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# Mexican/Mexican-American Siblings: The Impact of Undocumented Status on the Family, the Sibling Relationship, and the Self

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There are about 4.4 million undocumented children and young adults under the age of 30 living in the United States, the largest group being Mexican nationals. The differences in legal status found in mixed-status sibling relationships (i.e., a United States-citizen and an undocumented sibling) can be an additional stressor or potentially a protective factor that can buffer the challenges of being undocumented. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of nine undocumented students who have at least one United States-citizen sibling. A semistructured interview protocol was used to explore how immigration status affected the relationship of mixed-status siblings and family dynamics from the perspective of the undocumented sibling. Using thematic analysis, three themes were identified: “It has brought us closer”: mixed feelings in the parent-child relationship; “Don’t take it for granted”: gratitude and frustration in the sibling relationship; and “Now, I am proud”: the trajectory of the undocumented sibling’s relationship to self. Undocumented participants punctuated the trajectory of their sibling relationship and family dynamics with experiences of conflict and bonding. They expressed feelings of resentment, jealousy, gratitude, and closeness toward their siblings and family members. They spoke about their trajectory toward developing an empowered sense of identity that they believed set them apart from their United States-citizen siblings. The findings underscore how immigration policies have the potential of shaping the relationships within the family, between siblings, and with oneself. Moreover, findings have implications for clinicians working with mixed-status siblings and their families, as well as for informing public policies.

### **Public Significance Statement**

Immigration status can positively or negatively influence the relationship between undocumented and United States-citizen siblings, bringing them closer or creating conflict. Promoting positive relationships among mixed-status siblings may serve as an additional buffer against the stressors faced by many undocumented youth.

**Keywords:** Mexican/Mexican American, mixed-status siblings, mixed-status families, sibling relationships

In 2015, approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants resided in the United States (Cohn, 2017), about 58% of them from Mexico

(Taylor, Lopez, Passel, & Motel, 2011). It is estimated that, as of 2014, about 2.3 million undocumented immigrants reside in California

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(Passel & Cohn, 2016). Within the undocumented population, about 4.4 million are children and young adults under the age of 30 (Passel & Lopez, 2012). Undocumented youth are typically considered part of the 1.5 generation, which Rumbaut (2004) defines as an individual that was born in another country and spent the majority of their developmental years in the United States. In 2010 an estimated 16.6 million people in the United States belonged to a family that had one undocumented member and 9 million were part of a mixed-status family, which can include one or more United States-citizen children, one or two undocumented immigrant adults, and undocumented children (foreign-born siblings of the United States-born; Taylor et al., 2011). A portion of these family members, approximately one million, are undocumented children and about 450,000 of these children have United States-born siblings (Passel, 2011). Little is known about the experiences of undocumented youth that grow up in mixed-status families with United States-citizen siblings.

Literature on undocumented youth largely focuses on the challenges faced by them (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013) and their resiliency (Cervantes, Minero, & Brito, 2015; DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016). Undocumented youth are more likely to live in poverty, spend a portion of time separated from a parent, typically the father, and have less social support than documented youth (Perreira & Spees, 2015). They usually become aware of their undocumented status during adolescence when they begin to engage in milestones that require proper documentation such as when obtaining a driver's license, applying for employment, or preparing for college applications. Additionally, they learn that they are at risk of being detained and deported (Abrego, 2011; C. Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Due to their "illegality" and deportability, undocumented youth learn to live their day-to-day lives based on exclusionary laws that are constantly changing (De Genova, 2002). Gonzales et al. (2013) found that daily barriers such as hiding their status and missing out on milestones (e.g., legally driving and working) can lead to a host of mental health difficulties and negative experiences including chronic stress, depression, anxiety, stigma, incidents of dis-

crimination, social isolation, and vulnerability to exploitation. Furthermore, Gonzales et al. (2013) found that the experiences related to undocumented status can lead to unhealthy behaviors, such as substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide attempts. Despite these challenges, some undocumented youth developed an empowered sense of identity and became engaged in activism; these undocumented youth are more likely to display higher levels of resiliency and hope (Cervantes et al., 2015; DeAngelo et al., 2016).

Since the inception of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) in June 2012, a small number of studies have found that DACA provided undocumented youth access to various resources and has been associated with an increase in mental well-being (Siemons, Raymond-Flesh, Auerswald, & Brindis, 2017; M. Suárez-Orozco, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). DACA grants eligible individuals a 2-year renewable work permit and temporary relief from deportation (United States-Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2016). DACA youth are more likely to enroll in college, obtain employment in various labor sectors, and financially contribute to their families (Gonzales, Terriquez, & Rusczyk, 2014), as well as have increased feelings of inclusion and belonging (Siemons et al., 2017; M. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Nevertheless, studies show that DACA individuals continue to experience anxiety and fear due to the temporary nature of the program and the continued risk of deportation of family members without DACA (Siemons et al., 2017; M. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). For DACA youth and their mixed-status families, this fear and anxiety has been exacerbated with President Trump's decision to rescind DACA (Schochet, 2017).

The limited studies that mention mixed-status siblings have found that some siblings who are aware of one another's documentation status notice how differently they are treated in regard to opportunities and access to services (Castañeda & Melo, 2014; Mangual Figueroa, 2011, 2012). In an ethnographic study, Dreby (2015) found that differences in legal status among mixed-status siblings resulted in a "pecking order" (p. 101) or furthered highlighted the hierarchy established within the family. In these families, United States-citizen siblings were less likely to contribute to household chores and

childcare and more likely to partake in educational, athletic, or employment opportunities in comparison with their undocumented sibling.

When compared to their undocumented siblings, United States-citizen siblings are more likely to access health care services, are able to travel outside the country, and are at lower risk of detention and deportation (Castañeda & Melo, 2014; Mangual Figueroa, 2012). In some cases, differential access to resources and opportunities, as well as the perceived preferential treatment from parents based on these privileges may lead to tension, resentment, and guilt among mixed-status siblings (Abrego, 2016). At the same time, these differences may unify families as they use their collective privileges to help one another (Castañeda & Melo, 2014). Mangual Figueroa (2011, 2012) conducted an ethnographic language socialization study with four mixed-status families and found that daily conversations about citizenship in relation to each other shaped siblings' understanding of their limitations and privileges, which, in turn, played a role in the development of their identity. While few in number, the literature on mixed-status siblings tend to focus on the experiences of the United States-citizen sibling and less on the undocumented sibling.

While there is a substantial body of literature on sibling relationships, there is minimal research on United States Latinx sibling relationships. Literature has highlighted that in comparison with European American adolescents, Mexican American adolescents spent more time with each other than with any other family members (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005). It has been argued that this creates a context where social learning can occur with older siblings serving as role models for their younger siblings (Whiteman, Zeiders, Killoren, Rodriguez, & Updegraff, 2014). Similar to studies conducted with other populations (Sanders, 2011), Mexican American siblings describe having close and conflictual relationships with one another (Updegraff et al., 2005). Scholars have found that Mexican American siblings that are close in age, have a sister, and endorse *familismo*—a cultural value that defines the family as a system of support and emphasizes the importance of family obligations and involvement with kin (Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, Marín, & Perez-Stable, 1987)—are more likely to have close and sup-

portive relationships with one another (Updegraff et al., 2005).

Researchers have found that among Latinxs, close and supportive sibling relationships are associated with a decrease in both risky sexual behavior (Whiteman et al., 2014) and substance use (East & Khoo, 2005) and an increase in academic motivation (Alfaro & Umaña-Taylor, 2010). Furthermore, siblings can serve as a protective factor during difficult times such as family separation and poverty, especially for siblings that belong to marginalized immigrant groups (Coleman-Minahan & Scandlyn, 2017). While the literature underscores the sizable influence of sibling relationships, little is known about the sibling relationship between mixed-status siblings.

In the last two decades there has been a growing number of mixed-status families (Taylor et al., 2011). The literature notes that mixed-status families are at greater risk of experiencing family separation, which has been linked to poor mental health outcomes in undocumented and United States-citizen youth (Brabeck, Lykes, & Hunter, 2014; C. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). More so, family separation has been linked to economic instability and may strain the attachment bond between children and their parent(s) that are deported (Dreby, 2015). In addition to the stress of family separation, undocumented youth with and without DACA fear being detained and deported (M. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Thus, it is imperative that psychologists understand the experiences of Mexican undocumented youth in the context of their mixed-status sibling relationship. The aim of this qualitative study is to identify, appreciate, and bear witness to some of the complexities in the lived experiences of nine undocumented siblings who have at least one United States-citizen sibling. Specifically, the study focuses on exploring the perspectives of these undocumented siblings and how having a United States-citizen sibling has affected their sibling relationship and family dynamics.

## Method

### Participants

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), it is important to select a population that can speak to the experience under investigation. Thus, a

purposive sample of nine participants who met the following inclusion criteria were interviewed: be between the ages of 18–30 years old, self-identify as Mexican/Mexican American, be a current student at the local university or community college or be a resident of the county, be undocumented with or without DACA, and have a United States-born citizen sibling with whom they have lived with for at least 5 years. The sample consisted of three males and six females that self-identified as first generation undocumented college students with DACA. At the time of the interview, participants were between the ages of 18 to 22 and attending a midsize, West Coast, public university. Participants were born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States as children before

the age of 8 (Table 1). Participants' family household income ranged from less than \$10,000 to about \$60,000, though the number of people supported by that income was not assessed.

### Research Paradigm

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method that can be grounded in various theories. Given this "flexibility" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78), the data was analyzed using an inductive thematic approach that sought to generate themes based on the words of participants instead of identifying themes based on an established theory (Boyatzis, 1998). Rooted in constructivist and critical ideology

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics and Background Information Ordered by Age of Arrival*

Pseudonym (age/gender), college status	Age of arrival	Birth order	Sibling constellation
Alex (18, M) freshman	1 month old	First	Alex has three United States-citizen siblings: a 17-year-old younger sister in high school, a 9-year-old younger brother in elementary school, and the youngest is a 1-year-old brother.
Maya (18, F) freshman	3 months old	First	Maya has two United States-citizen siblings: a 14-year-old younger brother in high school and the youngest is a 10-year-old United States-citizen brother in elementary school.
Sara (21, F) senior	6 months old	Third	Sara has three United States-citizen siblings: a 23-year-old older sister with a bachelor's degree, a 16-year-old younger sister in high school, and the eldest is a 25-year-old sister.
Damián (18, M) freshman	1 year old	Second	Damián has two United States-citizen siblings: a younger 14-year-old sister in high school and the youngest is a 10-year-old brother in middle school. Additional siblings include an older 33-year-old undocumented brother.
Leslie (19, F) sophomore	3 years old	First	Leslie has three United States-citizen siblings: a 16-year-old younger brother and a 14-year-old younger brother, both in high school, and the youngest is a 13-year-old sister in middle school.
Verónica (22, F) senior	4 years old	Second	Verónica has a 15-year-old younger United States-citizen brother in high school.
Adriana (21, F) senior	5 years old	First	Adriana has two United States-citizen siblings: a 15-year-old younger sister in high school and the youngest is a 13-year-old brother in middle school.
Karla (20, F) junior	6 years old	Second	Karla has three United States-citizen siblings: a 22 year-old older sister with a bachelor's degree, a 12-year-old younger sister currently in elementary school, and the youngest is a 5-year-old sister.
Gabriel (18, M) freshmen	7 years old	Second	Gabriel has a 9-year-old younger United States-citizen brother in elementary school. Additional siblings include a 20-year-old older undocumented brother and a 16.5-year-old younger undocumented sister.

research paradigms, the approach employed aimed to explore and understand participants' subjective experiences. Constructivists assert that there are multiple realities shaped by one's subjective and contextualized experiences, and that meaning is co-constructed through researcher-participant interactions. Critical ideology furthers this notion by acknowledging the ways in which power relations permeates throughout these realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ponterotto, 2005). Participants were invited to share and reflect on their lived experiences as part of a mixed-status sibling dyad.

### Researchers

The research team included a lead researcher and a senior researcher. The lead researcher is a 1.5 generation (Rumbaut, 2004)—born in Mexico, spent formative years in the United States—female doctoral student in counseling psychology with experience working with undocumented populations. Additionally, the lead researcher has close and personal ties to undocumented and mixed-status community. Thus, she explored and noted her personal beliefs, assumptions, values, and biases that arose throughout the research study. She conducted the recruitment, screening, interview, and analysis process with the guidance of the senior researcher, a male faculty member in counseling psychology. The senior researcher, an Argentine immigrant and naturalized United States-citizen, has experience working with immigrant and undocumented communities, as well as having spent a portion of his life in the United States without legal documentation status.

### Procedure

Given the difficulty to recruit individuals that are willing to disclose their undocumented status and participate in research, the lead researcher established a relationship with members of an undocumented student club at a local university. After obtaining approval from the institutional review board, information about the study was presented at the club meetings. In order to obtain a participant pool outside the university, flyers were posted in various locations in the community such as coffee shops, and e-mail announcements were sent to undoc-

umented affirming organizations in the community and at the local community college.

Based on a review of the sibling and undocumented youth literature, a semistructured interview was developed. It consisted of nine questions that focused on participants' experience of learning about their own status as an undocumented immigrant, how they learned about their sibling United States-citizenship status and their feelings about it, and how the difference in immigration status affected their sibling relationship as well as the relationship with other family members, nonfamily members, and themselves. As a research incentive, each participant received a \$15 gift card to a grocery store. All the interviews were conducted in the language of choice of the participants (English) and were done in person by the lead researcher. In regard to timeframe, it is important to note that interviews were conducted months prior and shortly after the 2016 presidential election. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min; they were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher.

Thematic analysis, as conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the data. The lead researcher became familiar with the data by conducting and transcribing all the interviews, rereading the entire set of interviews, and noting initial thoughts throughout this process. Each interview was read and initial codes were generated using QSR International's NVivo, Version 10, a qualitative computer software program (QSR International, 2017). Data extracts were compiled and organized under each emerging code and then theme. Given the limited literature on mixed-status siblings, there was not a preexisting framework to use in compiling the codes. Thus, a data-driven approach (i.e., an analysis based on the participants' interviews) was used to generate codes and emerging themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, the lead researcher created codes based on thick descriptions, which consist of quotes with vivid descriptions (Morrow, 2005). Once codes were organized into emerging themes, the lead researcher discussed initial findings with the senior researcher. Ongoing analyses and discussions with the senior researcher refined each theme's labeling and description.

Congruent with constructivist and critical ideology paradigms, several procedures were used to establish the credibility of the study's findings

(Creswell & Miller, 2000). The lead researcher engaged in reflexivity by identifying, writing, and discussing personal values, biases, beliefs and assumptions with the senior researcher to note how these may influence the research process. Considering the lead researcher's immigration history, it was important to ensure that participants' lived experiences were being adequately represented by asking clarifying questions throughout the interview process and engaging in member checking, which involves providing participants a summary of the findings to establish its accuracy and incorporate any changes into the final report. The senior researcher provided feedback throughout the process and reviewed the findings to ensure their credibility. Lastly, thick descriptions were used to ensure that the participants' voices were honored and represented both in writing and in presentations of the findings to underscore the importance of context for every narrative.

## Results

For undocumented youth with United States-citizen siblings, mixed immigration status is an important factor that adds complexity not only to the sibling relationship but also with the rest of the family and with oneself. The overarching theme of complexity references how United States-citizenship privilege juxtaposed to the limitations ascribed to undocumented legal status influences the level of conflict and bonding in the sibling relationship and beyond. This complexity is interwoven in the three themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' narrative and that have been labeled as: mixed feelings in the parent-child relationship; gratitude and frustration in the sibling relationship, and the trajectory of the undocumented sibling's relationship to self (Table 2).

### **“It Has Brought Us Closer”: Mixed Feelings in the Parent-Child Relationship**

Participants shared how the complexity of mixed immigration status influenced their relationships with family members, which consequently impacted their sibling relationships. Participants indicated that the status they shared with their parents and other family members (i.e., being undocumented) strengthened their relationship. For instance, Damián noted how his relationship with his parents is close because

unlike his United States-citizen sibling, his parents and him can mutually share in the concerns and fears of being undocumented. Meanwhile, Leslie discussed how generally she tends to converse with her father about politics and that the shared concerns of being undocumented brought her and her extended family members together:

I think it's a little bit hard with my siblings because I feel that I didn't talk to them as much as I did with my dad specifically, but now that I think about it with family my aunts and uncles I think that relationship is kind of we are all kind of coming together trying to be strong for each other because all my family that's undocumented are trying to stay strong, stay together, and stuff. So I think that's kind of brought us closer together.

While participants bonded with their parents and family members due to shared legal status, it also led to conflict due to harbored feelings of “resentment” toward their parents for their hardships. Sara noted that her feelings of resentment have been present since she was a child and that her difficulties in college heightened these feelings:

Well, I feel like when I was younger I kind of . . . I think I resented . . . my parents for having been born over there because I do not know I felt like I struggled more. And even when I came to college like when I went through what I went through my first year I was just like “oh, it's your fault like I was not born here and . . .” Sorry (crying) sorry it's hard talking about it. (laughter)

Maya shared how her perspectives and feelings toward her parents had shifted since attending college.

When I was younger I noticed that I was very confused about how I felt toward them because I am like . . . in one perspective you are like why am I going through this? Why did you bring me here? But then the other perspective is okay I know that it was not with bad intention, it was with their best intentions for the best of me.

Additionally, participants shared how their experiences of being treated differently from their sibling negatively influenced their relationship. Alex expressed anger toward his parents because he felt he was expected to contribute financially to the family even though his sister's legal status provided her greater access to a variety of employment opportunities. The perception of differential treatment led Alex to believe that he was not as loved as his sister. Additionally, participants com-



Table 2  
*The Relational World of Undocumented Youth: Family, Siblings, and Self*

Themes	Description	Examples
“It has brought us closer”: Mixed feelings in the parent-child relationship	The family system and its units are influenced by the differences in status that exist within members of the family. Family members who share the undocumented status find solace and understanding with one another yet undocumented youth experience mixed feelings towards their parents.	“We have to obviously be on our toes to see what’s—what changes are going to be happening in the political landscape. So it’s always kind of scary, but I feel like it brings me and my parents closer together.”
“Don’t take it for granted”: Gratitude and frustration in the sibling relationship	The sibling relationship is positively and negatively influenced by the differences in status that exists between siblings. Undocumented youth have a range of feelings towards their United States-citizen sibling due to their limitations compared and contrasted to their siblings’ citizenship privileges. These differences, in turn, contribute to positive and negative sibling interactions. Undocumented youth expressed feeling happy that their siblings have United States-citizenship privileges and resent that they do not exercise these privileges.	“I think it’s more—it’s been more of a learning thing. Like they get curious, they ask me questions. I’ll answer them and kind of help them understand what it means for me to be undocumented. And then also make them understand I guess . . . their privilege too.”
“Now, I am proud”: The trajectory of the undocumented sibling’s relationship to self	For undocumented youth, growing up with United States-citizen sibling(s) serves as point of reference in the development of a positive or negative sense of self/identity. Nonetheless, participants followed a similar trajectory, from feeling “less than” their documented siblings, to embracing their undocumented identity, to feeling proud and strong.	“Because I have to struggle more and I have to fight for more of my rights than they do. I feel like . . . be more aware of my status and just what comes with it and just . . . has let me embrace it and just not let it I guess bring me down or let it be a reason to not be able to do something.”

mented on how parents would compare siblings based on their mixed immigration status. For example, parents would compare the achievements of one sibling to another highlighting the privileges and barriers of their respective statuses. Leslie commented on how this comparison potentially strained her relationships with her younger siblings:

My younger siblings are not as academically focused or whatever. And I feel like that aspect because my parents keep on comparing them and telling them to try to go to college and stuff. They are holding a little bit of a grudge against me maybe because they do not want to. It’s not their thing [academics].

Adriana shared that she would often attempt to mitigate the negative effects of these comparisons by providing support to her younger siblings:

My mom constantly telling her “you need to do well in school and your sister is in college. Your sister went

through this already and she did it and she’s undocumented. She doesn’t have all these resources you do. You need to do better and stuff.” So, sometimes I definitely see her frustration like she gets really frustrated when she gets a B. And I am just like “it’s not a big deal like you are doing really well in school.” So I think I am trying to kind of . . . tone down the pressure.

In Karla’s case, she was being compared with the achievements of her older United States-citizen sibling. She reflected on how these forms of comparisons led to feelings of exclusion and it negatively impacted her relationship with her father and other family members:

My Dad is always kind of telling her “she is so brave” and everything. And just praises . . . what she does and also it’s kind of . . . pushes me out of the picture. But it’s . . . well, it’s not that I do not want to (study abroad). It’s that . . . I cannot. I do not really have . . . an option. So, I feel like that’s when it kind of affects everything because . . . okay, well do not brush me off me . . . do not . . . exclude

me and it's not my fault that I cannot . . . or when they (family) are like, "oh, well are you going to do it? Why don't you do it? Like you should" and it's . . . well, I cannot (scoff). Well, maybe you should be informed that I cannot you know (voice is louder). So, I feel like that's when . . . it affects my relationship with my extended family and also more within my family.

### **“Don't Take It for Granted”: Gratitude and Frustration in the Sibling Relationship**

Participants expressed how the differences in their immigration status became a source of conflict and at the same time provided opportunities to bond with their siblings. Participants described having an early awareness that they had a different legal status from their sibling due to accessibility to opportunities and resources, such as traveling and medical insurance. Yet the implications of their legal status differences did not resonate with most until they were in high school, especially for participants that were close in age. As participants became aware of the limitations of their undocumented status, they began to compare themselves to their documented sibling. The greatest source of conflict for participants was not the privileges allotted to their documented siblings, but feeling as though their siblings were taking these privileges for granted. Verónica expressed her frustration when comparing her high school experience to her brother's current experience:

I never really understood it until now that he got into high school. He's dealing with the same things I did and he has been offered a lot more programs. And it was not that I was upset at the fact that he was offered. It's just that I was upset at the fact that he does not put enough effort. So I had to put in more effort to get the bare minimum and he's being offered a lot and he's just like, "oh whatever, like we will figure it out later." And I am just like I didn't have the luxury to figure it out later. I had to figure it out at that moment, so I think that's where the first big clash started happening.

Additionally, other participants expressed feelings of anger, jealousy, resentment, and envy toward their siblings' United States-citizenship privileges. These feelings were particularly poignant when traveling back to Mexico. For instance, Adriana shared:

I think maybe when I was younger I definitely did kind of feel . . . jealous like about their status. Just because my mom would always talk about the possibility of us traveling back if some policy was passed and we're able to travel and then come back. And then she would mention "oh, but your brother and your sister don't have to worry about that like all we need to do is just

bring them with us." Being able to travel and just go to different places, especially because my mom does check in with our family in Mexico a lot. Yeah when I was younger I definitely felt I guess envy and jealous that like "oh why can't I have what they have?"

Alex explained how he has been working at repairing his relationship with his younger sister and noted how these feelings of jealousy negatively impacted their sibling relationship:

You can work at a store . . . you can work at a fast food restaurant or something. I cannot, I cannot work, I cannot apply for those things because I do not have a work permit. I have to work in the fields where they cannot trace me and stuff. Yeah so I would just feel . . . you could go do that and I have to suffer over here. I would say things like that just to make her feel bad . . . and . . . yeah she would remember those things like how I would put her down, how I would be mean to her, how I would be jealous of her and sometimes . . .

Sara shared how attending the same university as her older sister made her acutely aware of and "resentful" of how their mixed immigration status shaped their college experience:

My first year they dismissed me for spring quarter because I was not doing well in my classes. And that (voice quivering) I was just like "what did I do wrong?" I do not know what's going on. Well, I came back obviously (laughter) And I feel like sometimes I guess I did resent my sister that was here because she was not going through the same things I was going through and I was having a harder time than her . . .

While participants indicated that they experienced a multitude of negative feelings about their own and their siblings' status, they all were grateful that their siblings did not have to experience the barriers of being undocumented. They expressed feelings of love and warmth toward their siblings. Damián shared that: "Even though I am not documented, I mean they're still my siblings and we still love each other the same even if I was or was not so."

Additionally, participants communicated a desire that their siblings benefit from their privileges. Leslie shared this sentiment about her younger siblings: "I feel it's good for them. There are a lot of benefits that come with being a citizen and I'm really happy that they- they have that because I want the best for my siblings."

Just as mixed immigration status could be a source of conflict, it also provided participants opportunities to connect with their siblings. This was done in a myriad of ways such as

educating their sibling about the barriers and privileges of their mixed immigration status, sharing of knowledge and resources, and being a role model for their younger siblings. For example, Gabriel stated:

He came home and he's like "oh yeah I am an American" and "oh, um America is better than Mexico." And I was you know "don't say that because you are still young you don't understand what's going on there is more than just that" and then he was "no, I am American." I think he still says it I am not sure, but I am like, "you're Mexican American you have blood from both countries and that's really a privilege to have and you should feel honored to be from both countries." And I mean maybe when he's older he going to understand what it really means he's still young right now.

Sara and Karla reflected on how their older sisters, who attended the same university as them, were the ones to help them find resources for undocumented students. For instance, Sara shared that:

She's the one that well I guess she re- she's really tried to understand what I am going through. She's the one that introduced me to IDEAS and she's the one that would push me to go. She joined first and I am like I do not want to go there (laughter), but then I am like "okay."

### **“Now, I Am Proud”: the Trajectory of the Undocumented Sibling’s Relationship to Self**

The complexity of having a sibling with a different legal status (i.e., documented) as that of the participants (i.e., undocumented) had some impact on the formation of participants' identity to varying degrees. Participants tended to follow a similar trajectory of feeling “less than” their documented siblings to embracing their undocumented identity. For example, Leslie spoke about her path toward this embracement:

At first growing up I felt that something was wrong with me because I couldn't do all these things that they could do. Now that I am coming to terms with it I think that I'm learning to you know I'm working on myself and now I'm proud of it and I see myself as a strong woman and a student and . . . So it's a very important part of my identity and I am pretty proud of it. I think it has made me a lot stronger.

Karla shared her difficulties of growing up as the only one with an undocumented status among her three siblings. She explained how her undocumented status led to positive quali-

ties that she identifies in herself and how it differentiates her from her sibling:

I know she's been through a lot as well, but I think there is a greater knowledge that I have. I feel at times there is this positivity that I think about myself. I am pretty strong or maybe I am more passionate about social justice. Or I am more compassionate toward people who are undocumented. I kind of take into consideration more . . . my parents' struggle more than my older sister does.

Similarly, Damián reflected on how his challenges as an undocumented individual shaped his sense of self and how this distinguishes him from his siblings:

I always viewed myself as a little bit more of a hard worker because I ha- if I wanted money the only outlet was to go into the fields and do your fair share with dad . . . I always viewed myself as more of a hard worker. Because I know when the time comes they're going to be able to get a job at Starbucks or McDonald's or where ever they can find a job because they already have a social since they're born. So it's kind of where I have set myself from like my siblings.

Adriana shared that even though she arrived at a young age, she does not resonate with the “American identity.” She reflected on how a part of her identity, her siblings' identities, and their sense of belonging are linked to their respective birthplaces:

I just feel like I do not belong here. This isn't (sigh) like I know there's other undocumented folks who feel American or whatever, but I still do not feel like that's any part of my identity. I guess going to that sense of belonging . . . sometimes my mom still asks that question she'll ask me and my sibling “oh, like if we were to go back would you just go?” And I just see . . . such a big difference because to me I would be willing to go maybe . . . maybe now I am a little more hesitant of just dropping everything and leaving. It's just . . . yeah (laughter) it's just I think it's a lot to take (laughter). It's a lot to take in and a big change so I think I am a little more hesitant when I tell her. Um, and then just the immediate “No” from my brother and my sister.

Gabriel explained that his earlier, negative feelings toward being undocumented came from experiences with other United States-citizens and not his younger brother: “I would say . . . especially in my early teens I would I consider myself lower, inferior to people that were citizens.”

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide insight into the relational world of the participants, undoc-

umented individuals that have United States-citizen siblings. Congruent with theory that considers the sibling relationship as nested within various systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), participants' responses about their familial relationships are reflective of family dynamics as described by structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1974). The sibling relationship was impacted by participants' relationship with their parents (Whiteman, Bernard, & Jensen, 2011). Similar to other studies, participants reported strained relationships with their parents due to resentment and perceived differential treatment, while also having positive and supportive relationships with each other (Abrego, 2016; Castañeda & Melo, 2014; Mangual Figueroa, 2011). Undocumented participants that shared the same status with their parents commented on it as a source of bonding, a finding that dovetails with previous research that has found that parents and children who have a shared experience of the limitations of their status tend to have a greater bond (Abrego, 2016). Given the timing of the study, many participants expressed how the barriers of being undocumented were particularly salient during the 2016 presidential election and further strengthened the bond among undocumented family members. In contrast, participants also expressed how differential treatment and parents' tendency to compare siblings negatively impacted the quality of the sibling relationship, as well as the relationship between parents and the participants. These experiences are congruent with research that has shown that parents can indirectly and negatively influence the dynamics between siblings through parental differential treatment (Updegraff et al., 2005). The experiences of sibling comparison and parental differential treatment based on legal status are consistent with the limited literature on mixed-status siblings (Abrego, 2016).

Sibling relationships are often characterized as simultaneously being conflictual and a source of bonding (Sanders, 2011). For the participants in this study, experiencing the barriers imposed by their undocumented status juxtaposed to the privileges given to their United States-citizen sibling was an additional component that impacted the level of conflict and bonding they experienced with their sibling. Some participants reported feeling jealous and harboring resentment toward their sibling because of their

United States-citizen privileges. At the same time, participants spoke about having positive and supportive relationships with one another, which are consistent with other studies (Abrego, 2016; Castañeda & Melo, 2014). In particular, participants emphasized that having a different immigration status than their sibling did not diminish their love for one another. One common point of contention for participants centered on the concept of gratitude. "Don't take it for granted," or a variation of this phrase was used by many of the participants to highlight their frustration with their siblings for not taking advantage of their privileges, while others used the same phrase with a tone of relief that their siblings were spared the difficulties of being undocumented. Often, this phrase was used in the context of comparing oneself with their siblings' accessibility to resources and opportunities. Since participants were all college students, access to educational opportunities was a particularly salient topic for them.

For undocumented adolescents and young adults, identity formation is a developmental milestone that is influenced by their legal status (Ellis & Chen, 2013). Similar to other studies that focus on undocumented students (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Muñoz & Alleman, 2016), participants discussed how being undocumented played a significant role in their identity development, which, for some, resulted in difficulties with self-efficacy, feeling inferior to other documented individuals, and experiencing hopelessness. At the same time, participants described experiences of overcoming obstacles, engaging in undocumented student groups, and taking college courses that contributed to their positive self-image, increasing feelings of hopefulness, agency, empowerment, and a sense of purpose. It is important to note that participants' narrative of grappling with their legal status from childhood to young adulthood is congruent with a developmental framework. Participants described having little knowledge about what it meant to be undocumented nor cared about it as children. It became salient for most as they entered high school and realized that their status barred them from participating in educational opportunities. Participants' college experiences provided spaces and opportunities that increased their sense of belonging and inclusion, which scholars have found to be associated with positive sense of self (Cervantes et al., 2015; Muñoz & Alleman, 2016). Nevertheless, participants also expressed

that some spaces on their college campus led to feelings of exclusion. Identity development is an ongoing dynamic process and for undocumented students encountering spaces of inclusion and exclusion may contribute to ambivalent feelings about their identity (Aranda, Vaquera, & Sousa-Rodriguez, 2015).

The findings of this study highlight how siblings influence identity development. While these findings are reflected in other studies (Davies, 2015; Wong, Branje, VanderValk, Hawk, & Meeus, 2010), the current study is the first to capture how this is experienced by undocumented youth with United States-citizen siblings. Just as one's own legal status influences the development of one's identity (Ellis & Chen, 2013), it seems that for undocumented youth growing up with siblings that are United States-citizens also plays a role in the manner in which they construct their personal sense of self. Participants described various moments throughout their childhood and presently, of how they and other family members would negatively compare siblings highlighting the power of language in socializing people's role within the family (Mangual Figueroa, 2011, 2012). Congruent with the literature, this comparison of self to another influenced how participants saw themselves as different or similar to their sibling (Davies, 2015). Additionally, participants highlighted the positive ways in which they were different from their siblings as a function of their legal status. These experiences are reflected in the research on sibling deidentification, a process by which siblings differentiate themselves from one another (Sulloway, 1996). These findings suggest that participants use their documented sibling(s) as a reference to learn what it means to be undocumented and over time it may help them internalize the strength and resilience they developed in overcoming barriers, as well as fight against the stigmatizing narrative that they may be exposed to in society (Ellis & Chen, 2013).

## Implications

The findings from the study have implications for ways in which clinicians and policymakers can work toward creating more inclusive interventions and policies for mixed-status siblings and their families. In working with this population, clinicians need to be aware of how privilege and the limitations ascribed to immigration status influence the level of exclusion experienced within

mixed-status families. Additionally, clinicians need to be aware of how these varying levels of exclusion impact family dynamics and relationships. Given that undocumented youth experience exclusion on a daily basis (Gonzales et al., 2013), it is important for clinicians to be mindful of how this may manifest itself in a therapeutic context and create interventions that highlight their strengths and resilience. Research on siblings has demonstrated that positive sibling relationships can serve as a protective factor during difficult times (Coleman-Minahan & Scandlyn, 2017; Sakai, Sugawara, Maeshiro, Amou, & Takuma, 2002). By using a family systems lens, clinicians can inquire about undocumented youth's sibling relationship and explore ways in which it can serve as a protective factor. Apart from individual therapy, clinicians can work with each subsystem of the family (e.g., siblings, parents) to address some of the challenges that may be exacerbated by mixed immigration status.

Thus far, immigration policies are not inclusive of mixed-status families, which results in constant fear of family separation (Hawthorne, 2007). For instance, new laws such as the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents privilege the parent-child relationship, but exclude the sibling relationships. Even laws such as DACA may only be accessible to certain individuals in a mixed-status family, which can provide relief for the recipient, yet does not dissipate their worries for other family members (Siemons et al., 2017). Moreover, the temporary nature of some laws, such as DACA, heighten the anxiety and fear of DACA holders and their families (Krogstad, 2017). Policies should be created to keep mixed-status families together while providing an opportunity for undocumented individuals to be naturalized at a faster pace through their United States-citizen siblings. This would, to some extent, create a space of inclusion and equity between undocumented individuals and their siblings.

## Limitations and Future Directions

While the purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of undocumented individuals with United States-citizen siblings, it is important to note that participants were self-selected and therefore more willing to share their stories. Even though efforts were made to recruit individuals from different communities,

all of the participants were college students with DACA status. Results from this study may have differed with a population of undocumented individuals at greater risk of detention and deportation, and without the temporary protection afforded by DACA. Thus, the interpretation of these results should take into consideration the participants' privilege of having DACA, their ability to attend college, and their access to institutional support. Furthermore, it is important to note that the study was conducted during and shortly after the 2016 presidential election, and before the announcement to rescind DACA. Future research should interview undocumented individuals that do not qualify for DACA or have not pursued higher education and consider the current social political context as these variables may influence sibling relationships and family dynamics.

Since interviews were only conducted with undocumented siblings, findings do not take into account the perspective of United States-citizen siblings on the quality of their sibling relationship. Future research could employ a mixed methods approach of quantitative instruments and sibling interviews in order to capture a holistic perspective on the sibling relationship. By incorporating the voices and experiences of both siblings, researchers can investigate how mixed-status siblings negotiate power between themselves and in the hierarchy of the family system and its overall impact on their mental well-being. Given that United States-citizen children are impacted by their parents' undocumented status (Enriquez, 2015), research can be conducted on how this may be similar or different from having an undocumented sibling. Additionally, a comparative study could be conducted between mixed-status sibling dyads and United States sibling dyads. These studies could further our knowledge of sibling processes in the context of a given sociopolitical climate.

Researchers may also consider how mixed immigration status impacts sibling relationship across various contexts and identities. Participants in this study spoke about their relationship with siblings that had lived with them in the same household and are citizens by birth. Therefore, research is still needed to understand how mixed immigration status impacts sibling relationship among half-siblings, step-siblings, and siblings with different legal statuses including permanent residents and temporary pro-

tected status. Even more so, there is a need to examine the relationship among siblings separated in the case of deportation or transnational families. Additionally, research may be conducted on undocumented individuals with different intersecting identities such as undocumented queer and trans folk. While the intention of the study was to examine the influence of legal status, additional factors emerged that could impact the sibling relationship including gender, birth order, and age spacing. Future studies would benefit from examining how gender and sibling characteristics play a role in mixed-status sibling dynamics. Given the study's focus on undocumented individuals of Mexican origin, researchers could examine sibling relationships among undocumented individuals from different countries of origin. To this end, future studies should consider using system and family based frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner (1977); Minuchin (1974), and Falicov (2013) to conceptualize the role of context, culture, family structures, and sibling characteristic and to inform research questions and protocols. Finally, sibling relationships are likely to be lifelong, thus there is a need to conduct longitudinal studies that can highlight how mixed immigration status impacts siblings across the life span, especially in the context of changing immigration policies.

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## Resumen

Hay aproximadamente 4.4 millones de niñxs y jóvenes indocumentadxs menores de 30 años que viven en los EE.UU.; el grupo más grande es de nacionalidad mexicana. El estatus legal mixto entre hermanxs (unx documentadx y el/la otrx indocumentadx) puede ser un factor estresante o potencialmente un factor protector que amortigüe los retos asociados con estar indocumentadx. Este estudio cualitativo exploró las experiencias de nueve estudiantes indocumentadxs quienes tienen por lo menos un/a hermanx quien es ciudadanx de los EE.UU. Se utilizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas para explorar cómo el estatus migratorio afectó tanto la relación entre hermanxs quienes tienen distintos estatus legales (documentadx/indocumentadx) como la dinámica familiar desde la perspectiva de la persona indocumentada. Usando un análisis temático, se identificaron tres temas: "Nos ha acercado": Sentimientos Entremezclados en la Relación entre Padres e Hijxs; "No lo tomes por sentado": La Gratitud y Frustración en la Relación entre Hermanxs; y "Ahora Me Siento Orgullosx": La Trayectoria de la Relación con Unx

Mismx del Hermanx Indocumentadx. Lxs participantes indocumentadx puntuaron la trayectoria de la relación fraternal y la dinámica familiar con experiencias de conflicto y apego. Expresaron sentimientos tanto de resentimiento y celos como de gratitud y cercanía para con sus hermanxs y miembros de la familia. Ellxs describieron trayectorias personales hacia el desarrollo de una identidad empoderada la cual creen lxs distingue de sus hermanxs ciudadanxs de los EE.UU. Los resultados enfatizan cómo las políticas inmigratorias pueden dar forma a las relaciones familiares, a las relaciones entre hermanxs, y a la relación con unx mismx. Más aún, los resultados tienen implicancias tanto para lxs clínicxs cuando trabajan con las familias y lxs hermanxs cuyos estatus inmigratorios son distintos, como para las políticas públicas.

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