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Constructing Resilience Amid Instability:
Immigrant Narratives during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

in

Sociology

by

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June 2026

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ABSTRACT

Constructing Resilience Amid Instability

by Timothy Perez

Immigration and health scholars tend to define resilience as the process of successful adaptation to adversity and risk, often through internally directed goals. This study differs in that it centers immigrant communities' conceptualizations of resilience to understand its differing uses across legal statuses. Based on 36 interviews with primarily Latinx immigrant workers, I engage in qualitative and narrative analysis to explore how resilience is understood across legal barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic. My analysis frames respondent's narrative employment of resilience as a dialogic resource for making meaning which reproduce or resist neoliberal discourses. I found that immigrant communities' conception of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic was complex; it served as an empowering resource for those relatively privileged and legally secure while those without legal status were weighed down by the need to explain their experiences within this framework, sometimes contesting it altogether. For instance, respondents who experienced low legal barriers framed their resilience as the product of their personal choices. High legal barriers respondents centered their legal status as a salient in understanding instability during the pandemic. One subgroup in particular framed the capacity to enact and embody resilience as structurally unavailable to them, refusing the narrative demand to make their story legible as resilience. Given these findings, scholars should critically approach defining resilience in ways that reproduce meritocratic implications, such as the notion that societal instability is behaviorally and adaptationally mismanaged by disadvantaged groups.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK.....	4
<i>A. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Legal Barriers</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>B. Narratives and Narrating Social Instability</i>	<i>8</i>
III. DATA AND METHODS	11
<i>A. Data Collection.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>B. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>C. Data Analysis</i>	<i>14</i>
IV. FINDINGS	17
V. DISCUSSION	36
APPENDIX.....	48

I. INTRODUCTION

Economic and societal instability, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has a disproportionate impact on immigrant communities, especially undocumented persons. For example, past research has shown that recessions and pandemics have a disproportionate impact on the health and economic precarity on migrant workers and their families (Garcini et al. 2020; Bobek and Sandström 2024; Vargas and Sanchez 2020; Williams and Medlock 2017; Mengesha 2022). Relatedly, immigration and health scholars have focused on identifying specific strategies that immigrant individuals and families enact to be resilient to adversity during such times (Solheim et al. 2021; Livas-Stein et al. 2024). There has been an increased call for researchers to conceptualize resilience critically, in terms of who can access this kind of resilience (Scharp et al. 2021) and how differing kinds of resilience processes can be detrimental when only viewed as solely positive (Doan et al. 2022). Yet while research has increasingly focused on factors which shape resilience processes for immigrants in the U.S. broadly and also on being more critical in defining the concept, less research has examined how immigrant communities themselves understand resilience and adaptation as they make sense of their experiences of economic and social instability, particularly across legal barriers.

To address this line of research, I examine how notions of resilience were constructed by immigrants through narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic. My analysis frames narratives of resilience as not only practices of resilience *per se* but as dialogic resources for making meaning of instability, which may play a role legitimating

in normalizing hegemonic attitudes (van Leeuwen 2015; Hilmar 2025; Herzog 2018). My study asks the following questions: How were notions of resilience constructed within narratives during the pandemic by immigrant communities? What role did legal barriers and socioeconomic status play in how resilience was understood? How did these narratives make meaning of instability and/or legitimate or resist hegemonic discourses about immigrants? To investigate these questions, I examine how immigrants across legal statuses narrativized their experiences of the pandemic through a qualitative study consisting of thirty-six semi-structured interviews with migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2021-2022.

I found that that respondent's narratives of resilience expressed different meanings of the term, some of which contested the demand to be resilient. These findings were patterned across the presence of low or high legal barriers. I found that 1) Respondents who experienced low legal barriers largely constructed resilience as a product of their personal choices. One major way this happened was when respondents associated their disengagement from "divisive" political discourse with lower stress. These respondents also framed anti-immigrant rhetoric as something they could willingly chose to "accept" or ignore by understanding it as a trade-off to living in the U.S. Low legal barrier respondents tended to put forth narratives about individual growth and successful adaptation due to their personal choices, and they held higher overall educational attainment. 2) In contrast, those who experienced high legal barriers centered their legal status as a salient factor in producing unstable outcomes during the pandemic. In addition, this group had lower levels of educational attainment.

Two subgroups from the high legal barrier group emerged. The first subgroup employed a meaning of resilience as something inherent and innate regardless of circumstantial factors or structural barriers experienced during the pandemic. The second subgroup, having experienced very high legal and financial barriers, conceptualized individual choices for resilience as structurally and circumstantially unavailable to them due to these barriers. They resisted the narrative demand to have their stories be about achieving resilience and instead tended to focus on how their structural exclusion left them with little capacity to cope in socially preferred ways. Therefore, those with high legal barriers during the pandemic offered two contrasting ways to negotiate and contest what it meant to be adaptive during the COVID-19 pandemic's period of societal instability

Respondents' discussions of their resilience give us insight into how the salience of legal barriers shapes the meaning of what it means to be resilient. Through narrative analysis, I show how these various constructions serve as resources for making meaning of and negotiating the impact of legal barriers within a wider context instability As such, my approach shows not only how immigrants' communities themselves conceive of resilience, but the process by which differing legal and socioeconomic contexts were associated with contrasting meanings of what it means to be resilient. In doing so, I show how differing show how respondents legitimated and contested neoliberal, merit-based discourses in and through their narratives of resilience. Given these findings, scholars should question the ways in which they define resilience. We should critically consider the ways in which defining resilience through individual goals, assets, and strategies can

reproduce these hegemonic discourses such as the assertion that there is a meritocratic basis for adapting and overcoming societal instability.

In the following section, I discuss the background and theoretical framework for this study. I then discuss the methods of data collection and analysis, including data collection methodology and coding strategy. In my findings, I detail the ways in which resilience narratives manifested across legal barriers. Finally, I discuss the contributions my study adds to the literature, the implications the findings have for studying resilience within immigrant communities, and the limitations of my study.

II. BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

A. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Legal Barriers

Scholars have debated the extent to which being undocumented is a master status that shapes the impact of other social locations (Gonzalez 2015; Enriquez 2017; Valdez and Golash-Boza 2018). An intersectional approach to understanding the lived experience of those undocumented underscores how resistance to various forms of marginalization is “weakened by the emerging salience of undocumented status as a severe, relatively unsurmountable barrier” or what Enriquez (2017:1526) refers to as the legal status as the “final straw.” This study sheds light on how these barriers present themselves during times of heightened instability (such as COVID-19) – how choices to postpone college, for instance, are made in relation to a family’s legal status – but primarily shows how various social contexts and locations, such as legal status and education level, shaped immigrant families’ understanding of what it means to be

resilient and adaptive in relation to these barriers. This following section gives background to the pandemic context and legal barriers experienced during this time in the U.S., essential background for understanding the structural context within which these resilience narratives took shape.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrant communities, especially those who were undocumented, experienced pandemic-induced spirals of marginalization wherein “various forms of exclusion were activated and accumulated on one another” (Bazurli and Campomori 2022:1093). For example, layoffs and working cuts had compounding impacts on migrant communities, as migrant workers were disproportionately employed in occupations that laid off most workers and were often ineligible for any kind of federal support, such as unemployment assistance (Garcini et al. 2020). Researchers have described this period of time for marginalized workers as a time of pandemic precarity not only to the material deprivation and economic anxiety following the pandemic but also the widening risks for poorer health and health care outcomes for those who were already most at risk of economic collateral damage, especially because their income becoming more precarious (Perry et al. 2021). Schmitt et al. (2023:1) has also used pandemic precarity to detail how neoliberal policies and attitudes were heightened during this time, including “individualism, justification of inequality, depoliticization, and precarity” revealing how discourses shifted to not only blaming workers for their precarious situations, but how others attributed success and good health during the pandemic as the product of personal choices. In this study, neoliberal and meritocratic themes were expressed by those who experienced low legal barriers, and the fact that it

was discussed in relation to their pursuit of depoliticization shows that these neoliberal attitudes were indeed widespread, among those groups most vulnerable.

The pandemic saw active and heightened levels of exclusionary policies and anti-immigrant rhetoric, which were particularly impactful because of the way provisions of public health protections and safety nets are premised on citizenship in the United States (Triandafyllidou 2022:45). The Trump administration, and later the Biden administration to a lesser extent, identified immigrants as the cause of America's public health crisis (Lee 2022). As Lee (2022:400) notes, "immigrant scapegoating and restriction became primary tactics in the federal government's response to the pandemic." Other studies have shown that anti-immigrant sentiment was further pushed by rightwing politicians towards immigrant communities (Kirby 2021; Singh 2021). Latinx and Asian communities received vast amounts of negatively charged coverage similar to other scapegoating (such as the 20th century Braceros program), associated Mexican and other immigrants with contagion while perpetuating racist and nativist understandings that migrants were biologically inferior. (Molina 2010; Garcia et al. 2021; Snodgrass 2025). This rhetoric commonly employed during the pandemic was used in federal level policies during the early pandemic and had material, detrimental compounding mental and emotional impacts for immigrant communities in conjunction with other marginalized identities (Boris 2022). Consequently, both the financial and political environment for all working-class immigrant communities, but especially for those who were those undocumented, was one of fear and stress about policies, rhetoric, and financial uncertainty (Boris 2022; Mayora 2022).

Within this background of precarity and legal barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the research on the pandemic and immigrant communities has examined the financial and health impacts to these communities during this time and in addition, the strategies for resilience that these used to cope with heightened periods of stress due to legal barriers (Sola-Sales et al. 2021; Garcini et al. 2020). Yet, while research has shown that narratives are an important part of how resilience is conceptualized and enacted (Hauser et al. 2016; Ramasubramanian 2022 et al.), less research has been devoted to understanding the divergent narratives of resilience that immigrant communities employ, particularly across legal statuses, especially during societal instability like the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been an increasing push to conceptualize resilience critically, in terms of who can access this kind of resilience (Scharp et al. 2021) and how differing kinds of resilience processes can be detrimental when only viewed as positive (Doan et al. 2022). My research seeks to connect these lines of research by showing how narratives from immigrant communities reveal the process by which varying contexts of legal barriers amid instability shape the meaning of resilience. In doing so, I examine how notions of resilience were constructed through narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this resilience was used as a resource for making sense of instability. The following section elaborates on how narrative analysis was a good methodological fit for analyzing diverging constructions of resilience during the pandemic, across social contexts.

B. Narratives and Narrating Social Instability

Maines (1993) argues that narratives within sociological analysis are characterized by three elements: a selection of events for the purposes of focus, a transformation of these events into story elements through the use of plot, setting, and characterizations which confer structure, meaning, and context to the selected events, and the temporal ordering of these events so that questions of how and why events happened can be established. It is the second element which narrative sociologists primarily focus on because it is where “action, agency, and consciousness are processed and told through the structure of a story (Maines 1993:28). Narratives, as consistent re-interpretive work that people make about their lives and the world around them, requires selective appropriation of past events to devise coherent accounts which are also vital for formulating one’s identity and place in the world (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Crowley 2003). Due to their constitutive and social nature, formulating narratives is not a smooth progression but happens in “uneven and negotiated” ways (McNay 1999:334).

It is because they offer coherency in otherwise disordered and complex events. Hilmar (2025:310) understands narratives as “interpretive work” that happen most visibly “when material conditions are influx.” One example to illustrate how the narrative approach can be used to understand material conditions is influx is Silva’s (2012) research on changing 21st narratives surrounding transition to adulthood. Silva found that, contrary to prior research working-class youth “increasingly made use of a therapeutic model to narrate their coming-of-age experiences” because of the destabilization of traditional adult transitional markers such as stable careers and marriage (2012:506). This example shows how instability contributes to differing

conceptions of common discourses based on context. According to Silva (2012:506), this therapeutic narrative model enabled the post-industrial working class to “redefine competent adulthood in terms of overcoming a painful past and reconstructing an independent, transformed, and adult self.” In this examination of working class precarity, Silva gives us insight into not only how and why the meaning of *adulthood* is changing for respondents, but what these narratives enabled or achieved for working class people. In an analogous manner, my research seeks to understand how immigrants across legal statuses redefined the meaning of resilience during a time of deep social stratification and precarity, focusing on how the construction of resilience differed depending on legal status and socioeconomic context during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Examining narratives as vital work for revising self and societal conceptions before, during, and after major social and traumatic events gives us insight into what these new self and societal conceptions achieve individually and their importance for social reproduction (Sumerau 2025). In shaping how the social is understood and constructed, narratives often make claims about what counts as legitimate and illegitimate inequality – In offering distinct accounts of the social order, differing narratives of different groups “constitute a repertoire of legitimation” and resistance under social rupture (Hilmar 2025:310) and can achieve what Cassaundra Rodriguez describes as boundary work (Rodriguez 2023). For example, Rodriguez shows how some undocumented workers in the U.S. argue *against* dominant and hostile narratives about immigrants by making distinctions between themselves, as people with children who are raising productive youth, and others, such as migrant young migrant men, who do not have children (Rodriguez 2023:137). This example is relevant because it shows how, in

constructing this narrative, her respondents were *both* challenging a dominant narrative *and* doing boundary work which distanced themselves, and simultaneously, legitimated assumptions others made about undocumented young migrant men.

Nevertheless, narratives do more than show how actors legitimate social order, they also can serve to give insight into resistance. When narratives are viewed as secondary adjustments, they can reveal how people expressed consciousness of the injustice of state power and offer an “understanding of the role of structure in both enabling and limiting action” (Ewick and Silbey 2003:1333-1335). In their study of narratives of legal resistance, Ewick and Silbey analyze how narratives can show how structure can be momentarily appropriate for unexpected results, giving us insight into how resistance takes place within legal structures. In addition, Ewick and Silbey argue that narrative retellings of this kind “announce” themselves as resistance through the story-telling act; they serve to amplify acts of resistance (2003:1335).

To summarize, structural and political narratives are made more visible for analysis during times of social rupture, such as the pandemic or economic recessions (Hilmar 2025). Narratives offer distinct views of social order and make claims that can both legitimate inequalities, for instance by defining who deserves federal relief and support, and resist it, for instance by asserting that legal exclusion shaped pandemic experiences more than individual choices (Rodriguez 2023; Ewick and Silbey 2003). In analyzing these stories from respondents as narratives, we can understand how these differing constructions of resilience give us insight into how these discourses were legitimated and resisted.

III. DATA AND METHODS

A. Data Collection

Dr. Rebecca Mireles (PI) and her RA team at UCSB in 2021-2022 collected these data as part of the Migrant Initiative Grant and Data Collection Project. Data was collected by the research team for the purpose of understanding essential migrant workers experiences during COVID-19. To participate in this study, respondents had to be part of three other initial inclusion criteria: participants had to be over eighteen years old; be born outside of the United States; and work in one of the industries listed in the California State Government's list of essential workplaces and jobs. "Essential work" was defined using the California State Government's definitions to maximize the relevance of the work to the California political context, such as public healthcare and retail workers. The researchers used purposive sampling to recruit thirty-six participants across California born in a wide range of countries outside of the United States. Researchers collected demographic surveys as well as semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The semi-structured interviews included seventeen demographic questions as well as twenty open-ended questions concerning topics of health, work, family, hopes and the pandemic impact and meaning. I analyzed these semi-structured interviews for this project, as a secondary data analysis.

B. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents. Most (61%) of respondents interviewed were women. A majority of respondents were in the age 20-25 bracket. This age bracket in particular was relevant in understanding how certain milestones were impacted by the pandemic (such as secondary and graduate school). While 20% of respondents had a high school degree or less, 20% had a professional degree. 64% of respondents were Latinx. A plurality of respondent's country of origin was Mexico (44%) while the other countries of origin were limited to three or less. In addition, some Latinx respondents identified as white, others identified their race as their country of origin or ethnicity – In fact, this comprised all of the respondents who identified as white. in this sample. The education level of respondents is further explored in *Table 2*. An additional table which compares demographics across legal barriers is available in *Appendix B*.

Table 1. Participant Demographics, $N = 36$

Broad Demographic Category	Specific Demographic Information	N	%
Gender	Woman	22	61%
	Man	14	39%
Age	20-25	20	56%
	26-33	8	22%
	34-64	8	22%
Education	High school diploma or less	11	30%
	Some college	6	17%
	College degree	12	33%
	Graduate degree	7	20%
Race	Black	6	17%
	Asian or Pacific Islander	5	14%
	White	7	19%
	Multiracial	3	8%
	Other ^a	14	42%
Ethnicity	Latinx	23	64%
	Non-Latinx	13	36%
Country of Birth	Mexico	16	44.4%
	Argentina	3	8.3%
	Ghana	2	5.6%
	Kenya	2	5.6%
	Japan	2	5.6%
	Other ^b	11	30.8%

a. The “Other” category primarily consisted of those who identified with as Latinx or Hispanic

b. These include DRC, El Salvador, Panama, Peru, Canada, Nepal, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Czech Republic

C. Data Analysis

The strategy I used to code these thirty-six interviews was based on abductive analysis through qualitative research for the purposes of theory construction, setting up my coding process to highlight “seeming contradictions” and remaining open to where findings may diverge from “expected theoretical cases”, for instance not immediately coding for resilience but actions and mindsets it was being used in referenced towards (Timmermans and Tavory: 23). I engaged in the first process of “flexible coding” (Deterding and Waters 2021: 3) by first reading transcripts broadly and coding large chunks of text for themes. I found this method particularly helpful because I did not conduct the interviews firsthand. I wrote analytic memos after each reading interview and continuously returned to the academic literature during this process. I then used these memos, and broad themes were then used to construct novel research questions informed by the literature and my experiences reading interviews.

Resilience as an Emergent Theme

While resilience was not mentioned in any interview questions (Appendix A), it emerged as a major theme during the coding process. I further coded for narratives of resilience in this study in three ways: 1) When respondents themselves used the term and related language in their narratives, such as “resilience” or “adversity”; 2) When respondent’s narratives centered on how they managed to withstand the pandemic, particularly when they discussed “coping”, “managing”, “adapting”, “growing” etc. – these terms in particular were most abundant in respondent’s interviews, with almost every interview having at least one keyword; 3) Finally I analyzed what respondent’s narrative resolutions (or the “point” of their pandemic story) implied regarding their

meaning of resilience – For example, did their story use their personal coping strategies and growth as an explanation how they overcame pandemic adversity? How were actions and agency centered in their meanings of resilience? To what extent could resilience be achieved? One quote example may help elucidate this further – One respondent’s narrative closed with “we are resilient, we keep going and do not look back. This quote was not only considered essential in that respondent’s construction of resilience, but it also gave me insight into how resilience was being understood in terms of a set of actions and sentiments (“do not look back”) which have implications for what resilience means and where its purpose lies. “To keep going” (surviving) vs. “to grow stronger from” (thriving) are qualitatively different notions of resilience, for instance.

There was a narrative demand in respondents’ stories that kept bringing them back to resilience in some way. Capturing these differing meanings of resilience required a flexible and wide umbrella in defining resilience. The fact of its consistent emergence as a narrative gives veracity to my finding that resilience was something that was actively narrativized in response to this social crisis, and done so to different ends, some which will be discussed in my findings. Importantly, some respondents contested the narrative demand to have their stories be one of *achieving* resilience at all, yet even these cases centered their narratives in relation to some meaning of resilience amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coding for Legal Status

While the initial collection of this data did not ask for the respondent's legal status, I coded for legal status based on how 1) how central the impacts of legal status were in respondent’s narratives and 2) through direct, contextual indicators of legal

status. Examples of the former approach in coding were through voluntary mentions of how a respondent's or their family's legal status affected them during the pandemic, for example a respondent saying, "we were left out [of federal support] as noncitizens."

For the second approach, contextual indicators such as mentions of having an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), engaging in "under the table" work or informal labor, noting a lack of understanding or surprise that one's parents secured some form of healthcare or other service limited to citizens, mention of any inability to claim SNAP and/or pandemic relief program, and various work/educational statuses which provided insight or confirmation of a respondent's or their family's legal context such as "DACA", "naturalized" or "green card." In addition to these indicators, I also relied on instances of context-specific language. For example, the use of the term "citizens" was used to refer to others when discussing how their family's experience differed from the general population. Another example includes one Spanish interview wherein a middle-aged respondent discussed how during the pandemic, their night-time language classes were canceled, making it difficult to learn English thus pausing their planned "pathways" for a better life. I also had access to respondent's occupational data, income, year of migration, and other aspects of their family data (such as family size and income) from the demographic survey. This further helped me to code for respondent's legal status as respondent fell into to understand the respondent's material and legal context during the pandemic.

Categorization based on Legal Barriers

I categorized respondents into two groups characterized by high and low legal barriers, which were based on respondent's self-reported and coded experience of legal

barriers within their narratives. To do this, I categorized respondents based on 1) respondent's legal status and their family's legal status, particularly whether they or their family were undocumented and 2) the extent to which legal status was centered by respondents as a factor shaping their experiences within their narratives, as a type of adversity experienced during the pandemic. Using these two categories, fourteen (n=14) respondents fell into the *low legal barriers*, and twenty-two (n=22) respondents fell into the *high legal barriers* category.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Three Resilience Narratives

While respondents were sorted into two categories based on their discussion of legal barriers, three narrative themes emerged. One narrative theme came from those with low legal barriers and two were seen in those with high legal barriers. While the narratives from those with low legal barriers comprise one section, two subgroups emerged from the high legal barrier based on differing types of narratives of resilience. These themes each have their own section. These subgroup themes include 1) inherent resilience amid high legal barriers and 2) structurally inaccessible resilience amid high legal barriers.

B. Education Level of Each Group of Respondents

While coding narrative themes across legal barriers related to resilience, I found that low legal barriers were associated with higher educational attainment. To further explore this trend, I created *Table 2* in which I show a cross tabulation of education level by

respondent’s legal barrier category which includes both high legal barrier subgroups. *Table 2* shows that ninety-five percent of respondents who had a high school degree or less were in the high legal barrier group. In contrast, those most in the low legal barrier were most likely to have professional degrees. Forty-three percent of respondents in the low legal barrier category had professional degrees. To understand this link between education and legal status and how that is related to resilience narratives, I briefly explore how legal barriers not only informed each narrative theme, but what role educational attainment may have played in shaping these narratives.

Table 2. Highest Education by Legal Barriers Category, *N*=36

Education	Low Legal Barriers		High Legal Barriers <i>Subgroup 1</i>		High Legal Barriers <i>Subgroup 2</i>	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Some college	1	7%	3	25%	2	20%
College degree	7	50%	5	42%	2	20%
Graduate degree	6	43%	1	8%	0	0%
Total	14		12		10	

C. Narratives of Resilience from those with Low Legal Barriers

I found that those with low legal barriers attributed their resilience to a disengagement from “divisive” political discourse related to immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their narratives tended to be about individual growth and successful adaptation primarily due to their own, individual decision-making. This group

was correlated with higher overall educational attainment (Table 2, column 1). These narratives framed pandemic adversity – one primary one being the stress from political polarization—in a way that oriented them towards individual solutions. By framing stress as the primary adversity (as opposed to structural issues), resilience came to be about respondent’s decisions surrounding how they managed their stress. One salient resilience strategy was a disengagement from politics in favor of actions of self-growth and inward goal setting. As such, respondents’ meaning of resilience aligned with definitions most used in resilience research (i.e., successful adaptation through internally directed goals). These findings underscored the importance of examining how legal barriers and socioeconomic buffers shapes what it means to be resilient during times of instability.

In very patterned ways, respondents in the low barriers group discussed the political atmosphere as “stressful” but varied in what about the political atmosphere was stressful. This often happened even when respondents discussed other stressors in minor ways, such as distant family losing work and having to move back to Mexico due to not being able to find work. For instance, Valentina, a 28-year-old case manager from Mexico who held legal residence was one such example who described troubles her distant family had due to their lack of “education” (such as job loss) but centered her narrative around the political atmosphere of the pandemic. In the quote below, she discusses adversity in the context of the “stressful atmosphere” of the pandemic and does so in a way that presents this stress as arising from differences in political opinions.

It was just a stressful political atmosphere with a lot of people. Just because there were a lot of different opinions and since no one could take anyone’s opinion it was stressful to see... That was a stressful situation to see but I did not try to engage too much in that...

By describing this stressful situation as one that was about differences in opinions, Valentina is then able to situate her meaning of resilience within individual strategies, one that oriented around a disengagement in politics—she did not "engage too much with that."

With Trump being in office... politically, there was a lot of shit going on for sure, but I wasn't going to let that impact me on a personal level.

Through this, we see how Valentina is implicitly constructing an understanding of resilience. In framing political stress as something she has a choice over, she is framing the ability for this to impact her health as something she can decide on personally. Valentina shows how high legality respondents presented their resilience as a product of their decision-making by centering political divisiveness and their choice to not engage with it even when there were other factors at play acknowledged by respondents themselves.

As previously discussed, the primary adversity in these legally stable respondent's narratives was the stress surrounding the pandemic's political and cultural divisiveness and atmosphere, often towards immigrant communities. Importantly this was often presented by those respondents with low legal barriers as the responsibility of all parties during this time, including immigrant communities. One such example can be seen in Fernando's narrative. Fernando is a sixty-three-year-old Panamanian who came to the U.S. at age four and acquired a master's degree during his time in the U.S. His description of the pandemic shows how respondents attributed their stress to political divisiveness. The neutrality in this attribution, seen below, underscores how he views this

as a societal problem in general, where everyone is becoming more “exclusive” in their group identification.

The stress level [during the pandemic] is all due to the politics that we are living through, and you know, that is just constant... in the world right now. So, you know, without going into detail, I would say the “us against them,” the sides that we are building and how we are kind of becoming more exclusive in the sense of the groups that we are attaching ourselves to.

In presenting neutrally political divisiveness as a stressor, Fernando frames his stress as something he can personally address when he later discusses that in not “attaching” oneself to a group, one can deal with this stress. He later discusses how his resilience is the product of coming from a country “without freedoms” where he can have a greater perspective of ignoring strained political tensions in the U.S, offering him resilience. Yet, Fernando reported overall material and financial stability, and little concerns related to the fact of being a noncitizen during the pandemic. This pattern of respondents presenting the U.S. as a privilege to live in, one that allowed them to ignore certain political hostilities was seen in another respondent’s interview. One example which elucidates this is Vincent, a Vietnamese immigrant, and his anecdote about how his parents approached anti-Asian hate during the pandemic.

My parents... saw the attacks on Asians [during the pandemic] and they shrugged it off, saying, "As immigrants, it's a privilege to be here and if racism is a tax we have to pay to be here, then we will gladly pay it, rather than living in our home country."

By framing anti-Asian racism as a “tax,” they offer a meaning of resilience that involves an individual changing their perspective towards discrimination. In framing this as a

“racism tax” during the pandemic, Vincent’s parents frame racism as an acceptable trade-off to living in the U.S. Similar to Fernando, Vincent’s parents centered their background as an immigrant to explain how they rationalized a trade-off for political hostility during the pandemic, but did not report direct setbacks due to their status as noncitizens unlike the high legal barrier respondents, who did, as discussed more in-depth in next section. In both Fernando and Vincent’s case, we see not only respondents discussing their resilience in relation to the anti-immigrant political atmosphere during the pandemic as something that can be individually adapted to through rationalization, but in doing so in ways that may obscure their relative privileges (e.g., their education level, legal status, and professional careers).

There were other examples of respondents presenting politicization as a central problem during the pandemic. For instance, Damien a 24-year-old Mexican immigrant with a professional degree and a stable legal status discussed this in his assessment of the main problems he was encountering:

One of the main [problems] is that everything gets politicized. So now this whole, like, pandemic has also created a lot of division... I think people need to understand that pinning bad on someone else isn't going to make you good.

This quote further shows how respondents were, in patterned ways, discussing political division during the pandemic as a major problem, and doing so in ways that implied those who were doing so were doing it to their own detriment. By presenting the problem during the pandemic as a matter of political division, respondents’ strategies for resilience were able to be further framed around not expending energies on political

division and instead on individually oriented solutions and strategies. This can be seen in Damien's quote below.

I'm someone that is, I guess you could say like a believer that like I have my faith and I believe that things do happen for a reason... it's really up to us if we decide on acting upon what we've learned.

In Damien's case, he situated his own resilience in his capacity to learn, grow, and maintain optimism. This point is further evidenced by the quote below.

Personally, five years from now, I'm pretty optimistic about it. Just because I feel like I like to keep myself busy, and I keep learning, try to keep learning and like on a daily basis, there's not a thing that I could think of that would deter me from learning.

Because Damien defines "learning" as his response to adversity, his motivation to learn and grow presented by Damien as the reason he holds optimism. In framing his own optimism and motivation this way, he is also constructing resilience as an individual mindset motivated by personal choice.

In sum, respondents with low legal barriers constructed a meaning of resilience in relation to their personal choices. In particular, disengagement from "divisive" political discourse related to immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic came up in every respondent's narrative. Their strategies for resilience were framed as a product of their decision-making, and some respondents did so by showing how they rationalized discrimination as a trade-off for living in the U.S. By framing their capacity to be resilient in their ability to disengage or withstand political divisions as immigrants, respondents framed disengagement with politics as a form of resilience and growth. While other factors played a role, such as education level and legal status (Table 2),

respondents' constructions of resilience decenter these factors of relative privilege in their narratives.

While this pattern was common across with low legal barriers, these narratives of resilience were not felt as accessible to those who were directly impacted (emotionally and materially) during the pandemic due to legal barriers. The following section explores how those who did identify legal status as a primary adversity constructed their meanings of resilience.

D. Narratives of Resilience from those with High Legal Barriers

Respondents categorized in the “high legal barriers” category centered their legal status as a salient factor in producing unstable outcomes during the pandemic and either a) put forth a meaning of inherent resilience which existed independent of structural factors such as legal barriers or b) conceptualized individual enactment of resilience strategies as structurally and circumstantially unavailable to them. Among these two subgroups in the high legal barriers category, those who contested meanings of resilience as a product of individual choices had the lowest educational attainment overall (Table 2). In the following sections, I discuss both of these high legal barrier subgroups, as their constructions of resilience differed, likely due to their levels of familial support and socioeconomic status.

High Legal Barriers: Subgroup One: Inherent Resilience Amid High Legal Barriers

Respondents in the first subgroup put forth a meaning of resilience that described it as having an inward and inherent nature independent of circumstantial factors and legal

barriers. While respondents narrated their adversity as the result of their treatment and exclusions as noncitizens, their discussions of resilience focused on this inner capacity for resilience amid any hardship, including legal barriers. As previously mentioned, major way this took place was by respondents framing their resilience as the ability to withstand and adapt not due to individual strategies, but due to inherent strength as either immigrants, or as a “people” (ethnic group). Another way this took place was through the trivialization of legal status, for example treating it as “just another thing to work through” discussed by Maria, a 23-year-old Argentinian with high legal barriers. These strategies give insight into the process of how strategies of resilience were able to maintain an individually focused meaning despite cases where respondents recognized legal barriers as a salient factor impacting their families.

As discussed previously, respondents decoupled their meaning of resilience from their pandemic context within their narratives by attributing resilience to “inward” strength. Despite initially discussing how their families’ legal status shaped their pandemic experiences, these narratives offer resolutions that ultimately deviate from finding a meaning of resilience related to legal status and the pandemic context. One example of how this process took place can be seen in Saul’s case, a 23-year-old DACA recipient who postponed his higher education to support his undocumented parents during the pandemic demonstrates this pattern below. Despite stating that the pandemic introduced “precarious” conditions for undocumented people like his parents, he chose to focus on his parents’ capacity to “work through” any hardship in order to relate it to his own situation.

The [pandemic] was rough on my parents for sure... It's always been like that. I feel like they're well-conditioned right now. They were much more prepared than the average American, for sure, in terms of not having the support they needed. They were conditioned that, you know, "we have to work through it."

In this quote, Saul discusses a meaning of resilience that arises from his parent's "work through it" mindset, one which he seeks to emulate. In this way, Saul uses his parent's "conditioned" resilience to reframe his own obligations to work for his family and educational postponement during the pandemic.

Same thing with me going straight to work. Even though I knew in my heart that I didn't want to, that I wanted to keep continuing [higher education], I had to go to work to make it [to higher education].

In constructing this notion of resilience in relation to his parent's "conditioning," Saul focuses on a meaning of resilience surrounding his parent's capacity to "work through" hardship. This focus on "conditioning" to work hard is important because it appears in a context, where without his help during the pandemic, his parents would have been financially devastated. Therefore, his meaning of resilience does not account for how obligatory familial support played a role in his parent's capacity to get by, despite being a central factor in his narrative. Saul's narrative actively centers their inward capacity, and his construction of resilience does so in ways that do not center these circumstances of obligatory support and his own feelings of safety due to being the only one in his family to have a social security number. As such, Saul's example shows how respondents often excluded the importance of external resources, the importance of obligatory ties,

and structural context from their constructions of resilience despite initially centering legal status in their narrative.

A similar yet distinct case can be seen from Aurora, a 32-year-old Mexican immigrant and mother with a husband who was not fully documented. Aurora defined resilience in a way that sets it apart from specific circumstances related to their pandemic hardship. Below, Aurora discusses how the people she serves (Latinx and migrant communities) teach and inspire her to keep going “aside from their circumstances.” She does so in the context of what she calls a time of her community feeling “invisible” during the pandemic.

This is a very sensitive time...where I've been able to really appreciate what I have, and not so much what I don't have and working with what I have, making the best with what I have is my mentality now. That's something that my kids [her clients] have taught me, you know, we are very resilient... The people that I serve [as a social worker] are so resilient, they're so inspiring. They keep going and I don't always know what their purpose is, I don't know what it is that it helps them to keep going, but whatever it is they do aside from their circumstances.

Like Saul, Aurora defines resilience as a mindset or approach towards times of hardship that helps individuals “to keep going” despite the nature of their circumstances. Yet in contrast, Aurora emphasizes a lack of needing “purpose” to be resilient. Whereas Saul focused on “surviving” and working through it to eventually pursue higher education, Aurora’s meaning of resilience does not assert a teleology, or necessary purpose. This is important because it shows how these uses of resilience were expressed differently depending on the respondent’s own material conditions and hardships despite focusing on

inherent resilience. In Saul's case, "working through it" aside from circumstances of hardship was in reference to his educational postponement and parent's struggles, in Aurora's case, to "keep going" was in reference to her family and community facing financial hardship during the pandemic.

Michelle, a 19-year-old janitor and student in a mixed-status family further shows this pattern where resilience was constructed as not only something internal to individuals, but as necessarily excluding past hardships and traumas.

[I've learned from parents] how to keep calm and to try not to worry about myself. I feel like that has helped me in so many ways because I know even though we've gone through a lot, I know we're that type of people that keeps pushing forward and we don't look back at things, at bad things.

Michelle in the above quotes discusses her family as the "type of people that keep pushing forward and do not look at bad things." In presenting this mindset as her strategy for approaching hardship, Michelle decouples the meaning of enacting resilience from her circumstances "we don't look bad at bad things." While respondents may have not been intending to obscure a meaning of resilience rooted in its structural context, the way they constructed resilience within their narratives did separate its meaning from the pandemic context. Respondents who described resilience this way were therefore orienting its meaning towards what how "not looking back at bad thing" was a necessary part of resilience, and that this resilience was inherently present as a "people who keep pushing forward." Similar to Saul, Michelle's construction of resilience includes this tension between inherent strength as a "people" and the necessity of material support from others to maintain stability (in Michelle's case from her parents).

The tension in these cases arguably comes from the fact that respondent's narratives in the first subgroup were rife with discussions of structural barriers related to legal status while also finding space for support in some capacity, for instance seen when Michelle discusses how: "I felt like the government didn't know much like the situation that was going on, and the struggles that we had to face. I feel like they would have not understood the situation we were going through" while also discussing the importance of family. Because these structural barriers were felt so persistently during the pandemic, respondents were not able to put forth a meaning of resilience as the product of their decisions but were supported enough to find a home for resilience as an inherent part of their "people" (ethnic group) and family.

As discussed previously, some respondents also banalized the importance of the specificity of legal status on their hardship in their constructions of resilience. Maria, a 21-year-old Argentinian with high legal barriers who worked as a nanny while applying to graduate school during the pandemic, shows how respondents directly dealt with direct destabilizing effects of being a non-citizen during the pandemic while also banalizing it in their construction of resilience. Upon discussing how not having full documentation led to stress and frustration during the pandemic she closes her interview with the below quote:

As someone who is not fully documented... [it] caused a lot of stress not getting any assistance...I think a large group of people were forgotten that weren't really essential during the pandemic... Everyone has to work through certain things and that was kind of my thing that I have to work through.

Maria generalizes her hardship “everyone has to work through things” to make a point that this is *her thing* to work through. By reframing her legal barriers and feelings of exclusion as a just another thing “to work through” her narrative reframes these structural exclusions as something she can address at an individual level. Considering how Maria also discussed the impact legal barriers had on herself and her familial support system during the time, the tension between “working through” these while also recognizing structural, legal barriers.

High legal barrier respondents in this first subgroup constructed a meaning of resilience which focused on an inward capacity to “withstand” and “work through it” as a “people” (referring to both ethnic group and family). Because their construction of resilience focused on individual resilience in a somewhat supportive familial context, respondents in this high legal barrier group often deemphasized the importance of their structural context when they discussed resilience. It is possible that unlike the second subgroup, discussed in the next section, the impact of legal status in conjunction with higher SES indicators (Table 2) may mean that respondents in this subgroup occupied a middle-ground where their legal barriers were high, but they had adequate resources and buffers. While these narratives deemphasized structural factors such as legal barriers within their constructions of resilience, they were wholly constructed in relation to hardship and legal status, as can be seen in Saul’s case who situated his narrative within the hardship his parents experienced as undocumented workers during the pandemic but proceeded to focus on their inward capacity to work through anything. The next subgroup in the high legal barriers category highlights those cases in which any individualized focus of resilience, whether it be decision-making and adaptation, or inherent capacity for

resilience, were contested due to the overwhelming structural barriers faced during the pandemic.

High Legal Barriers: Subgroup 2: Structurally Inaccessible Resilience Amid High Legal Barriers

Respondents in this subgroup were distinct from the other two groups in that their narratives saw themes which conceptualized individual resilience as structurally and circumstantially unavailable to them due to legal barriers. They did so through discussions of how the pandemic in conjunction with their legal status made it difficult to access feelings of hope and optimism due to the lack of resources and structural barriers they faced. In fact, respondents in the second sub-group actively contested notions of resilience that were individualized, whether they were about their decision-making or inward strength, because the effects of legal status were felt so saliently across respondent's family during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three respondent's experiences are discussed in this section, each highlighting how respondents contested individually focused meanings of resilience in favor of structural meanings. These respondents include Isabella, who discussed her mother's changing optimism which challenges the view of unchanging and inherent capacity to be resilient amid hardship, and Erika and Ralph who explain how their "unhealthy" coping strategies were shaped by their legal status and lack of resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using their experience of legal barriers and hardship as the basis for contesting these meanings of resilience, these cases show how respondents problematized/engaged with the concept of resilience.

Isabella was a 19-year-old student whose parents emigrated from Mexico shortly after she was born. Using her mother's experience of immigration as an undocumented person during the pandemic, she explains how her mother's "optimism" and capacity to work through anything slowly changed into feelings of hopelessness during the pandemic. During the pandemic, Isabella began working to support her undocumented parents, while having to deprioritize her own higher education. The quote below shows how Isabella situated her own narrative about the emotional and physical toll being undocumented during this time had on her mother and other undocumented people and mixed-status families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

You see everyone else in the world collecting their employment benefits, chilling at home with their kids. Seeing that you're the one that is coming home and having to work that's a really hard strain on you physically, but also emotionally, in the sense of: "Oh, I wish that could be me, you know, being at home with my kids, but instead I'm out there risking myself and then coming home and risking them." [It puts an] emotional strain on people like my mom.

Following this (below quote) she discusses how this changed her mother's attitudes about the positive aspects of living in the U.S. given her hardship, and in turn, her own. For example, the regret about bringing her child (and Isabella's younger sibling) into "such a bad world" was shared by Isabella.

During the pandemic, it was absolutely hopeless. My mom's mental health was really bad... I remember she would literally just cry some nights and would be like, "I should have never had her [newborn baby]. She's coming into such a bad world" and I was like, "Fuck you're right. You're right." So, in my head, I was like, "I'm never having children."

Because like, look at how bad everything is now. So, I was in a really, really hopeless state and even now I'm like, is it getting better? I don't know. I think for a majority, there's not a lot of hope. In my head, I was just like, "No, there's not a lot of hope."

As seen in the quote, her mother "breaking down" during the pandemic, as someone who she looked up to as a young girl and someone who always "found ways" to secure her social services despite not being documented, was how Isabella narratively emphasized the limits of individual optimism and determination as enough during this time. Isabella's story does not frame this stress as a personal failing of her mother, but rather a product of the structural constraint she experienced as someone undocumented and hostile conditions, both due to the pandemic's exposure to health issues, which her mother experienced throughout, and the exclusionary toll of being undocumented during this time. In contrast to the first subgroup then, this group's construction of resilience was discussed in relation to the pandemic context itself.

As seen in Isabella's quotes, respondents directly contested a notion of resilience that separated how one copes, thinks, and feels from the structural context surrounding those aspects, particularly in regard to legal status. Erika, a 23-year-old Taiwanese immigrant in a mixed status family, who works as an informal care worker, applies this to her own situation and coping skills. While explicitly admitted that her coping mechanisms, such as smoking, had become "unhealthy," she also ties them to structural barriers below.

Because of the pandemic I started developing more anxiety and I've unfortunately taken to smoking cigarettes, which is obviously not ideal for anybody's health as like a coping

mechanism, it is very unhealthy. Then again, you know, the lack of mental and financial resources has been a really big burden.

Despite the recognition that she was engaging in “unhealthy” coping behavior, her narrative attributed her worsening anxiety and turn to the coping strategies as due to the lack she and her family had during the pandemic.

Similarly, Raul, a 52-year-old undocumented groundskeeper, directly tied the fear of changing work policies, a lack of access to healthcare, and closed pathways for documentation as contributing to a decline in his mental health. He situates his declining mental health to what he calls a new “normality” that was worse for him and his fellow workers.

[The pandemic] has had a very strong impact on my mental health...When you are going to work and wanting to return to normal, when [so-called] “normality” begins and many months go by, it’s sad to see when nothing improves. It does affect my mood. I feel that instead of improving, things will get worse.

Raul situates his turn to alcohol in this new normality and explains how alcohol’s numbing effects help him cope with a new normality of working conditions in the absence of other things to look forward to.

It is difficult to take care of your body and mind, especially with everything that is happening. Sometimes I blanket myself with alcohol because it causes my mind to feel numb... [My routine] is that I just get home from work, go to the store, eat a little and sleep for another day, another new day the same. Like a routine that is not very pretty, you just do the same thing every day, the same thing every day.

By explaining his turn to alcohol through these structural barriers, outside of his control, Raul's own meaning of resilience remains at odds to ones that attribute it to decision-making or inward strength. In fact, "explaining" a lack of hope and turning to what may be perceived as "unhealthy" coping mechanisms was the most common theme among these respondents in this high legal barrier subgroup. This is a key because narratives from those experiencing less legal barriers were highly centered on individual strategies and attributes.

These narratives from the second high legal barrier group show how respondents highlighted the impact of legal status and exclusionary policies on their capacity to maintain individual resilience during the pandemic. Isabella used her undocumented mother's narrative to explore how one's inward capacity to have a "work through it" can be lost in the fact of pandemic hardship, Ralph and Erika explained how their coping strategies and attitudes are connected to a lack of resources and their legal barriers during the pandemic. This high legal barrier subgroup overall reported the highest experiences of precarity due to their legal status during this time and in addition had the lowest educational attainment, showing how these contexts shape the meanings attributed to resilience. This further lends credence to the argument that SES buffered the effects of the impact of legal instability (Table 2) given most respondents did not have post-secondary degrees. The difference in these narratives from the first subgroup underscores how some of the most structurally disadvantaged respondents reconceptualized resilience as something that was not accessible to them at all.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *Summary of Findings*

The ways in which migrant communities conceive of resilience are differentiated and complex; it can serve as an empowering resource for those who are relatively more privileged while for others it can feel like something that has to be actively contested to adequately explain the realities of their lived experience. In this study, I show how immigrants communities conceive of resilience and the ways in which differing legal and socioeconomic contexts were associated with contrasting meanings of what it means to be resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analyzing these accounts of the pandemic as narratives revealed two things: 1) Those with low legal barriers, and higher educational attainment, defined their resilience primarily through their personal choices, one major one being through disengagement from “divisive” political discourses related to immigrants. 2) Those with high legal barriers centered their legal status as a salient factor in producing unstable outcomes during the pandemic and either a) constructed a meaning of resilience that was inherent and not dependent on the structural context and legal barriers or b) conceptualized individually oriented adaptations as structurally and circumstantially unavailable to them. Among the two sub-groups in the high legal barrier category, those who contested meanings of resilience as a product of individual adaptation were generally most precarious and had the lowest educational attainment.

In addition, my analysis clarified the link between education and legal status and how that is related to resilience narratives in that I found that those reporting low legal barriers held a correlation with higher education. Ninety-five percent of respondents who

had a high school degree or less also reported high legal barriers. In contrast, those most advantaged in terms of legal status were most likely to have professional degrees. This link further emphasizes the importance of buffered stability, both legal and socioeconomic, and its relation to resilience. By showing how immigrants with professional degrees and low legal barriers describe their resilience in relation to their personal decisions and attitudes regarding politics, I reveal constructions of resilience may legitimate hegemonic discourses. In addition, by showing how high legal barrier respondents either renegotiated or contested resilience, I show the way legal status was centered or decentered in meaning making of instability, and this the ways in which this was shaped by respondent's socioeconomic status, familial support, legal barriers, and legal status

B. Contribution

I bear qualitative data on how differing contexts of instability shape attitudes towards resilience, coping strategies, and the uses of identities such as immigrant or noncitizen. In doing so, I reveal widely varying meanings of resilience are shaped by the context of instability across legal and socioeconomic statuses and in turn how these meanings of resilience hold distinct political and personal implications as resources for meaning making. While previous research shows how resilience can be developed through narratives, research that studies how resilience comes to be associated with certain coping strategies and attitudes using narratives has remain underexplored. (Sola-Sales et al. 2021; Garcini et al. 2020; Hauser et al. 2016; Ramasubramanian 2022 et al). When it is critical of resilience, it is often in service of formulating how resilience can be

conceptually expanded or not always seen as a positive process given the actions and tradeoffs it is associated with (Doan et al. 2022; Scharp et al. 2020). My study connects these lines of research by showing how immigrant communities with varying legal barriers narrativize their COVID-19 experiences, thus showing how resilience is constructed and enacted across these contexts.

Another contribution this study offers is showing how, for example, reported feelings of hopelessness or apathy are not only a passive product of passive precarity but actively engaged and constructed within narratives. For respondents to connect their legal status and lack of resources to changing attitudes towards resilience reveals that respondents were not only cognizant of how their legal status shapes their experiences but actively narrativized it as part of a process to make meaning of their context during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, they either circumvented legal status (seen in the those who banalized or decentered it) or asserted it as a structural final straw in their narratives. For example, Isabella's discussion of her mother's loss of optimism being not only a real reflection of her experience of hardship, but how Isabella actively made sense of this period of instability through legal status and structural exclusion. My analyses show the processes by which instability in conjunction with legal barriers offer moments where beliefs and concepts tied to one's status can be renegotiated and contested.

C. Implications

Previous operationalizations of resilience tend to frame it as positive, flexible adaptation. (Finstand 2021; Ramasubramanian 2022; Randall 2015). As such, how conceptions of resilience are constructed within narratives to make sense of social

instability and what attitudes these narratives implicitly make about social status and structure have remained underexplored (Hilmar 2025). One implication of this is that in using such a definition, researchers who seek to study resilience may be selectively engaging with those who are likely to be experiencing lower legal barriers, especially during times of economic and social instability. The terms “resilience” and “adaptation” appeared most accessible and utilizable (due to frequency) to those with low legal barriers to begin with. In fact, the more vulnerable, the less respondents were likely to use the term resilience. Due to the way studies have framed disparities in resilience in terms of differences in traits and behaviors, this may partially be a case of “diversionary research (Link and Garcia 2021:343) – By exclusively focusing on individual traits and behaviors of those most disadvantaged, this research may divert attention away from how advantaged groups benefit and perpetuate inequality through discourses of resilience. We should seek to advance research which is critical of operationalizing resilience in such ways and examine the impact that legal status has on respondent’s own meaning of resilience.

In addition, this study also reveals how differing meanings of resilience hold implications for boundary-making through narratives. This can be seen in the way that political decision-making to either accept the status quo or disaffiliate was associated with resilience towards stress. Therefore, researchers should be critical of the concept of resilience on the basis that it may implicitly favor merit-based discourses about immigrant communities. For, example, respondents who discussed how structural barriers such as legal status overwhelmingly shaped respondent’s circumstances and not their individual attitudes or choices commonly invoked terms like “resources,” “noncitizens”

and “legal status.” In contrast, mentions of things like “self-growth,” “individual responsibility” “personal choice” and “adaptation” were most used by experiences who experienced low amounts of legal barriers. By framing their resilience as primarily the product of choices, low legal barrier respondents actively constructed a meaning of resilience that excluded others who were structurally disadvantaged (i.e., what are the implications for those who were not “resilient” within these put forth meanings?)

D. Limitations

Additional research is needed to understand the ways in which legal and socioeconomic status play a role in informing how narratives of resilience are constructed. For instance, low legal barriers were also correlated with higher socioeconomic status in respondents. While we know those who were less legally stable tended to have indicators of lower SES, we do not know, for instance, how someone who was not fully documented but financially and materially buffered from the impact of this during the pandemic would narrate their experiences given that legal constraint was such a salient theme.

Instability during the pandemic was one scope condition for this study, as instability offers opportunities to see how vulnerable populations can conceive adaptability and resilience. Yet differing conditions of instability, be they a pandemic, economic recession, political persecution, or combinations thereof, may shape the meanings of resilience differently. While those with stable legal status may have identified with it less during the pandemic which was primarily around issues related to

work and labor, a more explicit and focused nativist campaign which violent targets “immigrants” may shape how those who are documented or naturalized understand what it means to be “resilient” given they may be labeled and targeted in similar ways. This is an especially relevant consideration given the recent, targeted attacks on immigrant communities by the federal administration.

Important factors such as gender and race were not analyzed due to the focus of this study being legal barriers and legal status during the COVID-19 pandemic. An additional limitation includes an overall lack of specific analysis related to country of origin. For example, while a plurality of respondents in this study were Latinx, participants in this study come from a wide range of countries of origin (see Table 1). More research which incorporates further intersectional analysis to understand how these social contexts interact with notions of resilience during times of instability is needed. Further intersectional analysis would be useful to understand how differing contexts of marginalization shape the extent to which being undocumented counts as the “final straw” (Enriquez 2015:1535). In addition, the literature has increasingly focused on how “illegality” is racialized and impacts those who have low legal barriers and even those who may be citizens (Garcia 2017:2). By focusing on the impacts of “illegality” within immigrant communities across legal status, future research would benefit from engaging with the literature on how these anti-immigrant sentiments and climates impact those who have been racialized as illegal. Given the changing context of the U.S. regarding anti-immigrant sentiment, these questions remain relevant and future research may move beyond dichotomous categorizations based on legal status, towards a more complex intersectional approach.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Supplemental Semi-Structured Interview Guide

A1. Demographic Survey Questions

1. What is your birthdate (month/day/year)
2. What gender do you identify with, if any (for example, are you male, female, transgender, non-binary/non-conforming)?
3. Are you of Hispanic; Latina(o); Latinx or Latin American origin or ancestry? If so, please tell us how you describe yourself (For example, Central American; Chicanx, Chicano(a), or Mexican American).
4. What race or races do you identify with? (For example, do you consider yourself Asian, Black, Native American/Indigenous, White, Mestiza(o), multi-racial or something else?).
 - a. If Native American/Indigenous, please name tribe.
5. What country were you born in?
6. How long have you been in the US in total?
7. How many people live in your household? Please describe (how many adults and how many children?).
8. What is the highest level of education you have completed? Are you currently enrolled in school?
9. What do you currently do to make money? List all that apply.
10. How much money did you make last month?
11. How many hours do you work per week?
12. How much of your income went to pay for basic necessities last month (including food, rent/mortgage, utilities, gas/transportation, medical, etc.)?
13. Do you have health care coverage? If so, what kind (for example, private, public, through employer, more than one kind of health insurance plan).
14. Are you part of a worker's union? If so, which one?
15. Which language(s) do you speak fluently?

16. Which is/are your primary language(s)?

A2. Open-ended Interview Questions

1. We start off every interview with a broad question: what does “essential work” mean to you?

a. Why do you think you are an essential worker?

2. Tell me all about your work experiences, from your first job to now.

3. How did you come to work at your current job(s)?

a. How long have you been there? [If they don’t technically have a “job”]: how did you come to do [whatever it is they are doing to make money]?

4. Walk me through your typical workday before the pandemic in February 2020, from when you woke up to when you went to sleep.

5. Some people tell us work hasn’t changed for them during COVID-19, others say it has changed a lot. How about for you?

a. Tell me a story about how it’s changed.

6. Some people tell us their employers have been very supportive during COVID-19, others say their employers haven’t been very supportive. How supportive have your employers been?

a. Tell me a story about how supportive your employer has been.

7. Walk me through what you did during your most recent typical workday of essential work, from when you woke up to when you went to sleep.

8. What are three things that worry you the most about your current work experience(s)? [For each issue]: Think of the last time you talked to someone about this issue. [Give time for reflection]. Who did you talk about it with?

9. What are other commitments in your life that impact your essential work?

a. How has your essential work impacted your family over the past year?

10. During the pandemic, some people tell us it’s been hard to take or keep working now because of childcare, others say it hasn’t. How about for you?

11. What do you wish people from your public services, like the health department and education services in your area, knew about what the pandemic has been like for you as an essential worker?

Health: The following questions are about you and your family's health. In answering these questions, please keep in mind how every aspect of your life, not only work, has impacted your health during the pandemic.

1. How would you compare your health now to before the start of the pandemic?
 - a. Tell me a story of how your health has changed/not changed?
2. How has the health of your family been during the pandemic?
3. How do you try to stay physically and mentally healthy during the pandemic?
 - a. Tell me about the last time you did something to get healthier.
4. Please tell me what it's been like trying to get the health care you need, during the pandemic?
 - a. Does your work/job require you to get the COVID-19 vaccine?
 - b. What was your experience getting COVID tested?
5. How difficult has it been for you in trying to be healthy during the pandemic?
6. What have been some of the hardest parts of the pandemic for you personally?
 - a. Why/how have these made it harder for you to be healthy?
7. In the past 12 months, were there any other social events in the news, besides the COVID-19 pandemic, that impacted your health or stress levels in any way?
 - a. Please tell us a story about how this affected your health/stress.
8. What sources of support in your life have you relied on the most to be healthy? For example, family, friends, public services, neighbors, people from your religion, etc.
 - a. Please tell us a story about how and why you had to rely on this type of support.
9. Some people have said this past year has made them feel hopeful about their future, others say it has made them feel hopeless about their future. How about for you?
 - a. What are you hopeful for?
 - b. How did you come to feel that way?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a migrant essential worker during the pandemic?

Appendix B. Expanded Demographics Table

Table 2B – Descriptive Characteristics of Gender, Education, Race, and Ethnicity by Legal Barriers (N=36)

Variable	Full sample	% Low Legal barriers =	% High Legal Barriers =	% High Legal Barriers =
			Subgroup 1	Subgroup 2
Gender				
Woman	22 (61%)	6 (27%)	10 (46%)	6 (27%)
Man	14 (39%)	8 (57%)	2 (14%)	4 (29%)
Education				
HS diploma or less	9 (25%)	0 (0%)	3 (33%)	6 (67%)
Some college	6 (17%)	1 (17%)	3 (50%)	2 (33%)
College degree	14 (39%)	7 (50%)	5 (36%)	2 (14%)
Graduate degree	7 (19%)	6 (86%)	1 (14%)	0 (0%)
Race				
Black	6 (17%)	5 (83%)	0 (0%)	1 (17%)
White	7 (19%)	1 (14%)	3 (43%)	3 (43%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	5 (14%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)
Multiracial	3 (8%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)
Other	15 (42%)	4 (27%)	6 (40%)	5 (33%)
Ethnicity				
Non-Latinx	13 (36%)	8 (62%)	3 (23%)	2 (15%)
Latinx	23 (64%)	6 (26%)	9 (39%)	8 (35%)