widely recognized Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) scale (Kroenke, Spitzer and Williams 2001). The responses are summed across all nine scale items, resulting in a score that ranged from 0 to 27 (α=.903). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which nine symptoms bothered them over the last two weeks. Response options included: “not at all” (0), “several days” (1), “more than half of the days” (2), “nearly every day” (3). Sample items for depression are: “feeling down, depressed or hopeless,” “feeling tired or having little energy,” and “poor appetite or overeating.” Anxiety is measured through the validated Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale which consists of seven items which are summed as a score ranging from 0 to 21 (α= .931) (Spitzer et al. 2006). This scale asks respondents to indicate how often they have been bothered by various problems over the past two weeks. Similar to depression, answers are scored as follows: “not at all” (0), “several days” (1), “more than half of the days” (2), “nearly every day” (3). Sample items for anxiety are: “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge,” “trouble relaxing,” and “becoming easily annoyed or irritable."

Political Engagement

Political engagement was assessed with four items that were then summed to create a political engagement score. Participants were asked, "Below is a list of things that some people do to express their views. For each one, identify how often you do it." Items included, "Sign a petition regarding an issue or problem that concerns you," "Buy a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company," "Wear buttons or display stickers with social or political messages," and "Expressed a political point of view during a class discussion." Each response ranged from 0-3, representing "never," "rarely," "sometimes," and "often." Participants were also provided the option to respond, 'I don't know,' which was recoded as a missing value for all indicators used. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model was used to examine all four items for political advocacy. The CFA fit the data well: $\chi 2[2, 1275]=19.347$, $p<.001$; RMSEA=.08, 90% (CI) = .052, .118; CFI = .97, SRMR = .028. The responses are summed across all four items, resulting in a score that ranged from 0 to 12. Higher scores represent more political engagement ($\alpha = 0.740$).

Critical Consciousness Raising

The survey included five items that asked about student's engagement in immigrant conversations to capture critical consciousness raising. Items included, "Spoken up when you have heard people make false statements about immigrants," "Talked with someone about overhearing others make demeaning comments about immigrants," "Confronted someone because you heard them use the word 'illegal' or other derogatory terms for immigrants," "Wanted to change the subject when you have heard people talking about immigrants in a demeaning way," and "Talked with others about what immigration policy means for immigrants." Responses ranging from 0-4, representing "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often,"

and “almost all the time.” An omnibus CFA model was used to examine all five items. The CFA model fit the data well: $\chi 2[5, 1273] = 21.291$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .051, 90% (CI) = .030, .074; CFI = .99, SRMR = .018. The responses are summed across all items, resulting in a score that ranged from 0 to 20. Higher scores represent more critical consciousness raising ($\alpha = 0.760$).

Undocumented Student Program Use

Resource use is measured with a single question which asked, “Please identify how frequently you have done the following this academic year:” “visited the undocumented student program office/center.” Responses ranged from 0 to 4, representing “never,” “a few times a year,” “about once a month,” “about once a week,” or “more than once a week.” Responses of “about once a month,” “about once a week,” and “more than once a week” were collapsed due to the small sample sizes in each of these responses. Individuals who responded “I don’t think this exists on my campus” were reclassified as “never” visiting because all campuses have such a program. This measure is an original survey item.

Covariates: Demographic Characteristics

Additional controls for our models included age (continuous), immigration status (0 = no status, 1 = DACA), gender (0 = male, 1 = female), and Latina/o/x race/ethnicity (0 = not Latino/a/x, 1 = Latino/a/x) represent basic student characteristics. We include dummy variables for each campus with a student sample size of at least 40. Finally, we control for year in school. Our inclusion of covariates is based on previous research showing the importance of age, DACA status, gender, and racial-ethnic identity in mental health outcomes (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). Further, campus is important to control for given

differences in undocumented student resources and campus cultures which may affect the acts of resistance available for students to engage in (Cisneros and Rivarola 2020).

Analysis

Analysis was completed with Stata 15. We conducted a series of linear regression models to test our hypotheses. Multiple ordinary least squares regression has been used in the past by studies examining depression (Ganong and Larson 2011) and anxiety scores (Culatta and Clay-Warner 2021). The primary relationship of interest is between acts of resistance and depression as well as anxiety symptomatology. The first set of models (Models 1-3) within each mental health outcome includes each act of resistance regressed by the mental health outcome. Subsequent models include each act of resistance and sociodemographic covariates (Models 4-6). Finally, the last model (Model 7) includes a model with all acts of resistance and sociodemographic covariates.

Our final sample size was 1,125 college students. About 10% of the original sample were excluded due to missing data. Compared to the sample dropped due to missing data, the included sample had slightly lower anxiety score, slightly lower depression score, and slightly lower critical consciousness raising score. The included sample were less likely to be Latinx. This may mean our results are underestimates of the associations between acts of resistance and mental health.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample. About three quarters of the sample identified as women (76%). Almost all (92%) of participants identified as Latino, Latina,

Latinx, or Hispanic. Three-quarters (75%) of the sample identified as being beneficiaries of the DACA program, with the remainder reporting no legal status. Over two thirds (69%) of the participants were upperclassmen (third-, fourth-, or fifth-year students) with 31% being first and second years. The average age of participants was 21.79 (SD = 3.39). The mean depression score was 9.95 (SD: 6.58) which is categorized as a moderate level of depression (Kroenke, Spitzer and Williams 2001). Anxiety average score was 8.84 (SD = 6).

Engagement in acts of resistance ranged but was generally moderate. For political engagement, the average score is 1.41 (SD = 0.84), falling between "rarely" and "sometimes" on the scale. Critical consciousness raising's average score is 2.04 (SD = 0.94), the equivalent of reporting "sometimes" on all items. Almost three-quarters reported visiting the undocumented student program office during the academic year with 33% saying they never visited, 37% saying they visited a few times a year, and 30% visiting about once a month or more.

Regression Results: Depression

Table 2 shows the results of the OLS regressions modeling depression score. Models 1-3 show the association between each act of resistance, respectively, and depression scores. Models 4-6 add covariates. Our unadjusted model (Model 1) shows a positive and statistically significant association between political engagement and depression score. Higher scores of political engagement were positively associated with higher depression scores (b: 1.325, se: 0.229). This indicates that students who reported higher levels of engagement in activities such as expressing political views via signing a petition or sharing a political opinion during a class discussion also reported higher levels of depression symptoms. Model 4 added our covariates. Once we controlled for demographic factors, political engagement remained relevant for depression scores (b: 1.265, se: 0.234). Gender was the only sociodemographic covariate that was significant in the

model. Compared to students who identified as men, participants who identified as women reported higher depression symptomatology.

Critical consciousness raising is examined in Model 2. Higher critical consciousness raising was positively associated with higher depression scores (b: 1.556, se: 0.203). This means that students who reported higher levels of engagement in activities such as confronting someone for saying derogatory comments about immigrants or speaking up when people make false statements about immigrants also report higher levels of depression symptoms. This association persisted after including sociodemographic controls as shown in Model 5 (b: 1.456, se: 0.205). Model 3 takes into consideration usage of undocumented student programs on campus. Variation in frequency of visiting undocumented student programs did not have a statistically significant association with depression scores. This indicates that students who visited undocumented student programs on their campus more did have higher or lower depression symptoms compared with those who did not visit the office at all or who did so less frequently. Model 7 considers all acts of resistance simultaneously to test their collective associations to depression. Higher scores on political engagement were associated with higher depression scores (b: 0.646, se: 0.263). Similarly, higher levels of critical consciousness raising were associated with higher depression scores (b: 1.193, se: 0.234). Again, undocumented student program usage did not show statistical significance. Model 7 explains 9.4% of the variation in depression score.

Regression Results: Anxiety

Table 3 shows regression results for anxiety. Results are organized similar to Table 2. Model 1 shows the bivariate regression between political engagement and anxiety score. We find a positive and statistically significant association between political engagement and anxiety score (b: 1.456, se: 0.20). This indicates that students who reported higher levels of engagement in

activities such as expressing political views via signing a petition or sharing a political opinion during a class discussion also reported higher levels of anxiety symptoms. Once sociodemographic factors are controlled for (Model 4) this association persists and remains similar in size (b: 1.322, se: 0.212). Model 2 shows the association between critical consciousness raising and anxiety score. It shows a positive and statistically significant association between critical consciousness raising and anxiety. For each increase in unit in critical consciousness raising, anxiety score increases by 1.769 (se: 0.182). And this association remains similar even after sociodemographic controls are adjusted for in Model 5 (b: 1.622, se: 0.185). This means that students who reported higher levels of engagement in activities such as confronting someone for saying derogatory comments about immigrants or speaking up when people make false statements about immigrants also report higher levels of anxiety symptoms. Further, sociodemographic factors included in our models could not fully explain this association. Model 3 shows the association between undocumented program use and anxiety score. As with the depression model, there is not a statistically significant association between using this program and anxiety score. This remains similar in the model with sociodemographic control variables. These results indicate that students who do and do not visit undocumented student programs in their campus do not differ in their levels of anxiety symptoms. In Model 7, both the coefficients or political engagement and critical consciousness raising remain statistically significant albeit they are slightly smaller in size. Model 7 explains 12% of the variance in depression.

Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of our study is to respond to recent calls of social determinants of health scholarship by examining how structural marginalization contributes to health disparities,

including in immigrant mental health (Castañeda et al. 2015, Takeuchi 2016). To meet this aim, we draw inspiration from immigrant illegality scholarship and black feminist theory by deploying an asset-based approach that centers undocumented immigrants' agency in responding to an exclusionary socio-legal context that compromises their mental health. Specifically, we examined the association between undocumented college students' acts of resistance and their mental health, measured as anxiety and depression symptomatology. We found that political engagement and critical consciousness raising were both associated with higher depression and anxiety scores. Frequency in visiting undocumented student programs or services on campus was not associated with either mental health outcome. Our findings suggest that undocumented college students' efforts to navigate and contest their marginalization is negatively associated with their mental health.

Political engagement was associated with higher rates of anxiety and depression symptomology. Previous research on structurally marginalized individuals and college students had found mixed evidence as to the direction of the association between political engagement and mental health (Cornejo, Ayón and Enriquez 2022, Hisam et al. 2017, Ramirez-Valles et al. 2005). This difference may be due to differences in how ours and prior studies measured political engagement. We used four items to generate a political engagement score: signing a petition, buying certain products because of their social or political values, displaying social or political messages, and expressing a political point of view during a class discussion. These items capture individual self-expression and awareness of larger structural inequalities. However, they do not capture participation in collective political actions. It may be that politically-related group activities could facilitate community building which may have a positive association with mental health because it builds social support and capital. However, an individual act of engagement,

such as signing a petition, can be an indicator of greater awareness of social inequalities and in turn negatively associated to mental health. Future work should measure and test the role of different forms of political engagement to further unpack the association among different political actions and mental health.

Critical consciousness raising was also associated with higher anxiety and depression scores. The limited research on critical consciousness raising did not allow us to hypothesize a direction. It may be that engaging in political actions and in critical dialogues about immigration and immigration policy are associated with poorer mental health because such activities may increase the stress experienced by undocumented immigrants (Moreno et al. 2022). Indeed, a study of undocumented students' advocacy communication shows that individuals who frequently engage in advocacy communication have poorer mental health (Cornejo, Ayón and Enriquez 2022). Notably, while these two acts of resistance seek to address different levels of socio-legal exclusion (i.e., systemic and interpersonal), they both reflect efforts to challenge structural marginalization and seek just change. The fraught nature of contemporary immigration politics could expose undocumented students to increased anti-immigrant sentiment or subject them to persistent policy failures (Wray-Lake, Halgunseth and Witherspoon 2022). These realities may increase the feelings of social exclusion, a dimension of legal vulnerability associated with increased depression and anxiety symptomatology (Ayón and Becerra 2013, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021).

Use of undocumented student programs was not statistically significantly associated with anxiety or depression symptomatology. While the other two acts of resistance reflect efforts to challenge structural marginalization and seek just change, this one captured students' attempt to navigate the effect illegality on the individual level. The lack of an association may indicate that

the level at which resistance is practiced matters so that individual level acts of resistance may not be associated with one's mental health. However, it is important to recognize that undocumented student program use may be positively associated with other indicators of undocumented student wellbeing including sense of empowerment, educational success, and belonging. We should also consider that another potential explanation for undocumented student program usage's lack of significance is that the item measures frequency in visitation, not necessarily the resources they accessed. Thinking about this in relation to resource use as an act of resistance, students could be visiting the space but not necessarily accessing resources in the absence of a significant event occurring. Moreover, our lack of detection of an association between undocumented student program use and better mental health outcomes may be because students with a range of mental health statuses visit the program office; students with high mental health needs might make more use of the undocumented student program office. If this is the case, any positive association between frequency of attendance to undocumented student program offices and positive mental health outcomes would be muted. Future work should continue to interrogate potential associations between mental health and individual level acts of resistance, including resource use.

Our study demonstrates the importance of considering immigrants' agency amid structural constraints when studying their mental health. We offer *acts of resistance* as a unique theoretical framework to capture actions taken to resist structural inequality. We expand on prior research which has focused on political engagement (Cornejo, Ayón and Enriquez 2022, Rosales, Enriquez and Nájera 2021) by focusing on three actions taken by undocumented college students. Yet, there are many more actions that can be taken and are practiced by a range of marginalized individuals. Future research should move beyond the study of political engagement

to consider acts of resistance across a range of acts and populations. Qualitative work should also explore the processes in which these actions are employed and how exactly they factor into mental health. It may be that there are different ways of engaging in each act of resistance that leads to mixed results or that some types of resistance are less correlated with one's mental health. Such research would benefit from using a social determinants of health framework to interrogate structural explanations for mental health inequities. Yet, scholars should adopt asset-based approaches that affirm individual agency while investigating the relationships between structural marginalization and wellbeing. This means recognizing that marginalized people are not simply victims of structural inequality but also that they actively resist their marginalization in a myriad of ways. Their agentic responses are worthy of interrogation and must be studied to understand the full scope of the process through which structural inequality relates to mental health. This work should also examine the relationship between gender and acts of resistance given that gender was a significant covariate in our models and that the profiles varied by gender in some cases.

Our study also affirms the importance of drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship when examining mental health disparities among marginalized populations, like undocumented immigrants. When visioning ways to advance the limited research on immigrant mental health, Takeuchi (2016) called on scholars to draw theoretical inspiration from other fields, such as immigration scholarship, to better account for the structural barriers posed to immigrants' wellbeing. We did this by turning to the socio-legal scholarship on immigrant illegality which has highlighted how laws and policies create structural inequality through an exclusionary socio-legal context (Enriquez 2020, Gonzales 2016, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013) but also recognizes immigrants' agency to interpret and respond to these barriers (Enriquez and Millán

2019, Enriquez 2020, Menjívar and Lakhani 2016). Turning to black feminist theorizing (Hooks 1991, Lorde 1992) further enabled us to theorize acts of resistance as a wide range of actions marginalized individuals can take to resist structural inequality. These literatures supported our adoption of an asset-based approach wherein acts of resistance capture how undocumented college students were responding to an exclusionary socio-legal context that compromises their mental health.

It is important to note that our study focuses on undocumented college students attending 4-year public universities in California. California is one of the most inclusive policy contexts for undocumented immigrants, providing access to driver's licenses and limiting interactions with immigration enforcement (Enriquez, Vera and Ramakrishnan 2019, Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). Eligible undocumented college students in California can also access in-state tuition rates and state financial aid. Further, public institutions in California have moved towards establishing undocumented student programming. Collectively these inclusive state and institutional policies shield students from experiencing severe legal vulnerabilities. Undocumented immigrants and undocumented students in more exclusionary policy contexts have different experiences (Burciaga and Martinez 2017, Silver 2018). Thus, future work should examine whether these relationships are consistent in other state contexts.

Our study had some limitations. First, the study employed a cross-sectional survey approach so we cannot discuss causality. Second, participants self-selected into the study and may not be representative of undocumented public college students in California. Comparisons to national online surveys of undocumented students and young adults, suggest that men, non-Latinx students, and those with later age of arrival may be underrepresented in our study (see Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2015, Wong and Valdivia 2014). Participants were

also partly recruited through undocumented student services, possibly leading to the over-representation of participants who used undocumented student services. It may be that respondents may have been more likely to engage in acts of resistance compared to those who did not complete the study, leading to an overestimation of our results. Third, the survey uses self-report measures for anxiety and depression symptomatology. It is possible that some participants underreported their symptoms due to mental health stigma or a normalization of their strain (Cha, Enriquez and Ro 2019). Alternatively, participants who more frequently practice acts of resistance may be exposed to resources or conversations that make them more willing or able to accurately report their symptoms. Fourth, we collected data during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have influenced the prevalence of depression and usage of acts of resistance among students. Participants were instructed to answer based on pre-pandemic experiences. However, and lastly, asking participants to recall how they felt in the last two week prior to COVID-19 could have contributed to faulty responses as recollection of these events may have been difficult.

Finally, our study has implications for practitioners working with undocumented college students. Practitioners should recognize that the actions taken to resist structural constraints, like immigrant illegality, likely have consequences for one's mental health. Student affairs practitioners should offer services and design programming which this in mind to minimize the potential negative mental health impacts on engaging in acts of resistance. For example, activist spaces could include discussions of how political engagement may be associated with one's mental health and offer tools to mitigate this potential association. Programming and services should also be designed and advertised in ways that will not exacerbate feelings of social exclusion that could be associated with one's mental health. Mental health practitioners should

be informed about the unique stressors faced by this marginalized student group and be attentive to the various ways in which they resist the constraints of their status may also be associated with their mental health.

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Appendix A: Results Tables

Table 3.1: Summary of key variables, UC PromISE data set 2020, undocumented college students

	Mean/proportion	SD	Min	Max
Mental Health Outcomes				
Depression score	9.95	6.58	0	27
Anxiety score	8.84	6.00	0	21
Covariates				
Women		76.09		
Age	21.79	3.39	18	42
Year in School				
First year undergraduate	16.53			
Second year	14.93			
Third year	32.36			
Fourth year	26.84			
Fifth year or more	9.33			
DACA recipient	75.11			
Latino, Latinas, or Hispanic	92			
Predictors - Acts of Resistance				
Political engagement score	1.41	0.84	0	3
Critical consciousness raising score	2.04	0.94	0	4
Undocumented student program office visit frequency				
Never	33.16			
A few times a year	37.07			

About once a month or more	29.78
N	1,125

Table 3.2: Regression coefficients with depression score as the outcome, UC PromISE data set 2020, Undocumented college students

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Political engagement	1.325**			1.265**			0.646*
	(0.229)			(0.234)			(0.263)
Critical consciousness raising		1.556**			1.456**		1.193**
		(0.203)			(0.205)		(0.234)
Undocumented program use							
Undocu program use more than once a month - combined = 1, A few times a year			-0.240			-0.228	-0.478
			(0.469)			(0.471)	(0.462)
Undocu program use more than once a month - combined = 2, More than once a month			0.348			0.368	-0.176
			(0.495)			(0.498)	(0.492)
Women				1.235**	1.059*	1.503**	0.990*
				(0.456)	(0.453)	(0.459)	(0.453)
Age				-0.108	-0.107	-0.106	-0.111
				(0.0695)	(0.0688)	(0.0704)	(0.0687)
Year in school							

Second year				0.471	0.600	0.437	0.644
				(0.698)	(0.692)	(0.708)	(0.692)
Third year				0.167	0.420	0.230	0.378
				(0.650)	(0.645)	(0.659)	(0.644)
Fourth year				-1.112	-0.860	-1.035	-0.863
				(0.703)	(0.698)	(0.715)	(0.699)
Fifth year or more				0.559	0.777	0.644	0.748
				(0.887)	(0.879)	(0.898)	(0.878)
DACA recipient				-0.627	-0.707	-0.525	-0.687
				(0.470)	(0.466)	(0.479)	(0.468)
Latina, Latino, Latinx, or Hispanic				-0.414	-0.322	-0.194	-0.425
				(0.732)	(0.723)	(0.742)	(0.726)
Constant	8.089**	6.772**	9.938**	12.49**	11.24**	14.01**	11.21**
	(0.376)	(0.457)	(0.341)	(1.905)	(1.907)	(1.927)	(1.919)
Campus fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125
R-squared	0.029	0.050	0.001	0.071	0.088	0.048	0.094

Standard errors in parentheses

** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 3.3: Regression coefficients with anxiety score as the outcome, UC PromISE data set 2020, Undocumented college students

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Political engagement	1.456**			1.322**			0.602*
	(0.207)			(0.212)			(0.236)
Critical consciousness raising		1.769**			1.622**		1.346**
		(0.182)			(0.185)		(0.210)
Undocumented program use							
Undocu program use more than once a month - combined = 1, A few times a year			-0.356			-0.296	-0.558
			(0.426)			(0.428)	(0.415)
Undocu program use more than once a month - combined = 2, More than once a month			0.794			0.900*	0.314
			(0.450)			(0.452)	(0.442)
Women				1.981**	1.766**	2.263**	1.711**
				(0.413)	(0.408)	(0.416)	(0.407)
Age				-0.105	-0.104	-0.105	-0.110
				(0.0629)	(0.0619)	(0.0639)	(0.0617)
Year in school							
Second year				0.388	0.537	0.395	0.620

				(0.632)	(0.622)	(0.643)	(0.621)
Third year				0.536	0.816	0.617	0.788
				(0.589)	(0.580)	(0.598)	(0.579)
Fourth year				-0.309	-0.0320	-0.207	-0.0108
				(0.637)	(0.628)	(0.649)	(0.628)
Fifth year or more				1.198	1.438	1.308	1.431
				(0.803)	(0.790)	(0.815)	(0.788)
DACA recipient				-0.188	-0.280	-0.0198	-0.197
				(0.426)	(0.420)	(0.435)	(0.421)
Latina, Latino, Latinx, or Hispanic				-0.406	-0.323	-0.252	-0.487
				(0.663)	(0.651)	(0.673)	(0.652)
Constant	6.791**	5.222**	8.735**	9.064**	7.572**	10.58**	7.547**
	(0.340)	(0.410)	(0.310)	(1.726)	(1.715)	(1.749)	(1.723)
Campus fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125	1,125
R-squared	0.042	0.077	0.006	0.082	0.112	0.056	0.120

Standard errors in parentheses

** p<0.01, * p<0.05

CONCLUSION

The goal of this dissertation is to contribute to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of mental health among undocumented college students. I sought to illuminate on the processes and experiences in which students experience psychological wellbeing. While existing work has investigated the detrimental consequences of immigration laws and policies on undocumented students' mental health. Studies have also demonstrated that undocumented individuals employ their agency to manage and navigate the socio-legal context of immigration. However, we know little about these actions of agency and resistance shape undocumented students' mental health.

My dissertation examines how undocumented students experience their mental health and promote their psychological wellbeing in an exclusionary and unpredictable socio-legal context. I address the following questions:

1. How do undocumented students experience emotional distress and psychological wellbeing?

2. How do undocumented students practice agency to promote psychological wellbeing?

3. To what extent is engaging in acts of resistance associated with emotional distress, measured as anxiety and depression?

To answer these questions, I draw on 66 in-depth interviews and analyzed a unique survey data set composed of 1,277 Californian undocumented college students. I argue that despite legal barriers and vulnerabilities, undocumented students practice agency to promote and protect their wellbeing. I take an asset-based approach to illustrate how undocumented college students take action to manage their mental health and promote their psychological wellbeing. Throughout, I

advance the concept of *acts of resistance* to capture undocumented students' agency in navigating and contesting their structural marginalization.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Chapter one, "Emotional Rollercoaster: The Consequences of the Socio-Legal Context on Undocumented Students' Mental Health Processes," begins to elucidate my argument by tracing the processes in which undocumented students experience both emotional distress and psychological wellbeing. Building onto my interviewees' descriptions of their mental health as a rollercoaster, I demonstrate how the process is shaped by the socio-legal context and the agentic actions students employ. I find that as students confront their legal realities, they experience emotional distress resulting in downward motions (i.e., spirals, plunges). These downward motions stem from students' feelings of legal insecurity and uncertainty that ever-changing and unpredictable create. Specifically, students express that their downward motions are a result of threatened changes to immigration policies, financial concerns, and deportation worries. Yet, students utilize their agency by drawing strength from their undocumented immigration status, and envisioning opportunities for themselves to uplift themselves and experience psychological wellbeing. However, I also find that despite these actions of agency, students cannot solely experience psychological wellbeing because of the underlying unstable and unpredictable socio-legal context.

In chapter two, "Acts of Resistance: An Asset-Based Lens to Examine Mental Health," I explore in-depth the agentic actions students use to resist the structural marginalization they experience and how those foster their psychological wellbeing. Using undocumented student programs, political engagement, critical consciousness raising, and self-care are all actions that students rely on to mitigate the consequences of their undocumented immigration status. Using

undocumented student programming allows for students to access information on resources that could alleviate consequences or help them manage the legal vulnerabilities they experience. In addition, they facilitate networking and/or community building among undocumented students. Political engagement served as a mechanism for students to collectively or independently implement strategies to affect systemic changes on immigration. Critical consciousness raising allowed for students to learn more about the larger system of immigration and reflect on how they fit into larger contexts of social injustice. Finally, self-care served as a readily available tool for students to process the negative emotions they felt with respects to their immigration status. In all, I conceptualize these efforts as acts of resistance, or actions taken to resist structural inequality and socio-legal barriers.

Finally, chapter three, "Centering Agency: Examining the Relationship between Acts of Resistance, Anxiety, and Depression Among Undocumented College Students," considers how practicing agency is associated with mental health in the face of exclusionary immigration laws and policies. Along with my co-authors, we examine to what extent engaging in three acts of resistance is associated with depression and anxiety scores. We find that students with higher rates of political engagement and critical consciousness raising report higher depression and anxiety symptomatology. Our findings suggest that employing structural approaches to studying mental health must consider immigrants' agency and efforts to navigate, respond to, and challenge their marginalization.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings have policy implications for practitioners working with undocumented and immigration impacted college students. The significance of undocumented student programs or services on campus for student senses of belonging is affirmed in this work. Programs and

services for undocumented students should develop programming that teaches students about the link between legal vulnerability and mental health. In other words, it should support students in understanding how their undocumented immigration status affects their mental health. This includes supporting students in building their "toolkit" to promote their mental health through drawing strength from their status or connecting with other undocumented students. One example of this, previously shown in chapter two, is for undocumented student storytelling and community building events.

Practitioners should recognize the array of agentic actions students can take to address the consequences of their undocumented immigration status. This encompasses exposing students to alternate forms of resistance that promote wellbeing, such as self-care and critical consciousness raising. However, in widening the scope of different actions of resistance, it is also imperative to acknowledge that each unique act of resistance can have distinct effects on mental health outcomes.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of this dissertation affirm that developing a multi-faceted and nuanced understanding of the mental health processes of undocumented college students is critical to being able to inform future research on their educational outcomes. Existing research establishes that college students under emotional distress are vulnerable to experiencing challenges which negatively affect their academic performance (Bruffaerts et al. 2018). Additionally, researchers have explored how mental health implicates college student experiences and how students approach managing their mental health (Lipson, Lattie and Eisenberg 2019, Xiao et al. 2017). Future work should consider the experiences of undocumented students and other immigration impacted students as immigration laws and policies create unique stressors (Enriquez, Morales

Hernandez and Ro 2018, Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020, Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). In tracing the complex process between legal vulnerability and mental health we will be better positioned to identify potential mechanisms through which wellbeing and academic outcomes can be mutually improved.

The role of education institutions is a preliminary finding of this dissertation that merits additional exploration. In efforts to further link immigrant agency and structural inequalities, future work should highlight how educational institutions and resource inequities shape undocumented students' mental health. I found significant differences among undocumented students attending California's three higher education systems: University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community College (CCC). This is because unique institutional characteristics and resource structures set the stage for diverging experiences of legal vulnerability and experiences with acts of resistance. To date, there have been no comparisons across these three undocumented student bodies despite these substantial differences.

This work is timely because of the rising rates of emotional distress on college campuses (Eisenberg, Hunt and Speer 2013). For undocumented college students, this becomes even more apparent with the underlying socio-legal context. Indeed, I have illustrated that despite agency and acts of resistance employed by students, they are still constrained in their efforts to promote their mental health because of unstable and unpredictable immigration laws and policies. However, I also find that employ acts of resistance can yield some positive mental health outcomes. It is critical for research to take an asset-based approach that considers structural sources of inequality when studying mental health, doing so could provide more insights into why mental health disparities persist.

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