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**Engaging in Security Work:
Selective Disclosure in Friendships of Korean and
Mexican Undocumented Young Adults**

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While much of the literature on undocumented immigrants has focused on employment and education outcomes, we know little about the effects of their precarious legal status on interpersonal relationships. Based on interviews with 50 Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults, I find that, regardless of ethnoracial background, undocumented immigrants approach relationships cautiously, engaging in "security work" to protect themselves and their loved ones. Security work is a negotiated process of interpersonal interaction and status disclosure consisting of specific relational conditions to maximize affective and material security. First, shared immigrant background provides a baseline sense of comfort and safety. Respondents find symbolic belonging with those of immigrant descent, while exercising caution around anyone who is white. However, due to the stigma of undocumented status, both structural homophily and experiential homophily operate in determining disclosure patterns. Co-immigrant background is powerful but insufficient for establishing the trust required for disclosure; instead, shared experience is the necessary condition. This study demonstrates that the vulnerable, stigmatized nature of illegality circumscribes the freedom with which young undocumented immigrants navigate the most personal spheres of their social worlds. These findings have important implications for our understanding of the profoundly pervasive effects of immigration status on the everyday lives of undocumented immigrants.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing body of scholarship on the everyday lived experiences of the 2.5 million undocumented youth and young adults who migrated as children to the United States with their parents (Batalova and McHugh 2010) and grew up in the U.S. amidst and alongside their citizen peers. Their undocumented immigration status poses a unique and restrictive context of reception (e.g., Portes 1981, Portes and Bach 1985, Portes and Rumbaut 2001) that further constrains pathways towards incorporation due to denied access to the formal labor market and higher education (e.g., Gonzales 2011, Abrego and Gonzales 2010, Abrego 2006) despite literature that suggests the “assimilation” of linguistically and culturally competent 1.5- and 2nd-generation children of immigrants (Alba and Nee 2005).

In this piece I build on our understanding of this vulnerable population by highlighting the insidious deep-seated effects of legal status that extend into their intimate interpersonal relationships. In particular, by examining their approach to friendships and other non-familial relationships, I propose the theoretical concept of *security work* as a parallel framework to legal violence (Menjívar and Abrego 2012), which neglects to account for the detrimental effects of immigration status beyond the domains of employment, education, and family. In doing so, I shed light on the contexts in which undocumented young adults exercise agency in sharing their status with friends, through *selective disclosure*, and how one’s ethnoracial identity shapes these segmented patterns of disclosure. The precarious and stigmatized nature of undocumented status significantly circumscribes the freedom with which these young people navigate the most personal spheres of their social worlds.

Previous scholarship (e.g., Enriquez and Saguy 2016; Gonzales, Suarez Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguinetti 2013; Castro-Salazar and Bagley 2010) has considered important implications

about the effects of putting shame aside and disclosing one's status (or vice versa, keeping it a secret). However, in this article I explicitly examine the relationship between immigration status and disclosure, specifically shedding light on how young undocumented immigrants who are legally shunned from the place they call home cultivate a sense of relational security for themselves. This subset of our population not only grapples with contradictory feelings of inclusion and exclusion on both interpersonal and institutional levels but also the potential risk of detention and deportation should they not practice utmost caution in their social interactions.

For these individuals who live in untenable legal situations, there are both *affective* and *material* implications to sharing these personal aspects of their lives. Due to the criminalization of undocumented status in the U.S., divulging such a source of stigma (Abrego 2011) places one at risk for being judged and disrespected by one's peers, as well as bringing potentially severe material and existential harm to his/her ego and loved ones. Like other social beings, youth who are undocumented seek and desire strong emotional support and social acceptance. However, they must be selective about those *from whom* they seek this social support due to this duality. *When and with whom do they feel safe to disclose their legal situation in their personal relationships? What are the contexts, situations, and relationships that guide and direct selective disclosure? And how are these boundary making strategies conditioned by race and ethnicity?*

Drawing on in-depth interviews, I address these questions, namely examining how the intersection of race and immigration status shapes how Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults traverse their social worlds. Through exploring these questions about the social lives of young undocumented immigrants in particular, I provide new insight into social ties in general, namely the complex role of experiential homophily (Suitor, Pillemer, and Keeton 1995) in social network formation and specialization.

Disclosure of Status Among Young Undocumented Immigrants

Undocumented immigrants in the U.S. often live “in the shadows,” hiding the fact that they are residing in the country without legal authorization (Chavez 1998), largely because of the stigma of being labeled as “illegal” (Donato and Armenta 2011; Menjivar and Abrego 2012). In the last several years, however, undocumented youth activists have played a pivotal role in rejecting the stigma of undocumented status and reappropriating it into political strategy and civil disobedience (Galindo 2012). The year of 2010 marks a critical moment in the history of immigrant rights, when, on March 10th, a group of young undocumented students in Chicago intentionally “came out” to the media with their status, catalyzing a series of national political campaigns of being “Undocumented and Unafraid” and “Coming Out of the Shadows” (Terriquez 2015; Galindo 2012). These discursive efforts to combat the silencing and dehumanization of “illegal immigrants” have initiated a robust movement of collective and individual empowerment among young undocumented immigrants to publicly disclose their status (Nicholls 2013; Seif 2014; Terriquez 2015). In addition to collective-level motivations of increasing awareness and advocating for pro-immigrant policies and laws, undocumented youth activists have been found to “come out” more readily in their personal lives to access information and resources, put a stop to unwanted questioning, and/or affirm an authentic identity (Enriquez and Saguy 2016).

While the rhetorical strategy of public disclosure has served to empower and galvanize many young activists, most undocumented immigrants however remain “in the shadows” (Chavez 1998) and are extremely cautious about public and private declarations of their socially stigmatized identity. Similar to undocumented activists who have strategically and boldly “come out” as “undocumented and unafraid” to the masses, their non-activist counterparts also exercise

agency in disclosure within their personal networks. Given the taboo nature of their status as well as the potential risks of deportation, we may expect that undocumented youth and young adults generally may not be as vocal as undocumented activists about their status with their close ties, let alone make any public statements exposing their tenuous legal situation. Potential negative ramifications of disclosure also may lead them to be strategic with their friendship-making behavior and in turn patterns of personal disclosure of status.

Extrafamilial Interpersonal Relationships of Young Undocumented Immigrants

Academic and popular discourse on the personal relationships of undocumented young adults has centered around the consequences of mobilizing the social capital readily available to them (Abrego 2011; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Gonzalez 2011; Perez and Cortes 2011; Menjivar and Abrego 2012; Enriquez 2011), but their spheres of more intimate interpersonal relationships are less understood. Prior scholarship has demonstrated that strong friendships and caring mentors play a significant role in providing valuable information and emotional and mental support in the midst of restrictive circumstances. Teachers and administrators as well as undocumented peers have been shown to be pivotal in sharing information on circumventing obstacles within the educational system (Gonzales 2011; Enriquez 2011; Abrego and Gonzales 2010). In addition to these supportive individuals, finding community through civic engagement and mobilization also acts as a critical psychological resource for undocumented youth and young adults, allowing them to remain resilient and hopeful (Gonzales, Suarez Orozco and Dedios-Sanguinetti 2013).

When it comes to the labor market, one's co-ethnoracial ties are instrumental in shaping work trajectories, at times opening up possibilities to work in sectors beyond conventional low-

wage labor (Cho 2017). However, while we know that strategic social ties can alleviate institutional barriers and, for activists, offer a sense of belonging and mental strength, *how* undocumented young adults navigate their social worlds is less understood. The focus has been on the consequences of mobilization of social capital available to these young people and less about the ties themselves. While it is critical to understand the utility of relationships, less is known concerning the deep-seated effects of immigration status on the relationships themselves and the ways in which undocumented young adults maneuver these personal spaces.

Undocumented youth and young adults not only have to be strategic about navigating their relationships, since one poor judgment call could lead to life-altering ramifications, but also because, for these young U.S.-raised undocumented immigrants who can “pass” (Goffman 1963) as legal, revealing this stigmatized aspect of their identity could lead to heightened shame and a loss of dignity.

Intersections of Race and Illegality

Along with increasing attention given to the younger, more “Americanized” segment of the undocumented population (often called “Dreamers”), the media has begun to highlight the ethnic and racial diversity of the undocumented population. Of the 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the U.S., it is estimated that 71 percent have migrated from Mexico and Central America, 13 percent from Asia, 8 percent from South America and the Caribbean, and 7 percent from Europe and Africa (Migration Policy Institute 2017). While the majority of the undocumented population is of Mexican and Central American origin, studies have shown that migration flows have been shifting in recent years with a decline in Mexican immigration (with

more Mexicans leaving than entering the U.S.) and an increase in Asian immigration (Passel and Cohn 2016). Asians now comprise the largest share of recent immigrants to the United States.

Though there is growing awareness of the diversity of the undocumented population, particularly with the increasingly panethnic undocumented youth movement, the racialized narratives of “illegal immigration” in broader public discourse continues to equate “illegal” with “Latino” or more specifically “Mexican” (Chavez 2008). Asian undocumented young adults who have been raised on U.S. soil pass as legal not only due to embodied characteristics of American culture, but further because their Asian appearance disassociates them from dominant stereotypes about undocumented immigrants. Having this dual cloak of invisibility, therefore, could shape their trajectories of personal relationships and experiences of disclosure differently from Latino undocumented young adults. Unaware of peers who share in their struggles outside their immediate family, they may be more inclined to withhold their status and shoulder their emotional and material burdens on their own. We might expect them to “come out” to administrative and academic figures who serve instrumental functions, but they may not disclose their status to friends as readily as their Latino counterparts.

In this article I explore how undocumented immigration status affects the formation of group boundaries in everyday social life, and furthermore how these interpersonal experiences may be conditioned by ethnoracial background. This research builds on the analytic framework of “legal violence” (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) which draws on Bourdieu’s theories of structural and symbolic violence to expose the harmful and exclusionary effects that the law has on the domains of work, family, and school for the undocumented community. I find that legal violence is not only experienced in the public and institutional realms, but extends to the private and personal spheres.

To highlight the unique position and relational approach of undocumented youth and young adults in response to threats of legal violence, I develop the conceptual framework of *security work*. *Security work encapsulates the negotiated process of maximizing affective and material safety and minimizing legal violence*. I find that undocumented youth and young adults engage in *selective disclosure* of their immigration status wherein they strategically navigate their social ties to ensure relational security. Undocumented immigrants are hyper vigilant about who can and cannot penetrate their social worlds not only to counter the risk of detention and deportation but also to protect themselves from potential judgment, disrespect, and hurt.

Instead of focusing on the detriments of such relational constraints, which is indeed a reality that is implicit throughout the paper, I shift attention to the young undocumented immigrant as an *agent* of security work, which is critical to the preservation of their own emotional and ego security as well as the material protection of their and their family's livelihoods. My findings reveal that these 1.5-generation undocumented young adults, having grown up alongside peers with similar trajectories, are careful to maintain their own emotional stability and dignity by exercising selective disclosure. As such, refracted through a filter of race and immigrant background, only a limited number and limited categories of persons are given the privilege of hearing the personal details of their legal situation. Undocumented young adults strategically navigate their social worlds by perceiving and discerning who can and cannot be trusted with the intimate details of their legal situation, shaping their experiences with personal disclosure.

Scholarly consensus suggests that individuals have homophilous relationships, tending to befriend those who are similar to themselves, along various demographic markers such as race/ethnicity, age, class, and education (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001). Similarly,

race has been found to be a significant determinant of interpersonal trust (Uslaner 2002). Little is known, however, about the role of legal status in social network formation. Many identity characteristics such as race, age, gender, and at times class could be signaled visually, facilitating homophily; but legal status is not inherently physically discernible. In the United States, however, strong negative associations persist between race and immigration status, the Latino face being equated with undocumented status in the American consciousness. Given these structural racialized conditions and mental linkages between the visibility of race and the invisibility of undocumented status, what aspects of being “like me” steer the friendships of ethnoracially diverse young adults living with undocumented status? Does race hold primacy in the cultivation of relationships for undocumented youth and young adults, or does legal status become the “master status” that matters more?

Furthermore, relatively little is known about the role of socially stigmatized identity characteristics such as undocumented status in relationship-building and social network activation. Individuals with mental illness, for instance, while being found to exercise agency in activating one’s social support in the midst of difficult circumstances, is inevitably situated in and constrained by their network culture and accessibility (Perry and Pescosolido 2014). Experiential homophily (Suito et al. 1995) – in this case, shared mental health experiences – as well as the closeness of the relationship and frequent contact are found to be strong determinants of tie activation among those navigating mental illness. Do the social network activation patterns of those who live with the stigmatized identity of undocumented legal status parallel those with individuals who carry the stigma of mental illness? How do people selectively choose their confidants to whom they can disclose their stigmatized identity? And how does race condition these patterns if at all?

This paper contributes to our understanding of how confidant ties are formed, and how the intersection of a stigmatized identity and ethnicity affects confidant tie formation. In this era of heightened legal violence against the 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the U.S., should legal status be added to the list of demographic variables that inform homophilous relationships? This paper therefore contributes to broader understandings of homophily, stigma, and specialized networks by beginning to ask whether race or immigration status (or their intersection) becomes the “master status” in the formation of friendships and selective disclosure among young undocumented immigrants.

Research Design

This article draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 50 Asian and Latino undocumented young adults from the greater San Francisco and Los Angeles areas of California. As the state with the highest share and greatest ethnic diversity of undocumented immigrants, as well as the largest number of DACA-approved youth and young adults in the country, California is an appropriate site for this research (Migration Policy Institute 2014). To be eligible for this study, respondents had to be young adults between the ages of 21 and 35, be of Korean or Mexican descent, and have experienced living with undocumented status. I chose to focus on the case of Koreans and Mexicans as they comprise the largest DACA-eligible groups within the Asian and Latino populations, respectively. Individuals who were able to regularize their status in their young adulthood were also included in the study for two primary reasons: to facilitate data collection (vis-à-vis the putative protection of documentation) and to highlight more effectively the role of legal status on everyday life. Three were legal permanent residents and three had recently attained citizenship. The rest of my respondents (44) were undocumented with

41 of them having received DACA¹ benefits.

In an effort to overcome some of the selection bias in chain-referral sampling common in research on vulnerable populations, while also seeking to maximize the trust and comfort of respondents, I used two strategies to recruit interview participants: convenience sampling and snowball sampling. First, I reached out to a broad range of individuals in my personal network and asked them to provide my contact information to anyone they knew who would be eligible for the study. Respondents found in this way contacted me directly to express their interest in participating. I then asked these respondents to refer me to others who might be willing to participate in the study. Because my call for recruitment was forwarded to various advocacy and activist organizations, my sample includes three individuals who were actively involved in the undocumented activist movement.²

The 50 respondents include 28 undocumented young adults of South Korean origin and 22 of Mexican origin. All of the interviews were conducted in summer 2016 and spring of 2017. Interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours, and included questions about their migration experience, school experiences, work experiences, relationships with family and friends, encounters with law enforcement, and how undocumented status may have affected these spheres.³ My sample is majority female with 31 of the respondents being female and 19 male. They ranged between the ages of 21 and 35 at the time of interview. I intentionally focused my sample to include this subset of young adults in order to explore understandings of social belonging and boundaries that would not be captured with a younger cohort. My respondents would be considered ‘high achievers,’ as the majority of them had graduated from college (or had some college). As my findings document, focusing on this subgroup reveals that even those who have strong advantages along traditional lines of incorporation (and would be considered advantaged relative

to the broader undocumented community) are significantly circumscribed by immigration status. Further, the social network of undocumented immigrants, as an extreme case, is useful to understand the role of trust and safety in interpersonal relationships. Studying this selective vulnerable population has broader implications for friendships in the midst of severe adversity and perceived shame in general. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis package Dedoose.

As a U.S.-born, heterosexual, cis gender, Generation Y, educated, Korean American female, I have tried to be cognizant of my positionality in relation to my respondents. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, from initial email contact to the conclusion of the in-person interview, I asked myself the following: What role does my positionality (especially as a citizen and as an Asian) assume in studying the experiences of undocumented immigrants? How does my positionality influence the interactions I have with undocumented Koreans? With undocumented Mexicans? In multiple aspects of my identity, I am extremely privileged, which could potentially lead to guardedness and satisficing on the part of my respondents.

To mitigate these effects on the “data,” I employed a few strategies to emphasize my stance of scholar-activist: exhibiting a warm and friendly demeanor, using colloquial language for the interview, not printing out any research materials and receiving oral consent (and explaining why), identifying myself as a graduate student at UC Berkeley, explaining the motivation for my project which was activated by my friends’ receipt of DACA benefits. With my Mexican respondents, I found myself instinctively amplifying these approaches. However, my interactions revealed that in reality it was my Korean respondents that needed more assurance that their information was safe with me, as they were much more likely to be “in the

shadows.” Overall, being a young woman of color from Berkeley worked towards my advantage in building trust and rapport in my interviews with undocumented young adults, because I was generally perceived to be a peer in terms of age, political orientation, and racial minority status.

Findings

For all respondents (both Korean and Mexican), shared immigrant and ethnic background provides a baseline sense of comfort and security, while caution is exercised around anyone who is racially white. Regardless of ethnoracial identity, respondents generally have similar perceptions of what constitutes the relational conditions and potential site for the disclosure of deeper personal matters including immigration status. Thus, when discerning who can enter their social world in the first place, race and immigrant background hold primacy. They find symbolic belonging, what Ariela Schachter (2016) describes as a “subjective sense of social similarity,” with those of immigrant descent, building friendships with those whom they perceive as understanding the unique challenges of the immigrant experience.⁴ In contrast, they exercise caution around anyone who is perceived as politically conservative and/or racially white.

Within this overall pattern, however, selective disclosure diverges between Korean and Mexican respondents. Put another way, while my interview participants, regardless of ethnic or racial background, sensed a strong level of connection with fellow immigrants and therefore formed homophilous ties based on immigrant background, they did not necessarily follow the same pattern when it came to status disclosure. I find that drivers of personal disclosure are deeply shaped by their respective ethnic communities: Korean respondents are often prompted to disclose their status to explain away another source of shame and preserve their status identity, while Mexican respondents seek empathy, compassion, and a sense of community in times of

distress. Furthermore, Korean respondents in particular more often create a distinction between the *confidants* with whom they discuss the intimate details of their legal situation and those *companions* who they see regularly but to whom they do not reveal their legal status.

My Mexican participants, on the other hand, have more overlap in their circles of confidants and companions. The individuals whom they confide in most about their concerns around immigration status are a distinct group that is set apart from other friends and often includes individuals with whom they do not interact regularly.⁵ Hence, due to the stigma of undocumented status, it is the combination of structural homophily (social position, demographic identity markers) and experiential homophily (common experiences) that is operative in determining patterns of disclosure; co-immigrant background is powerful for a baseline filter of social safety but not sufficient in establishing the trust required for disclosure; instead, shared experience - or at the very least an understanding of this experience - is the necessary condition.

Undocumented young adults must strategically and agentially navigate their social worlds in order to maximize interpersonal and material security for themselves as well as for their undocumented family members. In the sections that follow I first discuss these relational conditions in more detail, which apply to both Korean and Mexican origin undocumented young adults. Their experiences navigating relationships not being entirely congruent, I then explore this variation by ethnoracial background.

Baseline Filter of Selective Disclosure: Shared Immigrant Experience

The precariousness of undocumented status not only inflicts constraints on material circumstances, but also molds the orientation and approach with which undocumented young adults relate to those around them, including their most intimate friendships. The undocumented

young adults in my study developed their closest friendship ties with those who understood firsthand the experience of being an immigrant, even when they were not from the same ethnic or racial group. More importantly, they explicitly *attributed* their capacity to feel safe with these friends to this shared immigrant identity, as 28-year-old Jenny⁶ from Los Angeles does when describing her best friend Fatima:

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

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

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

For instance, despite having a diverse friendship group, 24-year-old Julie described those closest to her being of Korean descent as well. “She’s not undocumented, but she’s still very similar to me in a lot of ways,” she said about her best friend. “I don’t really have friends who are undocumented that are close to me.” The similarity that Julie referred to was her friend Soojin’s shared Korean cultural background. Even though Julie thought “they would bicker less” if Julie were not undocumented (since she would not have to constantly remind Soojin of the limitations that come with her status), she expressed that Soojin was a “great support system [who was] as good as she can be” because of commonalities in heritage culture as well as interests in social justice.

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

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

The significance of shared immigrant identity is most evident through the experience of 34-year-old Mexican male Lucas. The majority of my respondents expressed feeling most cautious around people at their workplaces, more often strategically compartmentalizing their lives and completely separating their jobs from their social lives. For Lucas, however, it was different. As someone who worked in the tech industry of the Bay Area, many of his coworkers were in the U.S. primarily on H-1B work visas. Despite having vastly different migration histories, for Lucas, knowing that they understood the fundamental essence of being a migrant afforded him greater ease in their interactions: “It’s interesting because it’s really easy to hang out with people

at work *because they're also immigrants*, so they get that. They're Indian, they're Russian, other backgrounds...” (emphasis mine). While Lucas remained cautious about trusting all of his coworkers with the specifics of his legal history, overall he identified a greater sense of security at his place of employment compared to my other respondents.

For my respondents, the perception of a shared experience of being an immigrant in the U.S. and implicit understanding of its complicated, broken immigration system assumed a prominent role in determining comfort, ease, and a potential space of belonging. To ensure their well-being as well as the lives of their loved ones, undocumented young adults must delicately maneuver their social interactions, determining relational spheres of safety and spheres of vulnerability.

Boundary Making with Perceived Outgroup Members

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

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

Class and socioeconomic background assumed a role in determining Sara's level of vulnerability, but race took primacy. Being white was a symbol of privilege and status, in contrast to her own marginalized background, and thus signaled potential threat. Allie, a 22-year-old Korean-origin woman who was completing her bachelor's degree, also shared Sara's guardedness around individuals who were racially white:

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

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

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

Yeah. Some of them were micro aggressions. Like they [the parents] would be really close and suddenly they would distance themselves. I would really notice that after I said that I was undocumented. And sometimes they would just ask me, "How do you feel? You're taking resources away from other students." And I wouldn't know how to answer

that, especially at the time. And things like that made me feel like I shouldn't have said it in the first place. And that's what made me really wary of telling people like parents.

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

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

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

Intersectional Identities and Diverging Pathways of Selective Disclosure

For both Korean and Mexican respondents, a baseline sense of relational ease and comfort was guided by shared immigrant and ethnic background, which signaled in-group status. However, passing this interpersonal filter did not necessarily lead to openness about their immigration status, and in fact, pathways of vulnerability and disclosure about one's legal

situation diverged between these two groups of respondents. While all respondents were very aware of the stigmatized inflection of their immigration status, the contexts of disclosure and recipients of disclosure varied. As I will explain below, Korean respondents were often prompted to share their status to supplant another source of shame whereas Mexican respondents sought emotional support for direct challenges related to their status. The relative absence of peers who can empathize also led Korean respondents to create a brighter distinction between confidants, those with whom they discussed their concerns about their legal situation, and companions, individuals with whom they interacted regularly and would consider close friends, but to whom they did not disclose their status.

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

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

The experiences of my Korean respondents are in stark contrast to Mexican respondents like Cristina who was able to be ensconced in a close community of fellow Mexican origin peers that understood firsthand the harsh experience of being undocumented. For those Mexican respondents who did not have the opportunity to have strong friendships with peers in a similar situation, they described at least an implicit, unspoken understanding of the widespread presence of others like them in their schools and broader communities. Lucas, for instance, who grew up

in an agricultural center of California, described the presence of a “tribal anecdotal knowledge” in the community about navigating life without documentation:

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

The awareness of a large presence of others in a similar precarious legal situation, whether close relatives or distant neighbors, however, did not necessarily facilitate the act of disclosure. While the likelihood for undocumented Mexican interviewees to have close ties that are fellow undocumented peers was higher than for undocumented Koreans, because of a heightened sense of community vigilance around immigration authorities, they had to be as strategic about whom to trust. Being imputed as the “model minority,” particularly relative to the Latino face of the “illegal immigrant,” uniquely shaped the friendships of Korean respondents, who often only shared their status with select confidants unless prompted to disclose their status identity.

Confidants versus Companions

Due to greater feelings of isolation and lack of empathy and the fear of judgment, most Korean respondents had specific confidants to whom they would be open about their status, whereas Mexican respondents were more likely to share that most or all of their friends knew about their legal situation. When I asked 26-year-old Isaac from Korea who his close friends were, he asked me to clarify: “Like you mean people I can be open to?” A few of my Korean respondents followed up with a variation of this question, indicating that they had constructed a boundary between those to whom they could entrust the details of their legal situation (confidants) and those they could not (companions). The extrafamilial⁷ individuals that they

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

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

Here Isaac described that he does not discuss “that topic” with his close friends but actually his “less close friends.” These “less close friends” of Isaac were in fact two older Korean individuals who assumed the role of mentor rather than friend. One of them was his former pastor whom he could depend on anytime he “[needed] to just talk or ask for help.” Because she worked with disadvantaged undocumented youth and had a “passion to help the community,” he could trust that his struggles would be approached with empathy and treated with sensitivity. With his personable, disarming demeanor, Isaac had many friends from various phases and domains of his

life. And yet he withheld what was arguably one of the most defining aspects of his life, because he could not completely trust that these friends could hold this information with sensitivity and understanding.

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

Thirty-year-old Nancy also remained very private about her legal situation with good friends, despite knowing each other for more than a decade. Nancy, who was of Korean origin but immigrated to the U.S. from Paraguay, reiterated to me again and again that "people just don't get it." When she talked about one good friend in particular whom she knew since middle school and even lived with for two years as housemates, she intimated the need and desire to protect herself from judgment regardless of the strength of their relationship:

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

Nancy did not disclose her situation with her good friends because, though she trusted them enough to spend time together, that was where the boundary was set. She, like Isaac and Kevin, distinguished confidants from companions, friends with whom she enjoyed spending time regularly and even considered good friends but did not discuss her personal matters. For many

Korean respondents there was only a select handful of individuals who occupied the inner sanctum of their social world, those whom they could trust would not compromise their relational security.

Mexican-origin Cristina on the other hand only “[surrounded herself] with people [she feels] comfortable around.” She made sure that her close friends were individuals whom she could trust with “everything.” In addition to navigating school together, her closest friends were also all from Mexico and understood the plight of living with undocumented status.

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

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

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

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

In sum, generally Korean respondents were more private about their legal situation compared to Mexican respondents because of a perceived lack of shared experience and empathy, limiting disclosure to a select few confidants. However, at times Korean respondents were prompted to divulge their status as an explanation for another potentially more injurious source of shame, such as lack of engagement in international Christian mission trips and more ambitious academic pursuits, which are considered normative behaviors and achievements in the predominantly Christian and high-achieving Korean community. Particularly in densely connected social networks such as the Korean immigrant population (Min 1990), these dominating norms and values greatly influence personal decisions and behaviors (Coleman 1988).

When I asked 24-year-old Julie how she eventually divulged her legal situation to her friends from high school, she described feeling “forced” to explain why she was not applying to the competitive colleges and universities that were assumed to be part of her imminent future. This was a recurring theme with a few of my Korean respondents. “Why aren’t you going to college again? Why are you *aiming* for a CC [community college]?” or “Why aren’t you applying to places out of state or private schools?” were not uncommon reactions confronted by these individuals who were expected to excel academically and matriculate into the most prestigious of higher education institutions. In order to extinguish the shame of attending a lower tiered school, they were forced to expose the shame of their undocumented status, feeling obligated to explain why they could not achieve the Asian “success frame” like their documented counterparts (Lee and Zhou 2014).

Kevin *was* able to overcome all odds and matriculate into a prestigious university, but due to his family’s financial difficulties and inability to pay for his college tuition he

unexpectedly had to leave school in the middle of his first semester. In order to help his friends understand what was an atypical predicament for his social circle, he was motivated to share about his legal situation:

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

In addition to discussions about college, several respondents who were involved in church mentioned that the first time they shared about their status with friends was during conversations about overseas mission trips. In the Korean Christian church, participating in mission trips abroad is almost an expected rite of passage in the high school and college years (Ecklund 2006), one that could risk judgment and questioning should one elect not to participate. "Church friends would be like, 'why are you not able to go on missions to Mexico?' Yeah, that's how it really came up," 24-year-old Elizabeth told me.

The disassociation of illegality with the Korean community contributed to a lack of empathy and understanding even from those one deemed as confidants. Twenty-three-year-old Rachel shared her experiences of feeling isolated and abandoned, even among her close friends who were aware of her legal situation. The profound disappointment she felt when none of her friends was willing to give her a ride home despite knowing about her car-less, license-less situation left a lasting scar for Rachel. After a late monthly church meeting in Koreatown, Los Angeles, she needed to find a ride home to Pasadena, as usual. Absorbing the shame of her predicament, she mustered the courage to ask multiple friends for a ride, albeit being well aware that none of them live in the same direction. However, after being rejected more than once, she was left no choice but to eventually give up and catch a cab home, an exorbitant expense particularly in the Los Angeles area. As evident from the experiences of individuals like Julie,

Rachel, Kevin, and Elizabeth, there is a substantial added challenge of finding social belonging, due to the invisibility and unawareness of the presence of the Asian undocumented population as well as community expectations for their academic achievements and religious activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Recent studies have highlighted the restrictive role of undocumented immigration status on educational and employment pathways of 1.5-generation undocumented youth and young adults (e.g., Gonzales 2015, Gonzales 2011), showing how legal violence is inflicted on their day-to-day lives (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). My findings build upon this scholarship by demonstrating that the reach of undocumented status goes far beyond these public societal spaces, extending into the most personal and intimate parts of their lives. The tenuousness of status significantly informs feelings of interpersonal ease, leading undocumented young adults to engage in *selective disclosure* of their legal status, navigating their social worlds with heightened strategic acumen and discernment. For this vulnerable population, the disclosure of personal matters, in particular their undocumented status, could have affective and material implications wherein disclosure is not simply a risk of a loss of dignity and respect, but also of existential harm. This duality is unique to these individuals who tread liminality, leading them to place *relational security* as a priority in their everyday lives.

My findings therefore demonstrate that undocumented young adults practice security work through intentional boundary making based on perceived understanding and shared experience. All respondents, both of Korean and Mexican origin, found symbolic belonging with individuals who shared their immigrant and ethnic identity, while maintaining distance from those who are racially white. Within this overall pattern, pathways of vulnerability diverged

between Korean and Mexican respondents. For the former group there was an added challenge of finding social belonging due to the invisibility and unawareness of the presence of Asian undocumented immigrants. Being doubly invisible – passing as legal because they are U.S. raised *and* because of the racialization of Mexicans as “illegal” – also meant a doubly layered barrier to personal disclosure with friends. Given this context many respondents of Korean origin often distinguished between those with whom they could discuss their legal situation and those solely reserved for less vulnerable interactions and activities.

These findings bring greater nuance to our understanding of the social worlds of undocumented youth and young adults by exploring their network ties more comprehensively, beyond those instrumental for educational and labor market pathways, which has been the focus of existing research. The national “Undocumented and Unafraid” platform has empowered many youth to resist fear and stigmatization of their immigration status through the public disclosure of many undocumented activists. The findings presented above shed light on the mechanisms by which nonactivist youth and young adults exercise agency through their own acts of disclosure in personal relationships and how these pathways vary by ethnoracial background. Security work is central to the lived experiences of diverse undocumented youth and young adults, achieved by the ways in which they segment disclosure – vigilantly and strategically placing and withholding trust to ensure affective and material safety.

Furthermore, this study contributes to our understanding of social ties and network specialization more broadly. For undocumented young adults, friendships are not simply a result of accessible opportunity structures (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) but intentional choices that are made to maximize relational security and combat legal violence for both themselves and their family members. Moreover, while existing research demonstrates that

homophily is found to be particularly salient on race (e.g., Marsden 1987, 1988; Lincoln and Miller 1979; Uslaner 2002), these findings suggest that race may be serving as a proxy for immigration status or a more nuanced intersection of race and immigration status. For undocumented youth and young adults, it is not solely race nor solely the lack of documentation that shapes the formation and trajectory of their friendships, but rather the confluence of these very palpable “master statuses.” This research points to the importance of examining experiential homophily through an intersectional analytical lens to more accurately understand the friendship-making patterns of individuals, particularly for those who may bear the weight of a socially stigmatized experience (e.g., mental illness) or identity marker (e.g., LGBTQ). Further, this study highlights how state and local contexts matter: Given that this study is based in California, a relatively pro-immigrant state where there is a density and diversity of ethnic groups, these findings could be considered the “best case scenario” for undocumented youth and young adults in the country.

This work also reveals the insidious effects of undocumented status that temporary remedies such as DACA and in-state tuition cannot rectify. While strides have been made to provide opportunities for employment and higher education for 1.5-generation undocumented youth and young adults, these policies and programs cannot bring relief to the ways in which status constrains their personal relationships, their presumed “safe space.” Legal status, that which is public and institutional, has deeply personal and deeply private implications, limiting the freedom with which undocumented immigrants cultivate and traverse their social worlds.

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NOTES

¹ A federal temporary relief program founded in 2012 that grants certain eligible undocumented youth and young adults who entered the U.S. as minors a renewable two-year period of protection from deportation and work authorization.

² To elaborate on what I mean by "actively involved," these individuals held prominent positions in activist groups, leading efforts to mobilize individuals by organizing demonstrations, reaching out to stakeholders, etc.

³ Interviews were conducted as part of a larger project. This paper focuses on interpersonal relationships.

⁴ Living in areas of California where there is a high concentration of immigrants, such friendship-making patterns are feasible. It is important to note that this is a study of California-raised and California-based individuals, not all undocumented young adults.

⁵ These early findings suggest that undocumented young adults primarily base their relationships on two levels of perceived trust: particularized trust, which rests on the belief that most in-group members are trustworthy, and strategic trust, which is based on specific encounters with trustees (Smith 2010). Their friendships, therefore, are not simply a result of the opportunity structures available to them (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001).

⁶ All quotes from interviews use pseudonyms unless otherwise attributed.

⁷ Immediate family members occupied the innermost realm of trust for my respondents. Because in most cases my respondents' parents and siblings shared some history of being undocumented, their legal situation was both a

deeply personal and deeply collective family affair. However, within the immediate family, siblings often also played a critical role in providing emotional and mental support while conversations with parents primarily were often focused on “business” such as updates on relief programs. Hence, within the family, while trust was not an issue with parents and siblings, undocumented young adults did not depend on their parents to be “confidants” so as not to cause them even greater concern for their well-being.



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