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Toxic Ties: The Reproduction of Legal Violence within Mixed-Status Intimate Partners, Relatives, and Friends

Abstract: This article introduces the concept of toxic ties to analyze how relationships between documented and undocumented people are impacted by governmental policies that sanction legal violence and unevenly distribute legal rights, protections, and benefits. Toxic ties are relationships in which a documented person abuses, exploits, or demeans his/her undocumented partners, relatives, or friends. Drawing on interviews with undocumented and U.S.-born young adults in southern California, the article shows that as relationships between documented and undocumented people turn toxic, the resulting toxic ties reproduce legal violence in everyday life. Future research should further explore how toxic ties affect migrants' life outcomes.

There are approximately 11.2 to 11.5 million undocumented immigrants in the United States (Krogstad and Passel 2015), and most belong to mixed-status social networks composed of U.S. citizens, legal residents, and undocumented intimate partners, relatives, and friends (Passel and Cohn 2009). While the relationships in these social networks are generally beneficial (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), economic inequality and poverty can strain reciprocity within mixed-status ties (Cranford 2005; Menjivar 2000; Mahler 1995), undermine the benefits of trust (Rosales 2013; Smith 2007), and foster harmful power-dependent ties (Cook et al. 1983; Bonacich 1987). Building on studies that show how the unequal distribution of economic resources within social networks can negatively affect them, this study analyzes how governmental policies that unevenly distribute legal resources (rights, protections, and access to benefits) between documented and undocumented people (Menjivar and Kanstroom 2014; Donato and Armenta 2011) can also affect exchanges, trust, and the distribution of power *within* mixed-status relationships.

The potential for harmful dynamics within mixed-status social networks has increased since the late 1990s and particularly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, when a convergence of civil immigration and criminal law began to intensify immigration enforcement (i.e., deportations), to devalue undocumented immigrants by associating them with criminals, and to normalize the harsh treatment of undocumented immigrants (Menjivar and Abrego 2012a). In response to these trends, Menjivar and Abrego (2012a) introduced the concept of “legal violence” to capture the material, psychological, and social injuries (e.g., the pain of family separations) that these immigration laws inflict on undocumented immigrants within institutional settings and by institutional actors. The research presented in this article expands the scope of this concept to examine how legal violence can also be reproduced in interpersonal relationships.

Building on the premise that the practices and aggressions of state-sanctioned violence can become replicated in everyday life (Menjívar 2011; Bourgois 2004), this study explores whether legal violence is being rescaled and recreated within mixed-status social ties during everyday life.

Although an important topic, the extent to which the practices and tools of legal violence have become embedded within mixed-status interpersonal relationships remains under-analyzed. Migrant social network studies indicate that immigration laws and undocumented status exacerbate poverty, generating tensions and weakening social ties (Cranford 2005; Menjívar 2000; Mahler 1995). These studies, however, are based on the immigration enforcement context of the 1980s and 1990s and do not capture the post-9/11 hostile enforcement context of legal violence. Though not directly testing legal violence, one post-9/11 study found evidence that the intensification of immigration enforcement helped foster cycles of exploitation and deceit among undocumented immigrants (Rosales 2013). Another study detected an increase in tensions and rivalries between mixed-status relatives (Abrego 2016). While insightful, these studies do not fully explore the various ways that the practices and tools of legal violence produced by the state have been rescaled as micro-level aggressions that mixed-status partners, relatives, and friends use against one another in everyday life.

Overall, then, we know little about how undocumented immigrants' interpersonal lives are affected by governmental policies that unevenly distribute legal resources among individuals within many immigrant social networks and sanction legal violence. To address this theoretical and empirical gap, this study answers the following question: How do undocumented status, the uneven allocation of legal resources within immigrant social networks, and legal violence affect mixed-status dynamics in everyday life?

To answer this question, I introduce the concept of *toxic ties*, which refers to a type of relationship that has turned exploitive, demeaning, or abusive as a result of governmental policies that sanction legal violence and unevenly distribute legal resources within immigrant social networks. Drawing on 52 in-depth interviews with undocumented and U.S.-born young adults who belong to mixed-status social networks in southern California, I find that unequally distributed legal resources foster power-dependent ties. In other words, ties turn toxic when documented people intentionally or unintentionally misuse their power and abuse, demean, control, exploit, or threaten undocumented immigrants. Toxic ties, I argue, are harmful because they exacerbate the difficulties of undocumented life and, as these aggressions accumulate, reproduce state-sanctioned legal violence within the micro, interpersonal level.

In exploring how legal violence affects interpersonal relationships, I begin by reviewing how economic inequality negatively affects social network dynamics and propose that a disparity in legal rights, protections, and benefits within mixed-status social networks might have similarly negative consequences. I then propose that legal violence, like other state-sanctioned violence, can be rescaled and reproduced in everyday life through interpersonal relations. Third, I introduce the concept “toxic ties” as an analytical tool to understand the tactics, injuries, and practices of state legal violence as it is manifested within mixed-status social networks. To conclude, I review the key findings and discuss their implications for the wider study of international migration.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Can the Uneven Distribution of Legal Rights, Protections, and Access to Benefits Undermine Migrant Social Networks?

Patterned interpersonal relationships, or social networks, between relatives and friends tend to be valuable. Social networks are usually viewed as beneficial because through them, members exchange information, resources, and support (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998), trusting that other members will reciprocate the favor in the future (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Granovetter 1985; Gouldner 1960). As people continue exchanging resources, a sense of mutual trust develops within the social network (Bourdieu 1986). Trust also develops when people share a common set of behavioral expectations and beliefs that foster benevolent, as opposed to opportunistic, behavior across ties (Granovetter 1985, Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). In the case of immigrants, social networks help them access resources and information, find employment, solve problems, and receive the emotional support needed to settle in a new country (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). However, immigration laws that confine some immigrants to an undocumented status exacerbate economic inequality (i.e., poverty), which can negatively impact immigrant social networks in multiple ways.

To start, economic inequality can limit the resources people are able to share and, in the process, destabilize exchanges within migrants' social networks. Impoverished undocumented immigrants who do not have the right to work and cannot access the formal labor market, for example, often create informal moneymaking arrangements to sell information and services (i.e., unauthorized subletting) to newer immigrants (Mahler 1995). Undocumented immigrants accustomed to building relationships through mutual aid learn to pay relatives and friends for support, a commodification of support that can suspend reciprocity and breed animosity among undocumented relatives and friends (Ibid). Cecilia Menjívar's work with undocumented Salvadorans found that among mixed-status social ties, impoverished Salvadorans imposed excessive economic demands on relatives and friends with higher incomes even though they

were usually unable to return the favor (2000). When this happens, the expectation of reciprocity is disrupted and social ties fragment (Ibid).

Second, economic inequality can undermine trust and lead to opportunistic behavior. For instance, within poor and black social networks, people may not refer unemployed relatives and friends to their employers because they do not trust their reliability and fear that these relatives and friends will blemish their reputation (Smith 2007). In similar fashion, immigrant business owners or supervisors may utilize the expectation of trust to recruit undocumented relatives and friends, only to later exploit them (Rosales 2013; Cranford 2005), abusing the trust of ethnic peers.

Finally, economic inequality can foster power-dependent ties (Cook et al. 1983; Bonacich 1987). Members of a social network with limited resources and opportunities often become dependent on members with more economic resources (Cook et al. 1983). Within these power-dependent relationships, the person with more resources also has the power to control and coerce dependent relatives or friends (Ibid).

Here, I draw on this research into how economic inequality negatively affects social networks to analyze how the uneven distribution of legal resources in immigrant social networks affects mixed-status social ties. This uneven distribution of legal resources is important to consider because since the mid-1990s, several governmental policies have intensified it, especially between documented and undocumented people in the U.S. (Alden 2009). The Personal Responsibility, Work Opportunity, Reconciliation Act of 1996, for example, limited undocumented immigrants' access to social benefits, while the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) diminished protections for undocumented immigrants by expanding the list of offenses that can lead to deportation (Menjívar and Abrego

2012). With the passing of these laws, undocumented immigrants have fewer rights, less access to public benefits, and fewer protections than documented people. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, efforts to combat terrorism increased, widening the legal resource disparity even further and intensifying immigration enforcement (Menjívar and Abrego 2012a). Given that the immigration contexts of the 1980s and 1990s created tensions that weakened migrant social ties (Cranford 2005; Menjívar 2000; Mahler 1995), it is possible that increasingly hostile immigration enforcement will create even more tensions and further fragment migrant social ties. For instance, post-9/11 research has identified cycles of exploitation and deceit among undocumented acquaintances forced to work in the informal economy (Rosales 2013) and heightened rivalries and tensions among mixed-status relatives (Abrego 2016). Given the large portion of the U.S. population that belongs to mixed-status social networks (approximately 8.8 million people in 2008 (Passel and Cohn 2009)), further analyzing how these legal changes affect interpersonal relationships becomes especially important.

The Rescaling and Reproduction of Legal Violence in Everyday Life

This study examines how legal violence—immigration laws that legitimize and normalize harming immigrants within institutional settings—can be reproduced in everyday life through mixed-status relationships. Legal violence refers to the subtle and normalized “violent effects of immigration law” that date back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, but have been intensifying since the mid-1990s, as described above (Menjívar and Abrego 2012a: 1387). Post-9/11, the collaboration between the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local

police,¹ as well as several other state and local policies, increased detention and deportations, doubling both in just a decade (Alden 2009). Equally important, the legal language of these policies devalues undocumented immigrants by associating them with terrorists and labeling them as criminals for behavior that previously was not considered criminal (Menjívar and Abrego 2012a). This symbolic devaluation of undocumented immigrants that underpins legal violence has made it acceptable to inflict material, psychological, and social harm on them (Ibid).

Together, immigration enforcement and the devaluation of undocumented lives have normalized a range of aggressions within an array of institutions (i.e., the judicial court system, schools, and workplaces) and institutional dimensions (i.e., policies and agency personnel) (Menjívar and Abrego 2012a). For instance, it has become normal for ICE to detain parents dropping their children at school (Menjívar and Abrego 2012b), for judges to take away the parental rights of deported parents and to send these parents' U.S. citizen children into foster care (Hall 2011), and for some hospitals to repatriate undocumented patients (Johnson 2009). It has also become normalized to exclude undocumented people from rights and benefits and for them to live under chronic deficit (i.e., poverty, malnutrition), even if doing so diminishes their life chances (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). Legal violence also affects U.S. citizens in mixed-status families because they fear their undocumented relatives' deportation and suffer when this happens (Abrego 2016; Enriquez 2015; López 2015). In this manner, the state's institutions perpetuate legal violence in subtle and normalized forms of injuries and aggressions against undocumented immigrants and their families.

¹ This was through the promotion of IIRIRA section 287(g) after September 11, 2001 and the implementation of the Secured Communities Program (2008).

This study evaluates how legal violence has become embedded within the dynamics of mixed-status social ties. To do so, however, it is important to first distinguish between institutional settings and everyday life. Institutional actors receive orders from mandates and higher authorities to carry out the tactics and practices of legal violence (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). For instance, the Department of Homeland Security's ideology and protocols help U.S. Border Patrol agents legitimize carrying out tasks that harm undocumented immigrants (Vega 2017). However, if legal violence has become widely normalized, then it is possible that these subtle violent behaviors and practices have become commonplace among people living in the U.S. and, thus, recreated in everyday life without the presence of state institutions, authorities, or personnel.

Following this idea, this research extends the scope of legal violence beyond institutional settings to examine how the interpersonal tie-formation mechanisms (i.e., trust, mutual aid, and the expectation of reciprocity) of mixed-status social ties can reproduce legal violence as a type of "everyday violence" (Bourgois 2004). Studies on everyday violence posit that macro and state-sponsored violence are re-scaled as micro-level practices and expressions of aggression (Menjívar 2011; Bourgois 2004). For example, research after the Salvadoran Civil War found that people exposed to state violence subsequently normalized and replicated that violence of their own accord within their interpersonal relationships and in the absence of the state (Menjívar 2011; Bourgois 2004). This is mainly because the state's violent apparatuses and techniques became embedded in everyday practices (Menjívar 2011; Bourgois 2004). Building on this logic, members of mixed-status social networks may internalize undocumented immigrants' maltreatment and devaluation and reproduce the tactics of legal violence (e.g., abuse, exploitation, or exclusion) in everyday life. Overall, however, it remains largely unknown how

legal violence affects exchanges, trust, and the power balance within mixed-status social ties outside the protocols of institutional settings and in everyday life. The remainder of this article addresses that gap.

Toxic Ties

This article introduces the concept of *toxic ties* to analyze how governmental policies that unevenly distribute legal resources within immigrant social networks and sanction legal violence affect the mechanisms of mutual aid, reciprocity, and trust that build and maintain relationships. A toxic tie is a type of relationship that turns toxic when a documented person with more resources takes advantage of undocumented members with fewer legal resources in his/her social network. The documented person does not need to have malicious intent because legal violence and the underlying structural inequality, sustained by the hierarchical distribution of legal resources, enable these harmful dynamics. The scope of toxic ties is limited to dynamics *within* a given social network and excludes harmful interactions between strangers.

The level of toxicity depends on the harm the behavior causes on the livelihood of the person with fewer resources, with consequence ranging from mild to severe. For example, if a documented person threatens to report an undocumented relative or friend to immigration officials, the undocumented person might live in chronic fear—which is a relatively mild consequence. If a U.S. citizen actually gets an intimate partner, relative, or friend deported, however, the undocumented immigrant will experience acutely severe consequences (Menjívar and Abrego 2012).

To develop the concept of toxic ties, the following sections focus on how state legal violence and the unequal allocation of legal resources impact the distribution of power, mutual aid, and trust within mixed-status social networks. The case study of mixed-status social

networks offered here is theoretically conducive for assessing how state-sanctioned violence, such as legal violence, is reproduced by and re-scaled to interpersonal relationships. As it shows, mixed-status social networks intertwine structural and interpersonal dynamics and allow us to analyze how the unequal distribution of legal resources within immigrant social networks shifts the distribution of power, generates power-dependent ties, and negatively impacts relationships.

DATA AND METHODS

This study focuses on undocumented immigrants from Mexico because about half of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are from Mexico (Krogstad & Passel 2015). Undocumented Mexican immigrants in the U.S. have the lowest educational attainment, lowest median household incomes, and highest poverty rates of all undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, and U.S. citizens (Passel and Cohn 2009). These statistics indicate that undocumented immigrants from Mexico are the largest, most structurally vulnerable immigrant group in the U.S. and the most likely to be affected by legal violence.

The study's empirical base consists of interviews with 52 young adults between the ages of 19 and 36. All respondents were of Mexican origin or descent, grew up in households with similar socioeconomic characteristics, and lived in southern California, where most undocumented Mexicans, and their family and friends, are concentrated (Krogstad and Passel 2015). In 2012, I interviewed 30 young adults who were undocumented either because they entered the U.S. without authorization or because they overstayed their tourist visas. Between 2015 and 2016, I interviewed an additional 22 young adults who were born in the U.S. and had at least one Mexican parent who immigrated to the U.S. without authorization. All 52 respondents, thus, grew up in mixed-status social networks composed of undocumented and documented people. These young adults with different immigration and citizenship statuses provide different

perspectives on how legal violence and the unequal distribution of rights, benefits, and protections affect social ties.

Four research assistants, two key informants, and a community-based organization (CBO) helped recruit respondents. By tapping into the social networks of six people and an organization, I was able to increase sample variability and gain the trust of hard-to-reach undocumented participants and their families. My association with the CBO allowed me to recruit undocumented respondents who otherwise might not have trusted me, including applicants for the VAWA-visa and the U-Visa.² My insider-outsider position as a formerly undocumented immigrant of Mexican origin helped me build rapport and trust with respondents, allowing conversations to flow into sensitive topics, such as conflicts with loved ones.

Undocumented and U.S-born participants in this study had similar characteristics and grew up in families with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Undocumented interviewees grew up in families with an average self-reported annual household income of \$20,638, with household incomes ranging from \$5,000 to \$48,000. U.S.-born interviewees grew up in families with an average self-reported household income of \$25,590, with household incomes ranging from \$6,000 to \$50,000. This similarity enabled me to separate the impact of undocumented status on social networks from other structural vulnerabilities, such as poverty. I also interviewed the same proportion of undocumented and U.S.-born men and women. On average, undocumented interviewees were 28 years old, and U.S.-born interviewees were 26 years old when interviews were held. Most respondents lived in the Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Santa

² Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and the U-visa protect victims of domestic violence and other crimes.

Ana metropolitan areas. All participants' average household incomes were below the *living wage* of these metropolitan areas; which in 2015 was \$59,036³ for a family of four (Glasmeier 2016).

My in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol was developed and modified as new themes emerged during the interview process. During interviews with undocumented immigrants, I asked whom they resorted to when they needed emotional, instrumental, or monetary support, as well as how many close relationships they had in the U.S. and what aspects of being undocumented were the most rewarding and most difficult. Stories of unsupportive relatives and friends emerged naturally and spontaneously from these questions. In later interviews with U.S.-born young adults, I asked how they supported their undocumented relatives and friends, as well as what unexpected consequences they encountered in providing this support and whether people treated their undocumented and documented relatives and friends differently. U.S.-born young adults also shared vivid stories of how their relatives or relatives' friends had supported or mistreated undocumented immigrants.

To analyze these interviews, I began by identifying the most common themes through an inductive process and then counted the number of instances that respondents reported any information about their social ties (whether supportive, neutral, or toxic). When respondents described mixed-status relationships characterized by an exchange of emotional support, instrumental support, or trust, I coded these as "supportive ties." Respondents also described relationships in which not much had been exchanged but in which there was a sense of trust and that they could one day rely on this relationship for support. I coded these relationships as "neutral ties." Finally, I coded instances in which documented individuals used the

³ This figure refers to the annual living wage income before taxes for a family of four living in Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Anaheim California.

undocumented status of an intimate partner, family member, or friend to limit his/her access to opportunities, threaten him/her, intensify his/her economic or employment insecurity, steal from or belittle him/her, or extract cheap or free labor from him/her as “toxic ties.” Interviews with both undocumented and U.S.-born young adults allowed me to triangulate findings and capture different ways members of mixed-status social networks interpreted supportive, neutral, and toxic incidents within relationships.

I also separated interactions between respondents based on institutional settings (e.g., workplace, schools, organizations, and the police) and between respondents and their relatives and friends in everyday life. I did not include relations where there was a formal asymmetric distribution of power or authority (e.g. business owner and employee) but did include interactions between ties who owned a business together through an informal arrangements, had approximately symmetrical authority and power, and may have interacted in both informal and formal settings. I also included other informal moneymaking arrangements that were outside U.S. laws and formed through interpersonal agreements.

FINDINGS

Toxic ties emerge within the interpersonal relationships of undocumented immigrants. Together, half the undocumented interviewees reported 17 different instances of toxic ties with relatives, intimate partners (e.g., boyfriends and spouses), and friends. About half of these toxic ties were with documented intimate partners (e.g., boyfriends and spouses) and with their partners’ parents, a quarter were with documented kin, and a fifth were with friends. Toxic ties were more common among intimate partners and relatives probably because people expect more support from family members and intimate partners (who are seen as future relatives) than

friends.⁴ In comparison, none of the U.S.-born respondents had toxic ties with undocumented intimate partners, relatives, or friends. However, about half of U.S.-born interviewees *witnessed* toxic ties that involved mixed-status relatives. Among these, three U.S.-born young adults were negatively affected by their undocumented parents' toxic relationships with documented relatives and friends. Two others witnessed their documented parents exploit undocumented relatives, and five witnessed toxic ties among aunts, uncles and cousins. These differences suggest that undocumented immigrants who have fewer legal resources are more vulnerable to toxic ties.

Overall, the uneven distribution of rights, protections, and benefits between documented and undocumented members of mixed-status social networks fostered three types of power-dependent ties that turned toxic: (1) ties within mixed-status romantic relationships, (2) ties in which support was exchanged for cheap or free labor, and (3) ties in which people shared legal identities. In what follows, I incorporate the perspectives of U.S.-born respondents who witnessed toxic ties to triangulate results and deepen the analysis.

Power Struggles and Devaluation among Mixed-Status Intimate Partners

Toxic ties between undocumented immigrants and their documented intimate partners (i.e., boyfriends) and partners' parents emerged because of the power imbalance underpinning these relationships. Specifically, the documented person had the power to help the undocumented young adult adjust his/her immigration status through marriage. In turn, some of the parents of documented people questioned whether their children's undocumented partners were in love or just seeking a path to legalization. Additionally, some parents perceived undocumented immigrants as less valuable spouses for their children because they had fewer legal resources and

⁴ There is more social distance between immigrants and their friends than relatives (Menjívar 2000).

economic opportunities. Often, messaging from parents or general society influenced U.S.-born young adults to also devalue or mistreat their undocumented boyfriends, girlfriends, and/or spouses.

This happened to Francisco,⁵ who immigrated to U.S. at the age of four and fell in love with Perla, who was a citizen. Perla's mother (Beatriz) wanted her to marry a U.S. citizen with more opportunities and social esteem. Beatriz accused Francisco of only dating Perla to adjust his immigration status. Thus, when Perla got pregnant, tensions erupted and Beatriz told Francisco, "I am going to throw you in jail!" Beatriz filed a police report accusing Francisco of statutory rape, despite the fact that the child was conceived when Francisco was 17 years old. Beatriz then convinced Perla to end the relationship, file for child support, and falsely accuse Francisco of never financially supporting their son, manipulating several legal channels to get rid of him. In turn, Francisco was dumbfounded; he had dropped out of high school to work and support his son and Perla's college education. He explained:

I gave her money for my son and for her school... I have to pay it [again]... I am scared to get deported.... The judge told me... [Perla] is the only person who could take away the child support... She is not going to do it... [It's] up to \$15,000.

Perla also forced Francisco to repay an additional \$15,000 of retroactive child support because he had trusted her and not kept a record of his previous economic support. Although I did not interview Perla and, thus, do not know what motivated her actions, her behavior caused Francisco to live under severe economic pressure. If he did not come up with the money, he feared he would be deported.

⁵ The names of all respondents and the people they mentioned have been changed.

Undocumented women also had toxic ties with intimate partners. For instance, Mariana, who was 36 years old at the time of the interview, immigrated to the U.S. without authorization at the age of 18 to join her documented boyfriend. In the U.S., however, his loving demeanor turned toxic when he told her, “You are nothing... You do not have papers,” and threatened to take sole custody of their daughter. These subtle aggressions stoked fear and heartache in Mariana. People close to her began worrying about developing toxic ties that could harm her wellbeing and her daughter’s life. Overall, Francisco and Mariana are two of the nine undocumented immigrants in my study who fell in love with citizens who unintentionally or intentionally demeaned and abused their legal vulnerabilities.

The Extraction of Cheap and Free Labor

Toxic ties also emerged when documented people deceived and extracted cheap or free labor from undocumented relatives or friends relying on them for support. Although many documented people genuinely helped their undocumented partners, relatives, and friends navigate life in the U.S., some unintentionally exploited them when they faced economic trouble, and others intentionally took advantage of them. Because undocumented immigrants often assumed their documented relatives and friends were experts on U.S. institutions and labor market and, thus, depended on their guidance, this extraction of cheap or free labor was not only possible but also relatively easy.

Undocumented immigrants were frequently most vulnerable to being used as cheap or free labor when they asked their documented relatives and friends for assistance finding jobs that did not require work permits. Some documented people helped them find employment. Such was the experience of Susana, who at the time of the interview was 29 years old and had been undocumented for 18 years. Susana felt blessed: “I’ve had my jobs because of other people.

They [said]..., ‘They’re hiring at my job,’ and I go and I get that job.” Susana’s relatives and friends helped her survive in the U.S. However, many other respondents were not so fortunate, as can be seen within Maria’s family. At the time of the interview, Maria was 30 years old and had been undocumented for eight years. Maria and her undocumented mother (Juana) used to live with her documented aunt (Amparo) until Amparo misinformed them about employment opportunities in order to exploit Juana. Maria explained:

She swindled my mom... [Amparo] takes care of older people, so she gets paid like \$24 per hour... [My mom said,] “Your aunt [Amparo] pays me \$50 [per week],” and I responded, “What? \$50! Is it a tip?...” [She responded,] “I can’t find work... There aren’t any jobs, you need a social security number and to speak English.”

Since Amparo was a citizen, her job paid her \$24 per hour to take care of elderly people. Amparo subcontracted Juana, without the company’s permission, to do the actual labor for \$50 a week. In this manner, Amparo pocketed the extra earnings and profited from Juana’s labor. While Juana trusted her sister to help her find a beneficial employment opportunity, Amparo misinformed her about her job opportunities to use her as cheap labor. Thus, the relationship turned toxic when Amparo violated Juana’s trust, made Juana economically dependent on her, abused her position of power, and capitalized on Juana’s limited knowledge, rights, and opportunities.

Another way that documented people extracted cheap or free labor from undocumented relatives and friends was through informal living arrangements. Many undocumented immigrants struggle to find housing because they do not have the credit and work histories needed to qualify for leases and rental agreements. According to some undocumented respondents, their documented relatives and friends offered affordable housing. However, since the documented people owned the house or had their names on the lease, they were the rightful tenants and had

the power to force their undocumented relatives/friends to move out. As such, a power dependence underpinned these living arrangements and made undocumented immigrants vulnerable to toxic ties.

Some power-dependent living arrangements remained supportive because the mixed-status relatives and friends honored the trust binding their relationship. For instance, according to Alma, who was 31 years old and had been undocumented for 11 years at the time of the interview, her documented friend “saved me from ending up in the streets.” When Alma’s partner abandoned her, Alma’s best friend “let me stay at her house until we found a place I could afford.” However, other individuals charged their undocumented relatives and friends rent and demanded free labor. When Diego and his brothers arrived to the U.S., they endured this type of living arrangement. Diego was 31 years old and had been undocumented for five years at the time of the interview. Diego and his brothers did not have the credit and work history needed to rent an apartment, so they moved in with their documented uncle. Even though the brothers paid rent, the uncle’s family expected them to also repay their support with free physical labor. Diego explained:

They would exploit. They would charge high rent, charge for all the household’s food... [and then] tell them [my brothers], “Why don’t you go bring me a beer?”... “Now, why don’t you cut the lawn?”... “and fix the roof?”

The relationship was toxic because Diego and his brothers were dependent on the uncle for lodging and the uncle and his family took advantage of this dependence. The uncle’s family knew that Diego and his brothers did not have the right to work and, thus, could not build the work or credit histories needed to lease an apartment. Thus, the uncle’s family treated them like servants. Diego and his brothers found the living arrangement extremely stressful and degrading.

Not only was their uncle's family consuming their leisure time, but they felt belittled by their demands. If they were documented, they felt, the uncle's family would have been respectful. After several years of enduring this situation, the brothers found a person willing to rent them an apartment and have avoided the uncle's family since they moved out.

Finally, documented people extracted cheap labor from undocumented kin by expecting them to care for sick relatives. Families assumed that documented members could secure more stable and higher-paying employment than undocumented members. As such, they often found it sensible for documented relatives to work and financially support undocumented relatives who took care of sick relatives. Within these arrangements, undocumented immigrants tended to become dependent on the financial support of their documented relatives. This was the case for Florencia, who in 2016 had been undocumented for 20 years. Interviews with Florencia's U.S.-born niece Graciela, U.S.-born daughter Monica, and U.S.-born nephew Valentin provided different perspectives on how Florencia's undocumented status motivated the family's decision to make her the caregiver of the sick grandmother. They explained that when the grandmother had a stroke that left her severely disabled, Florencia was struggling to find a job and the family quickly assigned her as the primary caregiver. According to Gricela, Florencia "has been burdened because she has no papers... If she had papers..., [she would] have not been afraid to speak up" against the arrangement. Because she was undocumented, however, Florencia did not have leverage to oppose her family's decision.

This arrangement generated power-dependent ties between Florencia and her documented relatives. According to Florencia's 18-year-old daughter Monica, the family paid her mom approximately \$6,000 a year to take care of the grandmother, "Monday through Friday all day." If Florencia slept eight hours a night, then she was paid approximately \$115 per week

for over 80 hours of work—that is about \$1.43 per hour. Florencia did not have time to find other employment and completely depended on the money her siblings gave her. As a result of this arrangement, Florencia and Monica had lived in extreme poverty for almost two decades.

This agreement turned even more toxic when the grandmother qualified for Medicaid's Cash for Caregiving program, which provides financial aid to *documented* caregivers of people over the age of 65.⁶ Since Florencia's undocumented status disqualified her from receiving the aid, Valentin explained that "My aunt [Maya], she's a citizen, signed up as the official caregiver and refused to give the money to [Florencia]." The expectation of trust should have propelled Maya to give Florencia the money. Instead, Maya used the benefits of her citizenship status to steal the money Florencia had earned through her labor but could not legally claim. It is important to clarify that not all of Florencia's siblings intentionally took advantage of her and that several were too poor to provide more financial support. Nonetheless, Florencia's dependence on her enabled Maya to take advantage of the situation.

Sharing Papers

This study finds that undocumented immigrants settling in the U.S. often save to purchase houses, seek better employment opportunities, or start their own businesses. Nonetheless, they usually do not have the work histories, credit records, or Social Security numbers needed to qualify for loans, access better employment opportunities, or register their businesses. In response to these situations, several documented relatives and a few friends of undocumented immigrants took out mortgage loans, shared their Social Security numbers, or put houses or businesses under their name. Respondents referred to these processes as "sharing papers." Sharing papers was a form of support, involved an exchange of valuable legal resources,

⁶ More information at http://www.bc.edu/schools/gssw/nrcpds/cash_and_counseling.html

and was created by people who trusted one another. Even though sharing papers was meant to be a form of aid, it also tended to create power-dependent ties that were vulnerable to becoming toxic, especially when mixed-status relatives and friends shared papers to purchase houses, work with authentic Social Security numbers, or run businesses.

Because most undocumented immigrants do not qualify for mortgage loans to buy a house, many save for the down payment and ask documented relatives to secure a mortgage loan and put the house under their name. Some supportive relatives honor these sharing papers agreements for years. U.S.-born Juan and his family, for example, tried to support their undocumented relatives in this manner. Juan explained:

My dad [Felipe], on paper, is the owner [of the house]... Anything requiring a signature, it's my dad, anything requiring money, it's my uncle [Jose].

Legally, Felipe took out a mortgage loan and bought a house. In the process he shared his work history, credit score, and ability to legally purchase a house with his undocumented brother, Jose. Unofficially, it is Jose's house—he paid the down payment and was paying the mortgage, property taxes, and other expenses. According to Juan, his uncle Jose's ability to repay the mortgage helped his father Felipe because “on paper... [Felipe was] responsible with two mortgages... and timely payments... [And this] helps his credit [score].” The agreement, however, entailed risks for both families. Jose depended on and trusted that Felipe would not use his right to sell the house or refuse to transfer ownership. In turn, Felipe knew that if Jose lost his job or was deported, he would miss mortgage payments, with negative impacts on Felipe's credit score. While these risks were not equivalent, since Felipe could rent the property to pay the mortgage and keep the house, they show how the brothers relied on each other. Although Felipe is the legal owner and has less to lose if the agreement is broken, the power dependence

underlying the arrangement remained mutually beneficial because both families were able to fulfill their part of the agreement.

In contrast, other family members struggled to mitigate unexpected and negative consequences of sharing papers to purchase houses. This happened to Anthony's family. Anthony was born in the U.S. and was 25 years old at the time of the interview. His parents immigrated to the U.S. without authorization and became naturalized citizens. Anthony talked extensively about how his father (Hernan) helped his undocumented brother (Guillermo) purchase his family's home by putting the house under his name. The arrangement was mutually beneficial to both families for years because Guillermo made all the mortgage payments on time and helped improve Hernan's credit history. However, the sharing papers arrangement created unexpected tensions when Hernan's daughter started college. Anthony explains:

My dad has his name under this other house; then it shows that we have this other property and that we have this [rental] income... Even though it's not ours, legally it is [ours]. So it prevents my sister from getting extra financial aid [for college].

Given that Hernan had to report the house as an investment property in his taxes, he believed that the rental income put his family under a higher income bracket and disqualified his daughter from receiving federal and state financial assistance to pay for college. The relationship started to become toxic when Hernan began pressuring Guillermo to put it under somebody else's name. Guillermo found it difficult to find another trustworthy, documented, and economically stable person willing to put the mortgage under his or her name. So Guillermo waited several years for his U.S.-born son to graduate from college, find stable employment, and build his credit history to take over the mortgage. Even though Guillermo's family tried to mitigate the arrangement's unexpected costs and Hernan did not want to harm Guillermo's family, the tie between the

brothers was strained. Hernan believed he lost federal aid for his daughter's college education, and Guillermo feared losing his home and started to lose the support of his brother.

The legal vulnerability underpinning sharing papers can become very toxic when documented individuals refuse to transfer ownership of the houses either because they are experiencing their own hardship or because they want extra assets. In doing so, documented individuals violate the trust of the relationship and intentionally and unintentionally take advantage of their undocumented relatives' legal vulnerabilities and limited power to protect their properties. U.S.-born Sebastian and his family found themselves in this situation. His undocumented father, Pedro, paid the full purchase price of a house and asked his sister, a U.S. citizen, to put the house under her name because he was afraid of getting deported and losing his property. His sister accepted because the home equity of Pedro's house allowed her to negotiate loans for other investments. However, the mutually beneficial agreement started to crumble when his sister began defaulting on mortgage payments for other properties. Sebastian explained, "dad asked my aunt to pass the house to me, but she refused. She wanted to keep the house to negotiate her bankruptcy." When Pedro's sister refused to transfer the house's ownership, she broke the trust of the sharing papers agreement, making Pedro vulnerable to her financial problems.

Sebastian explained, "My dad was... powerless, he could not protect his house, he was stressed out." Sharing papers made Pedro dependent on his sister's goodwill and financial acumen. When his sister's bankruptcy problems forced her to betray him, Pedro was legally unprotected. In contrast, Sebastian used the power of his citizenship status to protect Pedro's house. He explained, "I got into a huge fight with my aunt and threatened to sue her. I have papers and could fight back... It got nasty, but I got the house back." Pedro's and Sebastian's

different reactions reveal the power asymmetries between documented and undocumented relatives. Neither owned the house, yet Sebastian's citizenship and protection against deportation helped him save the house. Even if Sebastian did not have a legal case against his aunt, she knew that his citizenship status allowed him to use legal channels in ways Pedro could not. Although Sebastian was able to save Pedro's house, the aunt's threat turned a mutually beneficial sharing papers arrangement into a toxic relationship. As Sebastian explained, family members "stopped talking or doing business... We don't trust her," and the aunt's betrayal was traumatic enough to cause Pedro's family to lose their ability to trust and seek support from their relatives more generally.

Documented people also shared their Social Security numbers with undocumented kin and friends to help them find better-paying jobs that required background checks. When undocumented immigrants borrowed Social Security numbers, they also borrowed their friends' and relatives' legal identity and authorization to work in the U.S. In turn, documented people built their retirement benefits without having to work. For example, U.S.-born Juan explained that his grandparents shared their Social Security numbers with their undocumented children because "when they hit [the age of] 65..., [they] would get that monthly income" or Social Security benefits.

While mutually beneficial, these sharing papers agreements also make undocumented immigrants vulnerable to losing their own earnings and to identity theft accusations. For instance, Abel was 30 years old and had been undocumented for 12 years at the time of the interview. At his university, he got a tutoring job, using his friend's Social Security number and name, but ended up losing his earnings. Abel explained: "I used my friend's name... They didn't pay me like \$800. I don't know if my friend took the money or if they didn't pay me because I

was using his name.” Abel was not sure whether his friend intentionally stole his income. He did not want to risk falsely accusing a supportive friend of stealing his earnings or risk being accused of identity theft if he pressed the tutoring company to pay him. Stuck in a legal limbo, he resigned himself to losing the \$800 he needed to pay his college expenses.

In more extreme cases, the documented person can accuse his/her undocumented relatives of identity theft. This happened to Maria’s undocumented mother, Juana. Juana’s documented sister (Amparo) eventually allowed her to use her Social Security number to apply for better-paying jobs and pass background checks. Initially, Amparo found this arrangement beneficial because she could build her Social Security benefits while working at a place that paid her in cash—income she did not report on her income taxes. When Amparo no longer found this arrangement beneficial, however, instead of asking Juana to stop using her Social Security number, she went to the employer and accused Juana of stealing her number. Juana’s employer immediately fired her. While in this case Juana lost only her job, Amparo’s accusation could have had more severe repercussions. Juana could have been convicted of identity theft, spent up to two years in prison, and then been deported.⁷

Finally, undocumented immigrants who owned businesses could not register their companies because they did not have the necessary Social Security numbers. Thus, they made sharing papers arrangements with documented relatives or friends who put the business under their name and applied for city, state, and federal licenses and permits. In these informal agreements, documented individuals became the legal owners of the business, and the undocumented, unofficial owners trusted that they would receive their share of the profits. In

⁷ According to the Identity Theft and Assumption Deterrence Act of 1998, Pub. L. No. 105-318, § 3-7, 112 Stat 3007 (1998).

other words, undocumented immigrants became dependent on their documented business partners to have the legal paperwork in order, to give them authority to run the business, and to transfer the profits. For a few, these arrangements remained mutually beneficial.

However, in some cases documented individuals stole the business profits, and the sharing of papers to open businesses turned ties toxic. Such was the case for Mariana and her undocumented boyfriend. When they opened their own business dying jeans, they looked for a documented person to register the business. Their friend Ricardo offered. Mariana explained that she trusted Ricardo because when he lost his job, she hired him. Mariana interpreted his offer to put her business in his name as a form of reciprocity and a gesture to continue developing their friendship. Mariana later learned, however, that the friendship was toxic. She explained:

We could not get the business permits..., so we put the business in the name of another person [Ricardo]... He robbed [us of]... about \$405,000... He would tell us that we could not deposit the money in [our] bank account because we do not have papers... We did not know he was robbing us; we trusted him blindly... He supposedly was a friend.

When Ricardo stole the business profits, Mariana and her boyfriend were powerless because under the law Ricardo was the business owner and did not commit a crime. Not only did Mariana and her boyfriend lose half a million dollars, but the betrayal threatened the business's survival, jeopardized their livelihood, and impaired their ability to trust people.

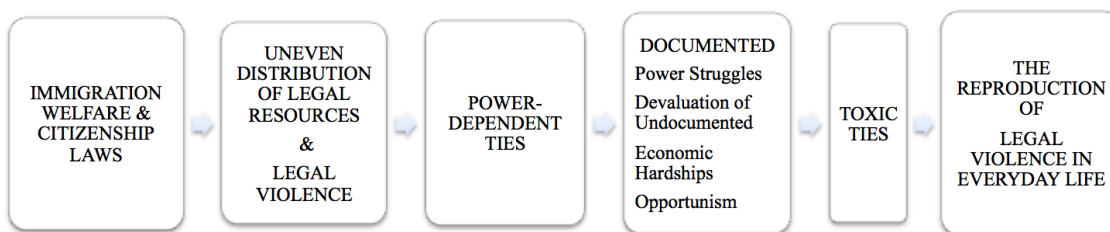
Furthermore, Mariana's story highlights how undocumented immigrants with limited resources are vulnerable to various forms of deception when sharing papers. When Ricardo told them that they could not open a bank account, they trusted him and did not verify this information. In turn, Ricardo had all the clients' payments deposited to his bank account and was able to steal the profits and disappear. While we do not know what motivated Ricardo to steal the

business profits, his actions caused great harm to friends who trusted him with their means to survival.

Most undocumented respondents explained that ties became toxic when their documented relatives, friends, or intimate partners deliberately devalued them, tried to control them, or took advantage of an opportunity to steal from or exploit them. However, overall ties can turn toxic, regardless of intention, because the hierarchical distribution of legal resources in many immigrant social networks makes mixed-status ties vulnerable to becoming toxic during times of uncertainty and hardship. Thus, a few of the undocumented and half of the U.S.-born respondents saw ties turn toxic when documented people experienced unexpected economic hardships or discovered unforeseen costs with sharing their legal resources. In this manner, ties can turn toxic even when documented people genuinely want to support their undocumented relatives, partners, and friends.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Figure 1. How Immigration Enforcement, Citizenship, and Welfare Policies Negatively Affect Mixed-Status Social Network



Aspects of legal violence such as the deportation, exploitation, and exclusion of immigrants have existed since the 1800s, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to Operation Wetback in 1954 (Menjívar and Abrego 2012a). However, the aggressions and injuries against undocumented immigrants that are sanctioned by legal violence have become increasingly hostile since the mid-1990s and particularly after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Menjívar and Abrego 2012a). Examining interpersonal relationships between U.S. citizens, legal residents,

and undocumented immigrants, this article has identified how state legal violence can be re-scaled and reproduced through the intimate and interpersonal relations of everyday life. As seen in Figure 1, immigration enforcement, citizenship, and welfare policies sanction legal violence and unequally distribute legal resources between documented and undocumented people. As a result, within mixed-status social networks, many undocumented immigrants become dependent on the legal resources of trusted documented intimate partners, relatives, and friends. These intimate ties become toxic when documented people intentionally or unintentionally take advantage of the legal vulnerabilities of their undocumented intimate partners, kin, or friends.

I conceptualize toxic ties as a type of relationship that is exploitative, demeaning, or harmful—regardless of intention—to undocumented immigrants by their documented counterparts. More broadly, I contend that toxic ties reproduce structural inequalities and structural violence at the micro, interpersonal level. In other words, ties do not necessarily turn toxic only when documented members of mixed-status social networks have malicious intent. Rather, documented people are part of a broader structural system of inequality that is sustained through legal violence and a hierarchical distribution of legal resources. This means that sometimes, documented people misuse their power when they encounter unforeseen economic difficulties or experienced unexpected costs associated with sharing their legal resources. Other times, documented people intentionally exploit, rob, or exert control over their undocumented partners, relatives, or friends who are unable to seek legal redress. Thus, I argue, the techniques and aggressions of legal violence have become so embedded within interpersonal relationships that even in the absence of hardship, the macro-level devaluation of undocumented immigrants normalizes everyday exploitative, abusive, and demanding aggressions against them.

These findings contribute to scholarship on migrant social networks by showing how governmental policies that unevenly distribute legal resources and sanction legal violence negatively affect (1) mutual aid and reciprocity and (2) trust within mixed-status social networks. In terms of mutual aid and reciprocity, previous studies on migrant social networks found that the immigration enforcement context of the 1980s and 1990s exacerbated poverty among undocumented immigrants (Cranford 2005; Menjivar 2000; Mahler 1995). This economic inequality resulted in the fragmentation of ties (Menjívar 2000), exploitation of undocumented immigrants (Cranford 2005), and suspension of mutual aid (Mahler 1995). The present study adds that in the post-9/11 context of legal violence, mixed-status social ties are exchanging legal resources (i.e., legal identities) as a form of mutual aid to build and sustain relationships. While often disguised or intended as a form of support, the exchange of legal resources is rescaling the macro-level disparity of legal resources between documented and undocumented people into micro-level power-dependent ties. These power-dependent ties enable documented individuals to rob, abuse, and degrade undocumented partners, relatives, friends who are unable to seek legal redress. Thus, as immigration enforcement becomes more hostile, the breakdown, tensions, and potential toxicity of exchanges within mixed-status social ties also expand.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the scholarship on trust. As originally conceptualized, trust is supposed to keep relationships within a social network beneficial (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993) and only foster malfeasance against non-members (Granovetter 1985). However, some scholars have started to dismantle these assumptions by showing that economic disadvantage can breed deception, facilitate exploitation (Rosales 2013, Cranford 2005), and cultivate distrust between members of the same social network (Smith 2007). This study adds that trust can also normalize subtle forms of aggressions within mixed-status relationships. In

other words, undocumented immigrants form power-dependent ties with documented people they trust. This trust enables the documented person to intentionally or unintentionally take advantage of his/her position of power and abuse, exploit, or degrade undocumented partners, relatives, and friends. According to previous conceptualizations of trust (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Granovetter 1985), such behavior should result in the exclusion of toxic individuals from mixed-status social networks. However, none of the documented individuals within toxic ties experienced severe repercussions. Since undocumented immigrants were unable to seek legal redress, other members of their mixed-status social networks often did not know who was at fault—that is, whether the undocumented immigrant became overly dependent or whether the documented member took advantage of that dependence. Hence, the harmful behavior that occurred within toxic ties was normalized as an unfortunate part of undocumented life. As these findings indicate, legal violence changes behavioral norms, normalizes subtle forms of aggressions, and sanctions documented people's ability to mistreat their undocumented intimate partners, kin, and friends.

Furthermore, these findings expand the scope of legal violence scholarship. Whereas previous scholars have focused on how the macro-level legal violence affects immigrants and U.S. citizens (Abrego 2016; Enriquez 2015; López 2015; Menjívar and Abrego 2012ab), this study illustrates how this state violence has changed the ways mixed-status people relate to one another. It demonstrates how toxic ties can be a mechanism through which mixed-status interpersonal relationships reproduce the tactics of legal violence (e.g., exploitation, degradation, abuse of power) associated with the state *as* and through everyday life. While not every toxic interaction is violent, the cumulative effect of toxic ties rescales and reproduces legal violence as everyday violence.

However, the formation of toxic ties does not remove undocumented immigrants' agency. For instance, several undocumented immigrants distanced themselves from people who belittled them, tried to control them, or tried to extract cheap labor from them. While some "sharing papers" arrangements kept undocumented young adults in dependent relationships, other undocumented immigrants tried to protect their investments by creating new arrangements with other documented people. Even this move, however, kept them dependent on the legal resources of documented kin and friends. Thus, until undocumented immigrants can access the same legal resources as citizens, they will remain vulnerable to power-dependent ties that can turn toxic. In sum, the concept of toxic ties is an analytical tool to detect how the practices and tactics of state legal violence can manifest as tensions, abuse, degradation, and exploitation within mixed-status social networks.

This study and the concept of toxic ties open the door for future research in multiple ways. First, while this study identified some factors that turned ties toxic, none of the U.S.-born young adults acknowledged that they engaged in opportunistic or abusive behavior. Scholars can, thus, study documented people's motivations to intentionally or unintentionally take advantage of undocumented immigrants within mixed-status social networks. Second, this study is based in southern California and does not capture the geographic heterogeneity of immigration enforcement in which some cities and states collaborate with ICE, while others do not. Researchers can compare how immigration enforcement in different local contexts impacts mixed-status ties and the presence, intensity, and nature of toxic ties. Also, future quantitative studies can systematically measure the prevalence of toxic ties themselves within mixed-status social networks and test the mechanisms this study detected. Finally, scholars are encouraged to analyze whether other governmental policies or systems of oppression (e.g., racism or sexism)

that unevenly allocate resources to different categories of people also create power-dependent ties that turn toxic.

As immigration enforcement and legal violence intensify, undocumented immigrants may experience more toxic ties. This study presented evidence that not all intimate relationships between documented and undocumented people are a source of assistance. On the contrary, some can reproduce the legal violence being carried out by the state. As long as undocumented immigrants must rely on relatives and friends to survive, they are vulnerable to toxic ties that exacerbate their economic and legal struggles.

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