

Legal Status, Education, and Latino Youths' Transition to Adulthood

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## Dedication

Per tots els joves que, de manera similar als sis participants d'aquesta tesis, han d'aprendre a viure en invisibilitat.

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Para todos los jóvenes que, de forma similar a los seis participantes de esta tesis, tienen que aprender a vivir en invisibilidad.

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For all young adults who, like the six participants in this study, must learn to perform invisibility.

## Abstract

This two-year ethnography explores how six Latino young adults (ages 18 to 21), who arrived as children or teenagers in the US, experience and understand illegality and education. Just one participant qualifies for the ‘Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Policy’; a common reality since more than half of the undocumented youth under 30 are ineligible (Passel & Lopez, 2012). Through participant observation and conversational interviews, I sought to understand the role that education plays in the life of these young adults; how the meaning they give to illegality evolves, and how they showed agency in their discourses and everyday practices.

Past research focused on the few undocumented students who are excelling academically (e.g., Perez, 2009), the marginalized lives of undocumented immigrants (e.g., Gonzales & Chavez, 2012), and the stages that undocumented youth undertake in learning about the meaning of illegality (Gonzales, 2011). Research has omitted the academic experiences of the *majority* of undocumented youth (who are not excelling academically), the nuanced forms of agency disclosed by this youth, and the experiences of *first-generation* young adults. These aspects are addressed in this study.

Through ethnographic and discourse analysis (Gee, 1990) this study shows how age of arrival becomes more determinant than legal status in explaining high school graduation and their academic experiences. Still all participants believed that by *echán-dole ganas* they could graduate from high school. The meaning of illegality becomes fluid and while participants stated not to fear deportation, they acted on that fear by performing invisibility in public and unknown spaces. Finally, these youth learn to live in

illegality but not as agentless individuals but as individuals who strategically pursue to improve their lives.

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Aquest estudi etnogràfic de dos anys de durada examina com sis joves llatinoamericans sense documents, d'edats compreses entre els 18 i els 21 anys i que varen arribar abans dels 14 anys (generació 1.5) o després (generació 1), donen sentit a una educació als EEUU i a una vida d'il.legalitat. Només un dels participants qualifica per la llei 'Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals'; una realitat molt típica ja que més de la meitat dels joves de menys de 30 anys sense documents són inel·ligibles (Passel & Lopez, 2012). A través de l'observació dels participants i d'entrevistes informals he investigat el significat que té l'educació per aquests joves; el significat que donen a la seva condició legal i com el significat canvia, i com mostren capacitat d'acció en el seu discurs i en les seves activitats diàries.

La investigació prèvia estudiava aquells pocs joves indocumentats que tenien uns resultats acadèmics excel.lents (Perez, 2009), les vides marginals dels immigrants indocumentats (e.g., Gonzales & Chavez, 2012), i les etapes que els joves sense documents experimenten al anar descobrint la seva il.legalitat (Gonzales, 2011). Aquesta investigació passada ha oblidat les experiències acadèmiques de la majoria dels joves indocumentats (els quals no tenen resultats acadèmics excepcionals), les formes subtils d'agència (capacitat d'acció), i les experiències de la generació de joves que varen arribar als EEUU després dels 14 anys. Aquests aspectes si que es tenen en consideració en aquest estudi.

A través de l'anàlisi del discurs (Gee, 1990) i de l'anàlisi etnogràfic, aquest estudi mostra com l'edat d'arribada és més determinant que la seva condició legal en l'explicació sobre les seves experiències acadèmiques i en la possibilitat de graduar-se de l'escola secundària. Malgrat els obstacles que aquests joves viuen, els participants firmament creuen que amb una actitud de *echándole ganas*, poden acabar l'escola secundària satisfactòriament. El significat d'il·legalitat és fluid i encara que la majoria diuen que no temen ser deportats o discriminats, actuen sobre aquesta por vivint en invisibilitat. Finalment, aquests joves aprenen a viure com a indocumentats però conscients del seu desig de millorar les seves vides, i ho fan estratègicament – a través de l'aprenentatge, la creativitat, i la recerca de noves alternatives professionals.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **Making Sense of Illegality and Education while Transitioning to Adulthood**

Immigration has long been a major demographic force in the United States, but the exponential growth of unauthorized migration during the last three decades defines contemporary migration trends (Ngai, 2004; Passel, 2011). During the first half of the 20th century, unauthorized migrants were virtually nonexistent, and nearly 90 percent of immigrants were Canadians or Europeans (Ngai, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Today, more than half of all immigrants are from Latin America and more than one fourth (28%) are unauthorized (McCabe & Meissner, 2010; Passel & Cohn, 2011; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011).

The wave of unauthorized migrants reached its peak in 2007, with estimates of 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Hoefler, Rytina, & Baker, 2010). Since then, the number of undocumented migrants has slightly decreased to 11.2 million, largely due to the decline in numbers of unauthorized Mexican residents<sup>1</sup> (Cohen & Passel 2011). Still, about 58 percent of all undocumented migrants are Mexican (Passel & Cohn, 2011) and more than three quarters (82%) are Latino (Passel, 2011). Traditionally, the undocumented immigrants who tended to cross the border were adult males (Chavez, 1998), but currently, males and females both are migrating at roughly equal

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<sup>1</sup> In 2007, there were an estimated 7 million unauthorized immigrants from Mexico. In 2010, the number of Mexican unauthorized immigrants had declined to 6.5 million. While the number of Mexicans voluntarily leaving the country has not increased, the inflow has decreased, and the number of Mexican deportation has clearly increased. In the past decade deportations have doubled, and more than 70% of deportees were Mexican in 2009 (Passel & Cohn, 2011).

rates (Batalova, 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Passel & Cohn, 2009) and children are common crossers (Cammisa, 2009). Presently, there are 4.4 million undocumented young adults under 30 in the U.S. (Passel & Lopez, 2012), and about 1.7 million are young individuals who have been in the United States since childhood with potential eligibility for obtaining a work permit and a delayed deportation under the ‘Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals’ (DACA) policy<sup>2</sup> (Passel & Lopez, 2012). Of all the eligible and ineligible undocumented young adults, about 1 million of them are coming-of-age in the United States (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

While illegality is an important characteristic of many current young immigrants, the impact of (il)legality in youths’ lives has often been neglected by scholars (e.g., Portes & Zhou, 1992; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Zhou, 1997). Most educational research that focuses on the academic engagement of immigrant children (e.g., Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Zhou, 1997), and children of immigrants (Ogbu, 1987; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1992), has overlooked the impact of students and parents’ legal status (Gonzales, 2011).

However, in the last few years, studies that focus on immigrants’ education and incorporation patterns into the U.S. society have spotlighted the fundamental role that legal status plays in the academic and professional experiences of immigrants (Abrego,

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<sup>2</sup> To apply for deferred action, youth need to meet all the following criteria:(a) Arrived in the United States under the age of sixteen; (b) Have continuously resided in the United States for at least five years preceding the date of this memorandum and are present in the United States on the date of this memorandum; (c) Are currently in school, have graduated from high school, have obtained a general education development certificate, or are honorably discharged veterans of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States; (d) Have not been convicted of a felony offense, a significant misdemeanor offense, multiple misdemeanor offenses, or otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety; (e) Are not above the age of 30 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012).

2006; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Menjívar, 2006; 2011; Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). In light of the social, political, educational, and occupational restrictions that illegality imposes to unauthorized immigrants, these scholars stress the importance of exploring the lives of undocumented adult immigrants (Chavez 1998), of mixed-status families (e.g., Mangual, 2010; Yoshikawa, 2011), and of youth (Abrego 2006; 2011; Gonzales, 2008; 2010; 2011; Sigona, 2012). The studies that focused on undocumented youths' educational lives have targeted the few undocumented youths who excel in education in order to advocate for the Dream Act<sup>3</sup> (Gonzales, 2009; Gonzalez, Plata, Garcia, Torres, & Urrieta, 2003; Perez, 2009). These studies also focused on the 1.5<sup>4</sup> immigrant youth, the youths who came to the United States as children (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011), and those who live in traditional immigrant destination states such as California and Arizona (Passel, 2006; Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009). Therefore, the stories of the *majority* of undocumented young adults—those who are not excelling academically—are disregarded, as well as the experiences of youths who live in nontraditional immigrant states, and who arrived in the U.S. not as children but as teenagers. In response to these gaps, this study contributes to the field of educational and immigration research by exploring how illegality affects those *nonextraordinary* young adults who came as children and as teenagers in the “New Latino Diaspora.”

By taking into consideration *nonextraordinary* Latino youths who crossed the border as

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<sup>3</sup> The DREAM Act (‘Development, Relief, and Education of Alien Minors’) bill “would provide a path to lawful permanent residency for those children who have lived in the United States for five years, completed high school, and met further requirements after five years such as completing a certain level of higher education or contributing their labor to the military (Shah, 2008, p.645).

<sup>4</sup> Although the delineations between the different generational categories are not strictly defined, there are flexible guidelines to describe each layer. Immigrants who arrive in the U.S. in their late teens or as adults are first generation; those who come as children—at age 13 or younger—are considered members of the 1.5 generation; and those born here to at least one immigrant parent are second generation (Zhou, 1997).

teenagers and who live in fast-growing immigrant states, this study brings a more nuanced understanding to the relationship between context of reception, legal status, ethnicity, and age of arrival and youths' educational outcomes.

## **Literature Review**

Undocumented youths who have been educated in U.S. schools are raised under an “American Dream” ideology that promises social mobility and equal opportunity based on personal choice and academic achievement (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012). However, this promise becomes truncated when they discover their lack of occupational options regardless of their academic success (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). This awareness usually takes place when youths transition from adolescence to adulthood and realize that despite their academic success, they are barred from legal work and from the opportunity to integrate legally, politically, and economically in the United States (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Perez, 2009; Seif, 2004; Shah, 2008).

For undocumented youth, coming-of-age becomes a developmental transition quite different from that of the dominant white middle class youths (Gonzales, 2011; Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). Youths' transition to adult roles—leaving the parental home, completing school, entering into full-time work, getting married, having children—not only differs significantly by generation, social class, and ethnicity (Arnett, 2000; Hartmann & Toguchi Swartz, 2007), but also by legal status (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). In fact, the experience of coming-of-age is markedly contrasted between those youngsters who are undocumented and their native counterparts (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). Un-

documented immigrants are banned from working, obtaining financial aid, voting, and driving in most states (Abrego, 2006)—activities that are often representative of youths' coming-of-age. Such exclusion and deprivation of adult rights can be disguised until undocumented youths seek to take such adult roles and move from “protected to unprotected, from inclusion to exclusion, from *de facto* legal to illegal” (Gonzales, 2011, p. 602).

This change from protected to unprotected status while transitioning to adulthood has been described as a *turning point* for undocumented youths (Gonzales, 2010; Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). Critical events, such as learning about the meaning of legal status, are called *turning points* when they cause “a major transformation in [an individual's] views about the self, commitments to important relationships, or involvement in significant life roles” (Wethington, Cooper, & Holmes, 1997, p. 216). In this sense, coming-of-age catalyzes “long-term behavioral change” and identity transformations (Rumbaut, 2005, p. 1043). As young adults confront their “transition to illegality” (Gonzales, 2011), this process leads to profound changes in their persona. For instance, most unauthorized youths disengage in education and question its role (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2010; Perez, 2009), they fear being deported, and they assume or challenge being criminalized by mainstream views (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Therefore, the turning point of coming-of-age affects not just undocumented youths' academic and professional life, but also their psychological well-being and social life (Chang, 2011; Moreno, 2011; Sepúlveda, 2011; Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

These studies highlight how coming-of-age affects undocumented youths who came to the United States as children (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). Gonzales (2011)

interviewed 150 undocumented young adults aged 20 to 34 to examine the transition to adulthood by undocumented youths who arrived in the United States before the age of 12. His work suggested that undocumented young adults experience three phases in their transition to adulthood (discovery of illegality, learning to be illegal, and coping) and that both undocumented college-goers and early exiters end up facing the same occupational opportunities.

While this transition also occurs among youths who arrive at age 14 or older (first generation), little research targets this undocumented group. First and 1.5 youth generations participate in the U.S. educational system, but they may have different approaches to educational and occupational opportunities—thus making such transition to adulthood more complex and multifaceted. Further, Gonzales (2011), as well as Rumbaut and Komaie (2010), explored such transitioning through surveys or interviews rather than ethnographic research that can explore more deeply youths' everyday experiences as they come of age. In addition, what these studies did not address is how young adults show agency in gradually constructing their path towards adulthood while making sense of their illegality. The legal status of undocumented migrants should not construct them as “passive and agencyless subjects overdetermined by structural conditions, or undocumentedness as a homogeneous and undifferentiated experience” (Sigona, 2012, p. 51).

The present study fills these gaps in the literature: First, it takes a longitudinal approach to undocumented youths' transition to adulthood (a two-year exploration). Second, it takes into consideration the coming-of-age experiences of not just 1.5 undocumented youths but also first-generation young adults. And third, it focus on youths' agen-

cy rather than on the structural limitations they live in (e.g., Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Menjívar, 2011). In this way, this present work explores how legal status, age of arrival, and daily experiences in school and at the community shape young adults' understanding of illegality and their own particular transition to adulthood.

### **Research Design, Methodology, and Research Questions**

This qualitative study is framed under a critical ethnographic lens to explore the experiences of a population who is excluded from political, occupational, and academic rights. Through ethnography and sociocultural theory, I focus on youths' agency, their academic experiences, and perception of their legal self that evolved during a two-year - period.

This study did not aim to develop a cross-sectional analysis of young adults at different points during their transition to adulthood (e.g., Gonzales, 2011), but to explore how young adults' meaning of illegality and education evolved as they experienced the last years of high school (at the start of the study). While feelings of disengagement are common among coming-of-age undocumented students (Abrego, 2006; Perez, 2009; Gonzales, 2010), some youths may disengage from school, drop out, and re-engage in school some time later (e.g., Moreno, 2011) thus revealing fluidity in their academic (dis)engagement and academic identity that cross-sectional approaches may not be able to grasp.

This critical ethnography started in 2010 after I interviewed 15 undocumented young adults for a project<sup>5</sup> that observed and evaluated the work of Minnesota Immigration Freedom Network (MIFN)<sup>6</sup> in high school classrooms. Part of the evaluation of the program required high school students' surveys and interviews. The interviews with the undocumented students inspired me to pursue this longitudinal study to deeply understand the lives of undocumented young adults in a nontraditional immigrant state (Terrazas, 2011; Wortham et al., 2009). The longitudinal study started in May 2010 and continued until the end of the summer of 2012. It involved six participants who I followed outside school, checked their Facebook pages, met them at work and with their families and friends, and interviewed them about once a month. After August of 2012 our relationship continued, our time together became sparser, and the interviews ended.

This critical ethnography examines the meaning of illegality and the experience of coming-of-age for *four* undocumented Latino young adults who arrived at their mid to late teens (ineligible to qualify for the benefits of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy), and for *two* young adults who arrived as children. Particularly, this two-year study examines the lives of six young adults ages 18 to 21 (at the time they joined the study) to answer the following questions:

1. How do undocumented young adults experience the U.S. educational system and make sense of the role that education plays in their lives? How do youths' school/work experiences influence their understanding of educa-

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<sup>5</sup> This project was led by my adviser Dr. Kendall King.

<sup>6</sup> MIFN started as an organization in 2005 with the agenda to promote social change through youth leadership development, immigrant civic engagement, and media justice and media participation. They support and mobilize undocumented youth to pursue social and political change.  
<http://immigrantfreedomnetwork.wordpress.com/>

tion?

2. How do undocumented young adults understand the role that (il)legality plays in their lives? How do the meanings of illegality evolve in relation to their lived experiences during the course of two years?
3. How do they show agency in their discourse and in constructing opportunities within the limited opportunity window given by their legal status?

With all my observations, field notes, and transcripts, I used discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) to discover youths' experiences as undocumented individuals. Discourse analysis allowed me to explore from a micro and macro approach their discourses on educational experiences, their evolving meaning of illegality, and to discern how these youths showed agency. Differently from most studies that focus on the frustrations and desperate lives of oppressed undocumented immigrants (e.g., Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Menjívar, 2011), this study explores participants' sense of agency. Agency is not understood as a synonym of political resistance or as "free will" (Ahearn, 2001) since the legal status of the participants clearly reveals how policy and thus societal structures limit their 'free will'. In this study I understand agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 118). In this sociocultural context the undocumented individuals show "capacity to act" through their discourses and practices that reveal a "strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 18).

Research that targets legal and nonlegal immigrant youths has mostly overlooked the impact of state policies and rural versus urban contexts of reception by centering their attention on the experiences of immigrants in traditional immigrant states such as California (e.g., Abrego, 2006, Chavez, 1998; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012) and New York (e.g., Massey & Sanchez, 2010; Yoshikawa, 2011). There is a dearth of research of the “New Latino Diaspora”—those areas of the U.S. in which the presence of Latinos has quickly increased in the past 20 years (Terrazas, 2011; Wortham et al., 2009). This is particularly relevant when state immigrant policies are vastly variable, and when the immigrant population in new-destination states is younger than that of traditional immigrant states, and has a higher proportion of Latinos and immigrants without documents (Terrazas, 2011). This study explores the experiences of Latino youths in the New Latino Diaspora, in particular in Minnesota—the 15<sup>th</sup> fastest growing immigrant state (Migration Policy, 2011).

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is composed of eight chapters including this introduction. Chapter 2 examines the literature in order to analyze the social construct of the “illegal alien”: a sociopolitical mainstream discourse that highly affects the Latino participants. Also, this chapter focuses on the literature that studied undocumented youths’ educational experiences and their coming-of-age. Chapter 3 describes the theoretical framework that informs this study: critical ethnography and sociocultural theory, and the methods of participant observation and conversational interviews to answer the research questions.

Chapter 4, “Portrait of Undocumented Latino Young Adults,” delineates the profiles of the six participants to better understand the particular histories of each one of them. Chapter 5, “Putting a lot of Effort in School,” examines the educational experiences and the meaning of education of these young adults. I discovered how age of arrival in the United States and work highly impact the educational experiences and the meaning given to education. Chapter 6, “The Meaning of Illegality in the Everyday life of Undocumented Young Adults,” explores how illegality pervades most domains of their lives but how they learn to find meaning and happiness in their lives. This chapter discloses why and how these young adults perform invisibility to protect themselves from prejudice and deportation. Chapter 7, “Undocumented Young Adults *Authoring* the Discourses of Agency of Multilevel Marketing Business,” looks at how the discourses of Multilevel Marketing (MLM) businesses (Herbalife and Amway) shaped the lives and the sense of agency of two of the participants. It describes how participants interpreted, internalized, and performed those MLM discourses by enacting an entrepreneur identity and developing a new understanding of the self. Finally, Chapter 8, “Conclusion,” puts together the findings of the three research questions and addresses how this study contributes to the field of educational research and Latino studies, and what the implications and limitations of the study are.

Overall, this study illustrates how undocumented young adults experience education differently depending on their age of arrival in the United States; how the meaning of education and legality evolves together with their everyday experiences in schools and at work; and how they show agency in constructing their life trajectories. Undocumented

young adults are not agentless individuals who position themselves under an oppressive society and structure, but youths who claim “a capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001). Through their everyday practices and discourses they revealed how they decide to hide or disclose their legal status and how they seek to avoid deportation and potential discrimination.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### **The American Dream and the Criminalization of Immigrants Shape Undocumented Young Adults' Transition to Adulthood**

The six participants of this study are undocumented young adults who are Latino, coming of age, and part of the U.S. school system. These are important characteristics to take into consideration in order to better understand the type of experiences these individuals encounter in the U.S. school system and in the U.S. society at large.

Three different fields of research inform this study on undocumented young adults. The first area analyzes the sociopolitical context on youths' adaptation and incorporation into the United States. The political and media discourses have historically constructed an illegal alien that is ethnically racialized as Mexican. This analysis is important in order to understand how the stereotypification of Mexican and Latino immigrants affects not just the sociopolitical climate of their communities, but also the immigrants' self-concept, and their academic and professional envisioning. The second area examines the life-course transition of youths into adulthood. While transitioning to adulthood is a rite of passage for all youths, in this review I particularly focus on children of immigrants who come of age and on documenting how illegality is a key component in this transition. Finally, the third area examines minority groups' education, particularly undocumented youths' educational outcomes, to disclose how legal status highly affects youths' academic experiences.

## **Anti-immigrant Views: Constructing the “Illegal Alien”**

Crucial to the experiences of undocumented immigrants is their context of reception. The incapacitating legal status of undocumented young adults is aggravated or mitigated in some states. Nevertheless, not only policy affects the development of their sense of selves as criminals, inferior, and deportable (De Genova, 2004; Dozier, 1993; Rumbaut, 2009) but also the social stereotyping that the media and mainstream project on immigrants from Latin America (Chavez, 2008; Leitner, 2012; Massey & Sanchez, 2010; Rumbaut 2009).

The intense stereotypification of Mexicans as illegal immigrants and criminals is not a new reality but certainly a dehumanizing one (Chavez, 2008). In the 1920s the Border Patrol was created and thus illegal Mexicans began entry in the U.S. (Ngai, 2004). However, the demonization of Mexicans and the persecution of illegal immigrants has gradually worsened by years of economic recession, the high percentage of illegal entry that grew exponentially after 1965<sup>7</sup>, and the absence of an immigration policy that regularizes 30 years of illegal entry (Chavez, 2008; Massey & Sanchez, 2010, Olivas, 2009). As Chavez (2008) stated, once the temporary work program in Mexico (the Bracero Program—1942–1964<sup>8</sup>) ended and illegal immigration began to increase, public anxiety over undocumented migration also began to increase (p.26). In the 1970s and 1980s, fear among the Anglo–Americans that the Southwest was being invaded with intentions of

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<sup>7</sup> After the temporary work program called Bracero Program ended in 1964, illegal immigration grew exponentially. This program allowed Mexican workers to work temporarily in the U.S. (Chavez, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> During WWII the U.S. was in need of more labor workers, since many U.S. Americans had been recruited into military service. The unskilled or semiskilled Mexican workers were sent to the U.S. under the temporary work program called Bracero Program that was established in 1942. The United Farm Workers fought the Bracero Program to end the exploitation of immigrant workers that also affected the conditions of U.S. farmers (Chavez, 1998).

reconquest by Mexicans and Mexican Americans started to become part of public discourse. Several magazine articles reported such fear and in the 1990s, the fear continued and increased along with the number of immigrants from Mexico—in grand part due to the negative consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)<sup>9</sup> for the local farmers in rural Mexico (Chavez, 1998; 2008; Germano, 2009).

The connection between ideology and policy creation is evident. During times of anti-immigrant sentiment, laws are manifestations of the anti-immigrant climate. For instance, the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrants Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) was implemented during a decade of mass migration. This policy became the most punitive legislation to date against unauthorized immigrants—apart from state policies such as Arizona SB1070, Alabama HB56, or California Proposition 22. IIRIRA, the last and current immigration reform, includes provisions for criminalizing, detaining, fining, and also imprisoning a wide range of infractions that broadened the production of illegality among documented and undocumented immigrants (De Genova, 2004). IIRIRA also banned unauthorized immigrants from voting, legally working, and receiving in-state tuition and financial aid in postsecondary institutions (Abrego, 2006). In other words, this immigration reform served to control the immigrant rather than immigration, and forced immigrants to live a constrained life of intense anxiety and fear of deportation (Abrego, 2011).

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<sup>9</sup> North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) eliminated barriers of trade and investment between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. NAFTA was implemented on January 1, 1994. American investment flooded into Mexico mostly to finance factories. Mexican farmers and manufacturers, once protected by tariffs on host products, could not compete on less expensive products from the United States—particularly corn (Chavez, 1998; Gimeno, 2009).

The events of September 11, 2001 occurred during a time of anti-immigrant policy and sentiment. In fact, 9/11 worsened the backdrop of anti-immigrant hysteria directed to all foreigners (Massay & Sanchez, 2010). Since 2001, the number of immigrants under detention has increased by 50% (Massey & Sanchez, 2010, p. 78), and under Obama's administration, the immigration enforcement agency (ICE) has actually accelerated the pace of deportations. In 2009, the authorities deported 389,834 people (most of them Mexicans)—about 20,000 more than in 2008, the final year of the Bush administration (Preston, 2010). However, in 2012, the Obama administration announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy (Preston & Cushman, 2012) which gives hope to 1.7 million undocumented students (39 % of young adults under 30) to find legal work in the United States and to delay their deportation (Passel & Lopez, 2012). However, the possibility to regulate migratory status of undocumented youths is still not possible. Nevertheless, the news of the Deferred Action policy was highly welcomed by the undocumented community overall, and the Latino community of Minnesota crafted the cover of its July monthly magazine with a picture of smiley putative beneficiaries and a line that read “sí se pudo” (yes, we could; <http://www.revistanuevaimagen.com>). This cover ignored the fact that many undocumented young adults do not benefit from this policy due to the rigid requirements that one needs to satisfy in order to apply, and due to the current ambiguity of what type of criminal record is considered punitive. As Orellana (2012) points out, “the criteria for exclusion is a little unclear and clouds the issue of how safe it may be for young people to come forward and apply for deferred action; making a

public declaration of their own undocumented status also may pose a risk for family members who themselves will not be protected by this decree” (para.7).

The perception of illegal migration as a national threat continues to exist in the mainstream and media. Despite demands from the mainstream, as well as liberal and conservative groups, the federal movement has failed to pass a comprehensive immigration reform, and states and localities have started to play a growing role in immigration regulation (Olivas, 2007). Since 2005, nearly 370 local governments across the U.S. have proposed or implemented policies designed to address issues of undocumented immigration in their communities (Walker & Leitner, 2011). Some states have taken the lead to implement *pro*-immigrant policies while other states have implemented extreme punitive *anti*-immigrant policies. In 2010, Arizona SB 1070 was passed and the law was surrounded by controversy since it obligates police to determine a person’s immigration status if there is “reasonable suspicion” that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the U.S. (Arizona Senate Bill 1070, 2010, p. 10). As the opponents of the law explain, to demand one’s documentation based on police reasonable suspicion of their illegality can lead to racial profiling (Lacayo, 2011) when public discourses link illegality with Mexican ethnicity (Martin, 2009; Santa Anna, 1999).

The line that distinguishes Mexican, Latinos, and illegal immigrants becomes blurred by mainstream views that lump them together regardless of generation, ethnicity, and legal status (Chang, 2011; King & Puntí, 2012; Rumbaut, 2009). Further, the public discourse links illegality with criminality since undocumented immigrants are perceived as increasing crime rates (Rumbaut, 2009, p. 125). This is a consequence of the U.S. fed-

eral policy (e.g., Coutin, 2005; De Genova, 2004; Ngai, 2004) and state and local government mandates (e.g., Dick, 2011; Schiffman & Weiner, 2012) that have criminalized and racialized Mexicans and other Latin Americans. Nevertheless, this association is founded on stereotypes since, during the years of mass migration—1994 to 2007—in which undocumented immigrant populations sharply increased, the overall rates of violent crimes and property crimes decreased significantly in the United States (Rumbaut, 2009). This emphasizes how Latinos, legal or nonlegal, are socially and politically stereotyped as illegal criminals, low class, and cheap laborers (Rumbaut, 2009).

Since the implementation of Arizona's controversial law, Georgia, Utah, Indiana, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Alabama have also passed similar anti-immigrant policies (Filindra et al., 2011; Oh & Cooc, 2011). And three of them (Arizona, Georgia, and Alabama) also currently bar undocumented immigrants from enrolling in public universities and colleges (Filindra et al., 2011). To date, the most punitive state law, Alabama's HB 56, also obliges public schools to determine the immigration status of all students, thus requiring parents of foreign-born students to report the immigration status of their children (Preston, 2011). This policy has been particularly intimidating to undocumented families with children. While the determination of children's legal status is argued to be done just for statistical reasons, the principal of one Alabama's school explained how the day after the new law was upheld (in June 2011), many Hispanic children withdrew from school, or were absent or crying (Jilani, 2011).

Children and youths see, hear, and absorb the anti-immigrant climate in their communities (Jilani, 2011). Children in Alabama were leaving schools since they could

feel the anti-immigrant sentiment charged in the same state policies (Jilani, 2011). In a different state, New Mexico, the local police of Albuquerque, following outlawed procedures, entered school compounds and seized, interrogated, and sent three undocumented high schoolers to the United States Border Patrol in 2004 (Olivas, 2007). While state laws and police interventions threaten those directly affected by them, it also reaches those undocumented immigrants living in different parts of the United States. Pamela, a Mexican undocumented high schooler from Minnesota, said “*no nos quieren*” (“they don’t want us”) while trying to make sense of the reasoning behind the punitive Arizona law (King & Punti, 2012). However, Pamela explained that “they don’t want us” because many Latino youths join gangs and create problems. This accusation of the same Latino community reveals how anti-immigrant mainstream views are able to reach the mindset of the youths. Therefore, the social hostility against illegal immigrants, together with restrictive laws, permeates into these youths a sense of self who end up believing to be a cause of societal ills and responsible of their fate (Abrego, 2006; Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Internalization of dominant stereotypes elevates the *stigma consciousness* (lower self-esteem of oneself and one’s communities) and consequently these individuals tend to have higher levels of mental distress (Kira, Hammad, & Simaan, 2005) and perform lower academically (Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007).

However, social stigma is present even if one holds a high self-esteem about oneself and their community. In 2007, the majority (69%) of U.S. adults believed illegal immigrants should “be prosecuted and deported for being in the U.S. illegally” (Rasmussen Reports, 2007), while 52% of U.S. adults believed that most recent immigrants “cause

problems” (Rasmussen Reports, 2007). By 2013, a year in which immigration reform seems imminent, 64% of U.S. adults who support the reform believe that this reform should first focus on border control (Rasmussen Reports, 2013). Further, 48% fear that a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants will lead to more uncontrolled migration (Rasmussen Reports, 2013). Such stances do not go unnoticed by U.S. Latinos, and indeed the majority of Latinos perceive themselves to be the targets of bias (Lopez, Morin, & Taylor, 2010; MacGregor-Mendoza, 1998; Pew Hispanic Center, 2007).

Still, once undocumented migrants are able to become documented the social hostility remains part of their everyday lives. As Chang (2011), a woman from Guatemala who was able to regularize her legal status, explains, “I was documented, but I was still unprotected from the consequential effects of intolerance” and “with each academic degree [I attained], I hoped to have added yet another layer of protection against racism, sexism, [and] xenophobia” (p. 515)—a hope towards acceptance that was not even accomplished with a doctorate degree.

Therefore, legality cannot be dissociated from race and ethnicity (King & Puntí, 2012). In fact, not all undocumented immigrants are equally criminalized. Those white undocumented immigrants from Canada, Britain, or Europe are able to immerse themselves in the realm of white privilege and avoid being ostracized for their “criminal” behavior (Passel, 2006), a privilege that Latino youths cannot share since they are perceived as the “illegal aliens” of the society (Chavez, 2008; Martin, 2009). Further, while the mainstream tends to perceive Latino immigrants as criminals, this approach is more punitive in some states and towns than others (Martin, 2009; Walker & Leitner, 2011). The

variability and influence of state policies is evident but still, not much research documents immigrants' occupational and educational experiences in nontraditional immigrant states. This study, contextualized in a fast-growing immigrant state, illustrates the lives of undocumented youths who are mostly perceived as an economic threat in Minnesota (Fennelly, 2008) and who are able to enroll in higher education but without obtaining in-state financial aid<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, researchers cannot dismiss the context where immigrants live and cannot separate illegality from ethnicity. Being undocumented and Latino leads to quite different experiences from those who are undocumented but white and English speakers. Further, being an undocumented Latino in California has quite different connotations than being an undocumented Latino in Alabama. In this present study, I observe the role that legal status, as well as ethnicity and language, shapes the everyday experiences of six undocumented young adults in Minnesota. I focus on how these undocumented youths acquire a view of the self that is affected by mainstream discourses and how this sense of self impacts their educational and work experiences. In other words, this study brings a more nuanced understanding on youths' experiences by attending not just to legal status but to ethnicity, self-concept, context of reception, and age of arrival in the United States.

### **Transition to Adulthood**

The second area of research highlights how, traditionally, coming-of-age has been understood as a liminal process between adolescence and adulthood (Menjívar, 2006;

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<sup>10</sup> By July 2013, undocumented youth in MN State Colleges and Universities will be able to obtain state financial aid. The MN Dream Act became law in May 2013 (Navigate MN, 2013).

Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Liminality refers to “in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures” and the adaptation of new ones (Horvath, Thomassen, & Harald, 2009, para. 1). While this in-between process is commonly temporary, it can actually become fixed and permanent when the reintegration process to the new stage does not take place (Menjívar, 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Therefore, undocumented young adults live their transition to adulthood in permanent liminality. While undocumented youths enter physically into adulthood in the United States, this entry is not recognized as legitimate by the state or federal policies. In other words, these youths live in a permanent social and legal in-betweenness. They are caught in between two paradigms—one that they have created for themselves and with their families as permanent residents in the U.S. and one constructed by the federal government and by political discourse as “illegal” (Shah, 2008). Therefore, this study examines how young adults deal with such liminality, in other words, how they live a transition to adulthood that rather than transitory becomes permanently liminal—and further, how their expectations, goals, and experiences are influenced by this in-between stage of belonging to a community but not legally belonging.

The concept of liminality illustrates how the transition to adulthood among undocumented youths is pervasive and inconclusive. Perhaps this explains why Gonzales (2011) defined such transition as the “transition to illegality” rather than to adulthood. As stated in the introduction, coming-of-age requires adopting adult roles that uncover the full meaning of illegality. These youths have been granted public K–12 education (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982), thus schools are protected shelters from many consequences of their ille-

gality—although this protection seems to dissipate in Alabama schools and in other cases such as the aforementioned school in Albuquerque (Olivas, 2007; Preston, 2011). While youths start adopting adult roles, such as driving or working, some undocumented youths become aware of their legal status, while others adopt a richer understanding of the meaning of their illegality (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010; Perez, 2009). Others apply for regularizing their legal status if they have the opportunity to do so, but this leads to a new legal limbo or a process of in-betweenness of legal status that can last up to 16 years (Gonzales, 2010; Menjívar 2006).

Scholars that have studied the contemporary transitions to adulthood reveal how coming-of-age is currently taking more years than in the past (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Tanner, 2006). This longer transition to adulthood is called *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), and explains the experiences of young adults in the Western middle-class world. Emerging adulthood is typically marked by achieving independence and autonomy—thus developing the individual character and identity exploration in the areas of work, love, and school—and delaying the responsibility roles of adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Further, emerging adulthood is a critical period for accumulating human capital and college credentials to facilitate social mobility (Rumbaut, 2005). During this period, young adults spend time in postsecondary settings; and delay their exit from parental households, from entry to full-time work, and from making decisions about marriage and children (Arnett, 2000). While in the 1970s a “typical 21-year-old was married or about to be married, caring for a newborn child or expecting one soon, done with education or about to be done, and settled into a long-term job or the role of full-time mother,” this is cur-

rently uncommon (Arnett, 2000, p. 3). Today, the average man is 28 and the average woman 26 at the time of their first-time marriage (U.S. Bureau, 2011) and the average of first-time mothers is 25 (Mathews & Hamilton, 2009).

Arnett (2000) places emerging adulthood as a period of youth transition that ranges from age 18 to age 25. However, he acknowledges that emerging adulthood mostly represents the lives of white middle class youths since different ethnic, racial, and social class groups experience the transition differently (Hartmann & Toguchi Swartz, 2007; Rumbaut, 2004; 2005; Rumbaut & Komaie, 2007; 2010). Emerging adulthood may not be representative for immigrants from non-Western countries for whom adulthood is rather associated with obligation and responsibility to close and extended family, and thus to greater interdependence rather than independence (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). In addition, many 1.5- and second-generation immigrant youths, as well as youngsters from economically disadvantaged families, have fewer opportunities to attend postsecondary institutions since their families cannot support them financially and in many cases the same youth contributes to the household economy (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, 1995). In such circumstances, their levels of freedom are limited and their transition to adulthood framed by family needs and economic stressors, thus these differences suggest that “children of immigrants—documented and undocumented alike—experience coming-of-age differently than the native born” (Gonzales, 2011, p. 605).

Rumbaut and Komaie (2007; 2010) studied the passage into adulthood among natives and (legal and nonlegal) children of immigrants. They distinguished five milestones

in youth's transition: moving out from the parents, being out of school, working full time, getting married, and having children. They observed that these milestones are happening in three different age ranges: early transition (18 to 24), middle transition (25 to 29), and late transition (30 to 34). Nationally, the school-to-work transition and leaving the parental household tend to occur in early transition (18 to 24) while marriage and parenthood tend to be prominent in all three stages (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010).

Rumbaut and Komaie find—using 2005 and 2008 Current Population Surveys—that all ethnic groups who are foreign-born young adults have more children earlier than their U.S.-born counterparts. In addition, Latinos are the most likely to be working full time, be married, and have children compared to the other racial groups—however, Latino's full-time work tends to be of low wage.

While Rumbaut and Komaie (2007; 2010) could not pinpoint the effect of legal status in their research, being undocumented transforms the transition into adulthood to a period of *submerging* adulthood rather than *emerging* adulthood (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). The term *submerging* implies that during this youth transition, unauthorized people visualize an ongoing future into the underclass and realize that their authorized counterparts have opportunity structures they have no access to. Youths need to accept such reality and thus learn to live with their illegality. In other words, they need “to learn to be illegal” (Gonzales, 2011). This shocking young-adult experimentation and realization at the “turning point” of coming-of-age requires an identity and behavioral transformation (Rumbaut, 2005). During the transition, youths face a period of disorientation in which they confront the implications of their illegality “and engage in a process of retooling and

reorienting themselves for new adult lives” (Gonzales, 2011, p. 606). This is what led Moreno (an undocumented young adult) to drop out from high school and get involved in alcoholism and drugs after he had been enrolled in Honors English, and gained a scholarship he knew he could not use in Arizona (Moreno, 2011). The process of learning to be illegal is not uniform among undocumented youths though, as it is not uniform either for legal young adults. How much youths knew about their illegality as a child, and at what age they arrived in the United States, are two of the many circumstances that shape such transition.

The process of conceptualizing the meaning of illegality for young adults has been addressed by Gonzales’ (2011) as well as Abrego’s (2011) studies. However, while learning to be illegal is a process that evolves in time and space, and is based on youths’ experiences, Abrego (2011) perceived the meaning of illegality to be fixed and depending on generational cohort. She stated that the 1.5 young adults see illegality as a *stigma* and the first-generation perceives their illegality with *fear*. In her study, though, it is not the generational cohort but immigrants’ ages and experiences that seem to make the meaning of illegality relevant<sup>11</sup>.

Abrego (2011) described how adult undocumented immigrants decline to attend press conferences in support of the Dream Act because they are scared of being visible and targets for deportation. On the other hand, their undocumented children are actively involved in events that support the Dream Act. These students do not hide, but hold up

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<sup>11</sup> This study aimed to compare first and 1.5 generation undocumented immigrants but Abrego actually compared adults to young adults. For a better comparison of the conception of illegality for first- and 1.5-generation immigrants, she should have controlled for age since age is a determinant variable. Further, she looked at first-generation immigrants who arrived late in the United States, but many first generation immigrants arrive as teenagers or early young adults and also have educational experiences.

banners that read “Our Dreams Can’t Wait” and “My Dream: The American Dream” (p. 338). In her analysis of the events, Abrego fell into generalizations and perceived the illegal consciousness of nonlegal immigrants as rigid and dependent on generational cohort. This tendency to generalize and develop standard monolithic experiences is common among most studies on undocumented immigrants. Gonzales and Chavez (2012) revealed through vignettes how undocumented immigrants are frustrated and “spending much of their time worrying” (p. 265), a frustration that is also present throughout the writing of Menjívar’s (2011) study on Central American immigrants who live in a legal limbo. These studies showed undocumented migrants to be eclipsed by their legal status, to live in fear and stigma, and to have no fluid perception about their illegality.

Gonzales (2011), who also looked for common patterns among 150 undocumented youths who are ages 20 to 34 (and who migrated before the age of 12), framed the meaning of illegality as fluid and evolving during their transition to adulthood. He noticed a potential relationship between educational attainment and legal status awareness among the 1.5 generation. Based on his study, 30% of high school dropouts discovered their illegality when they were teenagers compared to 9% of the college-goers. Therefore, there seemed to exist a positive relationship between youths’ early awareness of illegality and college attendance. Perhaps the younger youths discover their illegality, the longer they have to accept and assess their future and the importance of education. And, on the other hand, when youths discover their illegality as mid-teenagers, the stronger the shock, frustration, and disappointment they feel towards the educational system.

Gonzales (2011) also found, through life history interviews, how unauthorized residents “learn to be illegal” during their transition to adulthood in three different stages. First, there is the discovery stage (ages 16 to 18), in which youths (all legal and nonlegal) start acquiring semiadult roles: driving and getting their first part-time jobs. For most undocumented youths, this “discovery stage” is a turning point (Rumbaut, 2005) that transforms holistically their lives with shock, frustration, and usually with academic disengagement (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). The second stage of the transition to illegality is “learning to be illegal” (ages 19 to 24). Here, youths get involved in the low-wage market and some suspend the consequences of their legal status by enrolling in postsecondary educational institutions if they have enough family support and financial resources to enroll in postsecondary educational settings. Finally, in “the coping years” (ages 25 to 29), undocumented young adults (dropouts as well as college graduates) converge in occupational opportunities. This period forces them “to acknowledge the distance between their prior aspirations and present realities” (p. 614). Coping implies that youths need to learn to accept their constrained reality that regardless of their educational attainment their occupational opportunities are nonexistent. As Gabriel, a young adult explained,

I just stopped letting it [unauthorized status] define me. Work is only part of my life. I’ve got a girlfriend now. We have our own place. I’m part of a dance circle, and it’s really cool. Obviously, my situation holds me back from doing a lot of things, but I’ve got to live my life. I just get sick of being controlled by the lack of nine digits. (Gonzales, 2011, p. 615)

Gabriel accepted and resigned himself to the limitations of his legality and found meaning in his life through his dance circle and his girlfriend. Therefore, undocumented young adults must find spaces “in which they can make life meaningful...[and] try to sus-

tain a proud sense of self despite state policies that strip them of dignity” (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 253). Fine and Weis's (1998) ethnographic study focused on poor young adults from the inner city who were citizens. But similar to the experience of undocumented young adults, these white, black, and Puerto Rican young adults found no value in their educational diplomas since their educational outcomes did not affect their occupational outcomes due to racism and the economic disparities that the postindustrial economic created. Therefore, unprivileged young adults “sculpt real and imagined places for peace, [and] communion”: spaces that make their life meaningful (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 252). While Gonzales (2011) seemed to frame the search for meaningful experiences at the *coping* stage of youths’ transition to adulthood, undocumented young adults need meaningful experiences throughout their transition to adulthood and throughout their lives. Nevertheless, studies on undocumented youths and adults have not explored much how these immigrants find meaningful spaces in their undocumented lives.

This section of the literature disclosed a rich spectrum of lives transitioning to adulthood in which generation, race, ethnic group, and legal status influenced this transition (Rumbaut & Komaie 2007; 2010). However, studies to date have not explored the amalgam of transitions towards adulthood experienced by undocumented youths. Gonzales (2011) indicated a general trajectory towards adulthood (discovery of illegality, learning to be illegal, and coping) among all 1.5 undocumented young adults. However, how each one of the 150 undocumented young adults of Gonzales’s study particularly experienced their illegality as they came of age is unclear since they were homogenized. In this sense, the monolithic approach to adulthood omits the plurality of rich experiences in

youths' agentic lives. My study attends to plurality as it explores the rich experiences of each one of the six undocumented young adults to reveal how social, familiar, academic, and occupational experiences shade undocumented young adults' transition to adulthood.

### **Education and Undocumented Immigrants**

This last section of the literature review focuses on studies that examine the educational outcomes of undocumented youths. In relation to the political context of youth, few studies empirically document the effect of the macropolitical context in youths' educational lives albeit the large variability of state policies and contexts affect immigrants' educational and incorporation patterns (Portes & Zhou, 1992; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Filindra et al. (2011) study empirically explored the effect of state political contexts on immigrants' children's educational life. The authors found a positive correlation between proimmigration states (democratic states and those with policies that support immigration) and high school graduation rates among children of immigrants. While Filindra et al. (2011) focused on *all* children of immigrants, the political effect is particularly prominent for those children who are undocumented (Gonzales, 2008; Perez, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Being assigned to an undocumented status implies that the government openly discriminates and imposes a second-class existence and identity to these immigrants. For undocumented youths, education in most states is not a right but a privilege, and the relationship between education and occupational opportunities is mostly nonexistent (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales 2010; 2011; Perez, 2009). In this sense, these youths are forced

to accommodate, through exploitation, the underclass (De Genova, 2004). There are few extraordinary cases of undocumented immigrants who are able to enter the mainstream occupational world—This was the case of Jose Antonio Vargas<sup>12</sup> who, through the unconditional support of well-established acquaintances, was able to put into practice his degree in journalism at highly renowned institutions.

Foreseeing an underclass reality could lead school-age undocumented immigrants to develop “adversarial” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001)—or what Ogbu (1987) calls “oppositional”—identities, especially when most young immigrants expect education to be the pathway to the American dream (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Ogbu (1987) explained how these oppositional identities are enacted by youths of color who reject a mainstream culture that imposes a glass ceiling on the job opportunities to disempowered communities—in other words, when these youths do not give an *instrumental* value to education (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Further, Ogbu and Simons (1998) explained how education becomes a threat to the culture and language of many minority youths, thus giving a *symbolic*<sup>13</sup> view of education that also leads to educational rebellion (oppositional identities). While Ogbu and Simons (1998) did not particularly target undocumented

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<sup>12</sup> Jose Antonio Vargas was born in the Philippines and raised in the United States from the age of 12. He was unaware of his undocumented status until age 16. He worked for The San Francisco Chronicle, The Philadelphia Daily News, The Washington Post and the Huffington Post. In 2008, Vargas won with his team the Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Reporting for the coverage of the deadly shooting rampage at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. With the support of Peter Perl, the director of newsroom training and professional development at The Washington Post, he was able to keep his undocumented status hidden (Vargas, 2011). He is now an activist for his advocacy group Define American.

<sup>13</sup> King (1971/2007) does not define the symbolic value of education as Ogbu and Simons (1998) did. For King, youth who hold a symbolic value on education give prestige and status to higher academic attainment rather than feeling fear for the potential counterproductive consequences of education on one’s ethnic language and culture.

youths in their analysis, their theory seems to perfectly fit youths who have a limiting and imposed glass ceiling on occupational opportunities.

Past research suggests that whether this oppositional behavior is enacted depends on how immigrants adapt in the United States. Accommodating under a *dual frame of reference* enables immigrants to develop a positive sense of self by believing their lives in the United States are markedly better than the lives left behind (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). However, testimonies of undocumented youths (e.g., Moreno, 2011), and research on youths' perception of their illegality (Abrego, 2011) and on their academic experiences (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010; Perez, 2009), reveal how illegality affects negatively their self-concept and also has an impact on their attitudes at work, in school, and in their communities (Chang, 2011; Hernandez, Mendoza, Lio, Lattho, & Eusebio, 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Due to the social, cultural, political, and economic barriers that these youths encounter in the U.S. society, undocumented youths are quite less likely than their legal immigrant and U.S.-born counterparts to graduate from high school and attend college (Passel & Cohn, 2009). The high school graduation rate for undocumented youths ages 18 to 24 is just 60% compared to the rate of legal immigrants (85%) and U.S.-born youths (92%; Passel & Cohn, 2009). However, the graduation rate among unauthorized students is influenced by their age of arrival in the U.S., with age of arrival positively correlated with high school graduation rate. While unauthorized youths who arrived before age 14 have a high school completion rate of 72%, this lowers to a 54% among those who arrived after age 14.

In reference to college enrollment, just a few years ago Passel (2003) indicated that just one out of 20 undocumented children who graduated from high school went on to college, but this estimate has highly increased today. Currently, Passel and Cohn (2009) indicate that 49% of undocumented young adults of ages 18 to 24 enroll in college. And while the real number of undocumented students in all institutions is difficult to know, the estimated increase rate seems to be potentially a consequence of the rise in number of states offering in-state tuition to undocumented youths<sup>14</sup> (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Nevertheless, the percentage of undocumented youths going to college (mostly two-year colleges; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011) is still much lower than the rate of legal immigrants (76%) and U.S.-born residents (71%) attending higher education (Passel & Cohn, 2009). There is also quite a telling difference in college enrollment between those undocumented youths who arrived as children in the U.S. versus those who came as adolescents. The 1.5 generation has a higher rate of higher education enrollment (61%) than the first generation (42%). These estimates are supported by Suárez-Orozco et al.'s (2008) longitudinal ethnographic study on 470 legal and nonlegal immigrant students. The authors reported in their five-year qualitative study that “students whom we knew were undocumented were disproportionately found among the precipitous decliners and our lowest achievers” (p. 390). While Orozco’s et al. (2008) study and the estimates show the importance of legal status and generational cohort in the academic

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<sup>14</sup> Prior to 2003 there were 4 states with in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants (Texas, California, Utah, and New York). The first one was Texas in 2001. Currently, there are 15 states that offer in-state tuition (Washington, Oklahoma and Illinois in 2003; Kansas in 2004; New Mexico in 2005; Nebraska in 2006; Wisconsin in 2009; Maryland and Connecticut in 2011; Colorado, Oregon, and Minnesota in 2013) In 2008 Oklahoma ended its support for in-state tuition for students without lawful presence (NCSL, 2012; NILC, 2013).

attainment of youths, they told little about the experiences that lead these youths to drop out from high school or enroll in higher education. This present study aims to explore what happens in the lives of these youths that translates into academic engagement and disengagement, and therefore, examine how academic identities are fluid and affected by policy, language proficiency, school structure, economic needs, and other family and personal circumstances.

The negative effect of legal status in educational outcomes was also implicitly revealed in Rumbaut and Komaie's (2010) study on immigrants' children's transition to adulthood. The authors revealed that first-generation Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran young adults (18 to 34)—some of them potentially undocumented—who arrived as children and as teenagers dropped out from high school in rates doubling their second-generation counterparts (legal U.S.-born young adults). Such a drastic increase in graduation rates between immigrants and second-generation Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran young adults is not occurring among other ethnic groups from the Caribbean or Asian countries. This legal relationship is clear when 82% of undocumented immigrants are from Latin America, and when Mexico (6.6 million), El Salvador (620,000) and Guatemala (520,000) are the three leading source countries of unauthorized migration (Hoefer, Rytina, Baker, 2010).

As Rumbaut and Komaie (2010) and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) suggested, undocumented youths are found among the lowest achievers in the educational system. A good explanation for not being engaged in school, and perhaps in developing oppositional identities, comes from their economic limitations to enrollment in higher education in-

stitutions and the nonexistent options to relate their studies to job opportunities (Gonzales, 2011). While the undocumented youths have been granted public K–12 education (Plyler v. Doe, 1982), the access to higher education becomes disrupted by the restrictive policies towards those who are targeted as illegal aliens. Since the passage of the 1996 IIRIRA (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrants Responsibility Act), the federal government has banned public colleges from offering in-state tuition unless out-of-state U.S. citizens were allowed the same rate. Since then, 15<sup>15</sup> states offer in-state tuition to undocumented immigrant students who have been studying at their high school states for at least two or three years (Flores, 2010; Kaushal, 2008; Olivas, 2009). While these policies have been targeted to disobey a federal law, they have been supported by stakeholders who argue that in-state tuition eligibility has not been based on individuals' residence but on high school attendance (Kobach, 2007, p. 479). These policies are found to increase the academic attainment of undocumented youths (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Khausal, 2008; Potochnick, 2011). But, under the current immigration law, undocumented youths are still unable to obtain federal financial aid for college or receive in-state tuition rates in most public universities. In 2011, California passed its DREAM Act, and under this new policy, not just undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition but also for state-funded Cal Grants and other public aid. California's bill is particularly relevant because it is home to far more undocumented residents than any other state and is the first bill that uses public funding to help unauthorized students (Vara, 2011).

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<sup>15</sup> See footnote 14.

Offering in-state tuition and financial aid is essential for youths' academic career since the cost of out-of-state tuition can be more than three times the cost of in-state tuition (Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Without financial aid or in-state tuition, education becomes essentially inaccessible for families who cannot legally work and obtain a social security number (Gonzales, 2010; Shah, 2008). In Minnesota, with the passage of the flat-rate tuition bill<sup>16</sup>, state financial aid was not accessible for undocumented youths, but they had access to in-state tuition at most colleges and universities—although not at the main state public university.

With political, social, and financial limitations, still some undocumented young adults are able to succeed in high schools and higher education institutions. In fact, academic articles (Chavez, et al., 2007; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Mangan, 2010; Perez, 2009), blogs (Lazarsky, 2010), and magazine articles (Jones, 2010) that touch upon the education of undocumented young adults tend to describe the testimonies of successful high school and college students. These testimonies serve to advocate for the DREAM Act and stress how academically well-prepared youths are still ineligible to work and apply their knowledge and skills in the workforce (Perez, 2009; Gonzales, 2009; Gonzalez, et al., 2003). However, the testimony of those DREAMers who are able to achieve academically regardless of familial, economic, linguistic, and personal issues should not eclipse the reality that the majority of Latino undocumented

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<sup>16</sup> A 2007 “flat-rate tuition policy” for select Minnesota state colleges and universities, reduced cost barriers for nonresident students and saw an increase in enrollment for nonresidents of 95%. This increase could have partly been due to the higher enrollment of Minnesota of undocumented immigrant students (Minnesota Minority Education Partnership, 2010). In May 2013, the Minnesota Dream Act became law; allowing in-state tuition and state financial aid to undocumented students who had been in Minnesotan high schools for at least 3 years (Navigate MN, 2013).

youths are not successful high school or college students—although they also dream to go to college and turn their professional dreams into reality.

The effect of legality in school achievement is not the only factor impeding educational success. English proficiency, track placement, positive relationships with school personal, and school resources are, among others, paramount in shaping one's educational outcomes (Callahan, 2005; Gonzales, 2010; Rodriguez & Cruz, 2009). English proficiency has been shown to be determinant in students' academic achievement. This proficiency is affected by the time of entry in the U.S. While the 1.5 generation may have difficulties learning the academic English of the classroom, this linguistic disadvantage is higher for older non-English speaking teenagers. This linguistic barrier may explain, among other factors, the higher dropout rate of first-generation undocumented immigrants (46%) versus the 1.5 undocumented group (28%; Passel & Cohn, 2009).

Collier and Thomas (1989) showed that those students who speak a different language at home from the language of the school need approximately 5–7 years to achieve comparable grades of those of their native-speaking peers. A different study in Arizona found that a group of students needed about three years to attain native-like oral proficiency in English, but the pace of learning varied highly from one to more than six years (MacSwan & Pray, 2005). As Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) explained, many environmental and hereditary factors influence language learning; therefore those children who come from lower socioeconomic and educational backgrounds tend to need more time to learn English than other limited English proficient students. Since the current immigration wave is mostly represented by a high percentage of impoverished immigrants with

limited human capital (Migration Policy, 2009), learning English may take quite a long time for many immigrant students. However, the development of academic English skills is not only necessary for the first generation of non-English speaking immigrants, but also for the 1.5- and second-generation students who need to enroll as English Language Learners (ELL) for a variable number of years depending on individual needs and school decisions (Faltis & Valdés, 2010).

Nevertheless, English language proficiency is not sufficient to guarantee undocumented students access to higher education institutions. As Callahan, (2005) revealed, track placement of secondary institutions seems to be more influential than language proficiency. This correlates with Gonzales's (2010) study where he stated that "positive tracking and close relationships with school personnel mediate some of the negative effects of undocumented status" (p. 477). In fact, positive relationships with teachers and school staff were able to mediate non-college tracks by allowing them to access information to get into college or obtain financial assistance (Gonzales, 2010). The importance of positive relationships was also stated by Enriquez (2011), who observed how undocumented youths needed to 'patchwork' the few emotional, informational, and financial resources that they clutched from family members, friends, and teachers to be able to reach college. Nevertheless, many educational institutional actors are not able to provide information specific to undocumented students since they are unaware of state and school policies that benefit these youths (Aleixo, Chin, Shurilla, & Fennelly, 2011; Enriquez, 2011).

The literature on undocumented youths has expanded significantly in the last few years. A key finding is the lower academic attainment achieved by this group that reveals the critical role that legal status plays in imposing academic and occupational barriers in their lives. Most research focuses on the (mostly successful) academic experiences of undocumented youths who arrived in the U.S. as children and were able to participate in the U.S. school system from the first grades. However, other young adults arrive in the middle or last years of high school and enroll with limited or nonexistent English proficiency, and in some cases limited schooling (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, 2004). Little research explores the fate of undocumented young adults who come as teenagers and who may seek to join the school system and struggle to graduate from high schools or, alternatively, look for employment. Furthermore, there is scarce understanding on how legal and nonlegal youths' academic engagement and disengagement actually occurs.

In light of these important gaps, this ethnographic study aims to explore the daily lives of undocumented young adults to understand their ongoing and evolving academic (dis)engagement. Further, it compares the academic identities of both young adults who came as children and those who came as teenagers. For a better understanding on the use of ethnography for exploring the lives of undocumented young adults, the next chapter focuses on this methodology and on sociocultural theory to theorize how research is understood and undertaken in this study. Framing this study under these theoretical backgrounds legitimates fieldwork, observations, and interviews as key methods to explore the meaning of illegality and education for undocumented young adults.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### **Critical Ethnography and Sociocultural Theory to Frame Participants' Discourses and Experiences**

This study explores how six undocumented young adults (four first-generation and two 1.5-generation young adults) between the ages 18 and 21 make sense of education and the meaning of illegality while they transition to adulthood. Three questions drive this study:

1. How do undocumented young adults experience the U.S. educational system and make sense of the role that education plays in their lives? How do youths' school/work experiences influence their understanding of education?
2. How do undocumented young adults understand the role that (il)legality plays in their lives? How do the meanings of illegality evolve in relation to their lived experiences during the course of two years?
3. How do they show agency in their discourse and in constructing opportunities within the limited opportunity window given by their legal status?

To address these questions, I adopt a critical poststructural ethnography that explores the meaning of education and illegality for six undocumented young adults during the course of two years. In this chapter, I first review a theoretical background of the field of critical ethnography. This first section shows how poststructuralism and postmodern-

ism are intertwined with critical ethnography. Then, I relate the theoretical underpinnings of this methodology to my own critical ethnographic study that is also framed by sociocultural theory. The chapter continues with my positioning, data collection, participants, and data analysis. It ends with an explanation of the strengths and limitations of this study. The overall aim of the chapter is to frame this study theoretically, and examine the lens through which I understand research. As this chapter reveals, I do not claim to have the only truth about the participants' experiences but to critically disclose my understanding of their experiences as they explained them to me, and as I observed them unfold.

### **Theoretical Underpinning: Critical Poststructural Ethnography**

This study is a critical poststructural ethnographic methodology due to the role of power, politics, and structure in affecting the lives of the participants. Poststructuralism is reflected as I claim not to be a neutral researcher but a Spanish speaking woman involved in these youths' experiences and discourses. Further, I understand youths' identities and experiences as fluid rather than rigid and static. In other words, framing this study under a critical poststructural approach is necessary because (a) *power*, through policy, media, and mainstream discourses, is poignantly determinant of undocumented youths' experiences and since (b) the aim of the study is to understand youths' *fluid* views on the meaning of education and legality. In addition, by taking a longitudinal ethnographic approach this study focuses on change over time and undertakes a co-constructed perspective on how these youths understand illegality and education.

### **From ethnography to critical poststructural ethnography.**

Ethnography was founded upon the realm of imperialism, racism, and colonial inequalities (Behar, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Foley, 2002). It was born from the assumption that the privileged intellectual class had the “right to tell stories about whom” (Behar, 2003 p. 16). As Smith (1999), Denzin (2005), and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) remind us, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself...is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary...it is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism” (Smith, 1999, p. 1).

The search in foreign lands for the primitive, underdeveloped, indigenous “Other” was part of the essence of ethnography. Classic ethnographers claimed to describe objectively (although it was not) the lives of the dark-skinned “Others” as truthful and objective generalizations to the white world and perpetuated a *present* or static “Other” that did not evolve, or change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Madison, 2005; Wolcott, 2008). Such a colonial foundation is not forgotten by critical ethnographers, a movement that demands social justice and equity and that started in the 1970s under the influence of critical theory, feminism, Marxism, race theory, postmodernism, and poststructuralism among other philosophical and theoretical pillars (Anderson, 1989; Behar, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Haw, 1996).

Assuming a critical worldview conveys the researcher’s belief in addressing issues and process of injustice and unfairness (Madison, 2005). Critical ethnography has its critical theory origins in the “Frankfurt school” (founded in 1923), under the influence of neo-Marxism theory. Under this influence, the role of social science research is to com-

mit up front “to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 13). Therefore, critical ethnographers are asked to be upfront about their political agenda and question the ideologies behind political institutions (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). The political involvement of critical ethnographers shows how after all, *this* research is “openly ideological research” (Lather, 1986, p. 63). However, to claim that critical ethnography is highly ideological or political is to ignore that *all* qualitative and ethnographic research is highly ideological since no research is apolitical or removed from ideology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 325).

Acknowledging the political and ideological underpinnings of one’s research, demands of critical ethnographers an intensive self-reflection, introspection, and self-critique of their positioning in their accounts of the “Other” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Madison, 2005). According to Noblit, Flores, and Murillo (2004),

[c]ritical ethnographers must explicitly consider how their own acts of studying and representing people and situations are acts of domination even as critical ethnographers reveal the same in what they study.” (p. 3)

Therefore, positionality forces the ethnographers to acknowledge not just the power dissonance surrounding their subjects of study but also the same ethnographers’ biases, power, and privilege. This concern of the ethnographers positionality is part of a so-called ‘reflexive ethnography’ (Foley, 2002; Madison, 2005). This reflexive ethnography focuses on positionality rather than subjectivity, since positionality requires directing the attention beyond the individual, or *subjective*, self to focus on the *subjectivity in relation to the Other* (Madison, 2005). This demands the ethnographer to explore the self–other relationships and become aware of the social constructed nature of the self (Foley,

2002; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). In other words, ethnography interprets how a multiple and constructed Self explores a multiple and constructed “Other.” This emphasis on reflexive ethnography (also called postcritical ethnography) forces ethnographers to be critical on societal power structures as well as on researchers’ positionality (Madison, 2005). This is how postmodern and poststructural theory shapes critical ethnography, not just through the use of subjective and interpretive lenses in exploring the Self and the Other (Britzman, 1995; 2003) but also by understanding power as fluid, diffuse, and discursively constructed in the society and in the Self–Other relationships.

While the Self–Other relationship must be based on trust and empathy, the dynamics between researcher and researched is not neutral. Rather, it is based on the distribution and negotiation of power. Unequal power dynamics between researcher and researched can elicit biased information and the perpetuation of colonizing and oppressive attitudes towards the “Others” (Smith, 1999). Researching individuals and communities whose racial background is different from the researcher has been targeted as problematic. As Troyna and Carrington (1993) state,

...white researchers cannot elicit meaningful data from black respondents because of status and power differences between them...and [a] more significant criticism is based on the way in which the data elicited from black respondents are generally interpreted by white researchers ...(cited by Haw, 1996, p.4).

The limitations of unequal relationships are supported by Smith (1999) who rejects indigenous research done by nonindigenous researchers or ‘colonizers,’ thus asserting that researching indigenous communities should only be done by indigenous people who hold the same indigenous outlook of time, space, and indigenous life in general.

However, this emic look at indigenous life through indigenous lenses omits that ethnicity and race are not the only identities present in the power relations between researcher and researched. While Smith (1999) does not mention that she herself holds a colonized but also a colonizer identity by being an indigenous woman but also a researcher educated under the Western thought, Villenas (1996) talks about her conflictive reality of being a minority woman and a researcher in her own community. As Villenas explains, individuals or researchers are colonizers and colonized people based on their relationship to the marginalized community and the privileged, dominant institutions. In addition, regardless of the ethnographer's ethnic identity, researchers become colonizers when they claim authenticity of their interpretations and descriptions of the "Others" under an authority façade that they enact through their role as researchers.

Villenas brings into light how there is more than matching an indigenous researcher with an indigenous community, or the racial identity of the ethnographer with the racial identity of the researched community to assure ethical research. In fact, limiting research of indigenous communities to indigenous peoples, or the research of minority groups to minority peoples, omits the large spectrum of identities beyond ethnicity and race that influence research and create unbalanced power relations. Further, it ignores the importance of multivocal and multiperspective research and the right of those who don't belong to the community to participate in the struggle. As Freire (1989) pointed out,

if the women are critical, they have to accept our contribution as men, as well as the workers have to accept our contribution as intellectuals, because it is a duty and a right that I have to participate in the transformation of society. Then, if the women must have the main responsibility in their struggle, they have to know that their struggle also belongs to us, that is to those men who don't accept the machista position in the world. The same

is true of racism. As an apparent white man, because I always say that I am not quite sure of my whiteness, the question is to know if I'm really against racism in a radical way. If I am, then I have a duty and a right to fight with black people against racism. (cited in Haw, 1996, p. 4)

Therefore, by opening up research of marginalized communities to researchers from different backgrounds and ethnicities who are mindful, ethical, reflective, and critical we are avoiding the 'ghettoization' of the research process that can limit perspectives and the reaching out to different communities (Haw, 1996). In fact, by listening to those who are silenced and by retelling the stories to other audiences and places, we can contribute to fighting inequalities (Behar, 2003). This is the approach this study follows. As a white female researcher, I seek to listen to and retell the stories of undocumented Latino young adults to different audiences and places to promote an understanding of il(legality) and its consequences to the Latino youth community.

My approach to research is framed in this 'self-other' constructed relationship in which identities, roles, and dialogues are negotiated and co-constructed. Doing a critical poststructural ethnography is the best approach for a study that pinpoints inequality and looks for a relationship between youths' ongoing everyday experiences and their evolving understandings on education and legality. A long-term ethnography allows me to follow the participants for two years, and develop trustful and long-lasting relationships to reach a deeper understanding on how legality and education embrace their agentic lives. Finally, developing ethnography of few individuals rather than a larger number allows a richer detailed analysis of the complex individual trajectories of these undocumented young adults.

## **Critical Ethnography within a Sociocultural Framework**

This critical poststructural ethnography brings insight to how undocumented Latino youths' understandings of education and illegality change over time through the lens of sociocultural theory. In this study, exploring change and agency implies understanding youths' evolving trajectories and attending to the role of time and space in how youths' practices and discourses in social groups influence their views. In other words, how youths' legal and academic identities are affected and transformed by their community of practices<sup>17</sup> (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or Discourses (Gee, 1989; 2009) during their coming-of-age time. Gee (1989) defines Discourses with a capital "D" as more than language but rather as discourse communities. A Discourse is "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group" (Gee, 1989, p. 18). This study explores how the participants are part of discourse communities (Discourses) in which participation and socialization influence and transform their identities and how they make sense of education and legality.

Different ethnographic studies have explored institutions (community of practices) where different undocumented immigrants meet: from schools (DeJaeghere & McCleary, 2010), to families (Mangual, 2010; Yoshikawa, 2011), to an immigrant woman's center (Coll, 2010). However, most of these studies target adult or immigrant's children and take into account one specific space (school, or family, or the church, etc.) where the undocumented immigrants are located in the development of their research

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<sup>17</sup> Community of practice is "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992, p. 464).

questions and their ethnographic findings. By attempting to make sense of the lives of young adult immigrants and their evolving sense of self in the ‘turning point’ of coming-of-age, I do not seek to study the cultural dynamics of a group in a bounded setting but to explore six different undocumented Latino young adults and their conceptualizations of illegality and education in relation to their participation and membership in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or Discourses (Gee, 1989) during their coming-of-age time. As Orellana (2007) argues, individuals are inseparable from their contexts and thus individuals and context are mutually constituted and their way of thinking, being and doing is transferred from one discourse community to the next. Under this premise, Orellana (2007) concludes that we should “stop focusing on easily dichotomized, bounded spaces, and consider instead the bodies, personas, of our participants as potential sites for research. We can move with our participants in and through the contexts of their daily lives, and read the signs inscribed on their bodies (...) to understand how these worlds move in and through them” (p. 134). In other words, Orellana claims that we should make our participants the units of analysis. This is the approach that this critical ethnography follows.

I followed the participants in their communities of practice, in social contexts where they become consciously and unconsciously familiar with their cultural models. Cultural models are ways of knowing, or stories “about how things work in the world” that are present in peoples’ minds but also in groups of people’s practices and texts (Gee, 2004, p. 35). These cultural models, while reinforced through practice are also fluid and adaptable to different contexts.

For undocumented young adults, the meaning of illegality and education is not linked to one particular space, a community of practice, or to just one Discourse, but to those discourse communities where everyday interactions and experiences occur and to the sociopolitical climate they live in. For this, I move beyond observing the experiences of the participants in one setting to undertake a multiple discourse communities approach to make the participants units of analysis (Orellana, 2007).

In addition, this study does not aim to document the dynamics of a group of undocumented young adults who know each other and meet regularly. It aims to explore the different trajectories and experiences of illegality and education of six undocumented young adults who have little or no relationship with each other and join different discourse communities. This diversity of life trajectories allows developing an in-depth, but also multivocal, understanding of undocumented young adults' transition into adulthood.

Further, this study explores the agentic lives of the participants. To analyze their agentic selves is important to define what agency is or, how I define agency. Often, agency has been understood as the capacity of individuals to make free choices, or as a synonym of free will (Ahearn, 2001). Under a definition in which the agent has free will, it ignores how people's actions are shaped (in both constraining and enabling ways) by the sociocultural and political structures that serve to actually reinforce or reconfigure the same structures (Giddens, 1979). Overlooking the role of structures in people's lives would make irrelevant the participants' legal status, age, and cultural background in explaining their capacities to act.

In this study, I take into consideration communities of practices or Discourses to understand the fluidity between structure and agency. In order to understand youths' agency it is important to acknowledge their participation and socialization in discourse communities in which their practices and discourses shape the structure, values, and ideologies of the same discourse communities while at the same time constrain and enable their own discourses. In placing linguistic and social practices within the context of Discourses, Gee (1989; 2004) contributes to "a more nuanced view of the varying ways in which agency is socioculturally constrained and enabled" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 127).

In order to understand how this process of agency takes place in relation to discourse communities, it is important to understand Bakhtin's (1981) notion of *authoring the self* and discourse (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). While discourse communities produce a series of discourses that are authorized by the same discourse community, these discourses—that come from immigration policies, the media, the school, the community, the family, etc.—may conflict with each other and reach the individual. The individual orchestrates all these voices through a process that Bakhtin (1981) calls *internally persuasive discourse*. In this process, one struggles to make sense of all these voices, and to personalize and produce her/his own unique voice from all the discourses to which she/he is part. This process is in itself agentic since it *authors* and rejects some discourses of the community and allows the individual to enact particular identities and a sense of self (Holland et al., 1998).

While Bakhtin (1981) gives us an understanding of the process by which the individual becomes agentic in producing discourse, we can also analyze the same discourses

produced by the individual to assess how the individual positions herself in reference to the macro structure of the society and other individuals. Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin (2011) explain how to discern a speaking subject that becomes an agent or an undergoer in discourse. By focusing on small-d discourse we discover how the “person agentively constructs who they are” (p. 180). Therefore, Bamberg et al., (2011) see how through an individual’s discourses (that are influenced by ideologies and Discourse) we can analyze the speaking subject as an agent that constructs and positions herself in relation to discourse communities and ideologies (Bamberg 2010, Bamberg et al., 2011). In discourse, the individual can use discourse repertoires that result in low agency and can construct herself as a victim, or to be of low influence. On the other hand, individuals can use discourse repertoires that position themselves as *agentive self-constructors*. By using devices that construct their character “in terms of high agency lend themselves for the construction of a heroic self, a person comes across as strong, in control and self-determined” (Bamberg et al., 2011, p. 187). In discourse, the self is placed in relation to others, and that requires a positioning that indexes a sense of self as an agent or as an undergoer; in other words, as a person who constructs the world or who is being constructed by the world.

In order to explore participants’ agency, I focus on their discourses and practices to observe how they position, construct, and enact their identities in relation to others and the macrostructure. Under this focused view, I do not dismiss that participants’ agency is constrained by their community of practices and the sociopolitical climate in which they live. Such an approach leads me to define agency as the “strategic making and remaking

of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power” (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 18). This definition understands that the agent is imbedded in relations of power; in relationships that are within a hierarchical structure (and produce the same structure), and in which participants deliberately construct their identities and their own understanding of the self.

### **Positionality**

As a critical ethnographer, I claim that the illegal status of my undocumented participants is an arbitrary, socially constructed imposition that critically affects their personal development and pushes them to live under exploitative conditions. While I claim that the sociopolitical environment of the U.S. promotes unfair conditions to the undocumented Latino community, I also perceive this community as agentic and critical of their reality. In this study I operate from a stance that participants develop strategies to ‘make and remake the self’ and actively construct six different life trajectories actively. While I aim to acknowledge the agency of the participants, researching such scapegoated population requires a deep concern of the effects of my research and my actions to their persona, as revealing key information could put them in danger of deportation or of social mistrust. Therefore, keeping anonymity and high respect on participants’ lives and experiences are fundamental practices of this study.

While I am not a political activist, I have been part of formal discussions on educational opportunities for undocumented youths in Minnesota. As a researcher, I don’t aim to be neutral or judgmental of the participants’ experiences but to ask and question

their activities and their choices to fully understand their experiences and their thinking. I wrote letters to Antonio (one participant) to support their legal regularization efforts, and talked to lawyers about options to regularize their legal status to inform the participant on legal as well as educational opportunities. However, the reality is that this critical ethnography cannot liberate them from their legal constraints but I hope that they are able to co-construct with me their stories of accomplishment, agency, misrepresentation, and marginalization. I also seek to raise awareness of the everyday life experiences of these young adults to the mainstream academic community while also reaching educators and school personnel who can make a difference in these young adults' lives.

In this study, I reflect on the participants' experiences as I observe them to evolve, and as they are narrated by themselves, their family and colleagues, and co-constructed through dialogue with me—a female, white graduate student from Barcelona, Spain. These conversations and observations are influenced by our identities, personal views, and cultural backgrounds. While my education, privileged race, and role as a researcher empower my position in the study and our encounters; I believe that it is their knowledge and experiences as undocumented individuals that authorizes our dialogues. While their voice is empowered by their experience; my questions, presence, and observations affect their everyday experiences and opinions. At the same time, the participants influence my own questions and my way of looking at the world and understanding it. Therefore, being aware of such mutual influence and how the established relationships with the participants vary and evolve is key for keeping my reflective-self active during the study.

As a white—thus privileged—female researcher I face the limitations of representing nonwhite unprivileged Latino or undocumented ‘Others.’ However, I see my identities not as limitations for this research but as determinant characteristics of *my* study. In addition, as Freire (1998) stated, my duty and right as a white woman who does not accept the discrimination of undocumented Latino immigrants is to fight with them against racism and political discrimination. However, as a poststructuralist researcher, I believe that my study simply represents a partial interpretation of these young adults’ discourses and experiences since I construct with them a particular version of truth presented by my linguistic subjectivities (Britzman 1995; 2003). This study represents the voices of these youths that are shaped by their communities, their families, and the mainstream discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore, by interpreting the voices of the participants I interpret the voices of their communities that are imbedded in their speaking and represented through my own words and the words of academia.

### **Data Collection**

Through weekly participant observation (at work, home, and with friends), I gathered information about the participants’ ways of doing and being. Through the use of school assignments and Facebook I was able to gain access to obtain participants’ thoughts and discourses that may not be observable, voiced, or previously considered. However, the bulk of my data comes from life history interviews (Denzin, 1989), and in-depth conversational interviews (Patton, 1987) with the participants, their friends, and family members.

During the course of the study, I was interested in interacting informally with the participants and in developing a trusting relationship that moved beyond research to display care and empathy. Through my interpretation of the interviews, field notes, and other written materials, I sought to write a multivocal hermeneutic ethnography in which my voice is present but that focuses on the lives of *non*extraordinary undocumented young adults whose academic experiences and understanding of illegality are unique. In order to assure a collaborative work with the participants, I promoted dialogical interviews, and member-checking of my interpretations and understandings of their comments and experiences.

The following table illustrates the types of collection processes, the timeline, and the types of data collected in the study:

Table 1

*Data Collection and Timeline*

Collection Processes	Timeline	Data
Observations	Approx. two participants per week. Thus, each participant is observed every three weeks.	Field notes
	Settings:	Reflection notes from Informal conversations with:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Church (two participants)</li> <li>• Academic environments</li> <li>• Stores</li> <li>• Accompanying them to errands</li> <li>• Work ( 3 participants)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants</li> <li>• Family members</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Lawyers</li> <li>• Teacher</li> </ul>

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Interviews	With participants: Approx. once every other month (an interview every three observations) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes with family members and friends</li> </ul>	Tape-recorded dialogical data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal conversations</li> <li>• Semistructured conversations</li> </ul>
Journals and other type of texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal journals (when possible)</li> <li>• Academic assignments</li> <li>• Facebook (5 participants - daily)</li> </ul>	Text written by participants

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## Participants

The participants of this study are not random undocumented young adults, but most of them were young adults who had been already recruited for a previous research project and my pilot study.

Through a research grant that Dr. Kendall King obtained in 2010, I was able to observe and evaluate the work of Minnesota Immigration Freedom Network (MIFN)<sup>18</sup> in high school classrooms during the spring of 2010. Four of these current participants were recruited via a survey administrated by MIFN volunteers in high schools in Minnesota. The survey inquired students about their desire to attend college and the obstacles they faced as high school students and as potential college students. While the survey did not ask for their legal status explicitly, some of the students pointed out how their legal status was an obstacle to achieve academically. The other two participants were met in their work places during the summer/fall 2010 when I, assuming they were high school Latinos, started conversations about their educational experiences that informally led to talk

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<sup>18</sup> MIFN started as an organization in 2005 with the agenda to promote social change through youth leadership development, immigrant civic engagement, and media justice & media participation. They support and mobilize undocumented youth to pursue social and political change.  
<http://immigrantfreedomnetwork.wordpress.com/>

about immigration, their legal status, and finally, to voluntarily participate in my pilot study.

The legal status of the students came out quickly during the first interview or conversation, even though I never asked explicitly. Different characteristics may explain participants' comfort in revealing their legal status: (a) my Spanish-speaking background; (b) my international student status; (c) the participants' decision to voluntarily participate in an interview and follow-up study; and (d) my genuine interest in understanding their experiences as undocumented youths.

The background of the six participants at the time I met them in Spring 2010 is the following:

Table 2

*Participants*

Name	Region and Country of Origin	Year of U.S. Arrival (Age at Arrival)	Age at Start of Study	School Grade at Start of Study	Living Situation
Antonio	Mexico, Morelos	1993 (1 year of age)	18	12 <sup>th</sup>	With both parents, siblings and their partners, and their children. A total of 9.
Noberto	Guatemala, Quetzaltenango	2008 (16 years of age)	18	11 <sup>th</sup>	Initially with his uncle and brother. By 2011, alone, in a community house with other people.
Patricia	Mexico, Acapulco	2002 (12 years of age)	20	12 <sup>th</sup>	Initially with her two U.S.-born kids and boyfriend. By April 2011, at the house of her parents with her boyfriend and kids.

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Ricardo	Mexico, Morelos	2006 (16 years of age)	20	11 <sup>th</sup>	With his parents, his siblings with their partners, and one child. A total of 10.
Diego	Mexico, Morelos	2007 (16 years of age minus 5 days)	18	11 <sup>th</sup>	Initially with his mom and legal resident step dad; Fall 2011 plus his cousin; Spring 2012 plus an old woman—all 5 in one-bedroom apartment.
Sarita	Mexico, Morelos	2007 (18 years of age)	21	12 <sup>th</sup>	Spring 2010 with her mom and brother; Fall 2010 with a friend; Spring 2011 with friends and family; Fall 2011 with boyfriend and another family; Spring 2012 with her mother, her boyfriend, her brother, brother's wife, and a child.

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### **Data Analysis: Ethnographic and Discourse Analysis**

This study's analysis opens up a space for youths to express their perspectives. It also leaves room for adding my voice through interpreting their constructions of illegality and expressions of their agency.

Following a critical ethnographic approach, the preliminary phases of the analysis process involve “examining researcher bias and discovering researcher value orientations” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 300) prior to the data collection and after each interaction with study participants. Second, I use my *monological* data—field notes and reflections—from the observations and interviews developed during the course of the study to reflect on my opinions, biases, and findings. On the other hand, I analyze the *dialogical* data collected during the interviews. The data analysis process represents the movement from the raw monological and dialogical information collected to the creation

and interpretation of its meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interpretation of its meaning occurs not just once the entire data is collected but throughout the research, during field work, the writing of reflections, and the conversational interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Interpretations of the interviews are developed during and after the interview. Whenever possible during the interview, I “condense and interpret the meaning of what the interviewee describes and ‘sends’ the meaning back” during the interview process (Carspecken, 1996, p. 189). This process allows for *collaboration with* the participants to assure that my interpretations are accurate. However, since this study is ethnographic, the collaborative work with the participants occurs not just during the interviews but during observations and informal conversations, as well. Some member checking occurred after the dialogues were transcribed. I used text from my field work and transcribed dialogical data to assess content and meaning to the dialogues and observations (Carspecken, 1996).

The process of coding of the data through continuous reviews seeks to find different meanings of illegality and educational experiences. However, this coding was contextualized and not unlinked from those experiences and events that led them understand illegality and education in more nuanced forms. As an interpreter I acknowledge that there is no neutral use of language but purposive, and affected by the interaction with the interviewer. Further, the co-constructed dialogues represent the voices of our communities, the academia, and the media (Bakhtin, 1981). For this, it is important to assess and analyze the influences of mainstream ideologies and the media in our discourses (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 1999).

A closer analysis of those excerpts in which the meaning of illegality and educational (dis)engagement were clearly or implicitly formulated was done through discourse analysis (Gee, 1999; 2004). As this critical ethnography is not apolitical, discourse analysis is either neutral or apolitical. As Gee (2004) argues “all language-in-interaction is inherently political and, thus, that all discourse analysis, if it is to be true to its subject matter (i.e., language-in-use) and in that sense “scientific”, must be critical discourse analysis (p. 25). As I developed discourse analysis on my *monological* and *dialogical* data I followed the following premises: “*how* people say (or write) things (i.e., form) helps constitute *what* they are doing (i.e., function); in turn, *what* they are saying (or writing) helps constitute *who* they are at a given time and place within a given set of social practices (i.e., their socially-situated identities); and, finally, *who* they are being at a given time and place within a given set of social practices produces and reproduces, moment by moment, our social, political, cultural, and institutional worlds” (Gee, 2004, p. 47).

Discourse analysis brings an extra layer of comprehension on how the meaning of illegality and education is produced through talk-in-interaction (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990), and in relation to the situated meaning (contextualized discourse; Gee, 1999; 2004). In this study, I use discourse analysis with the interactional data in which I (the researcher), or other participants are involved in the conversations. In this way, I bring a more nuanced understanding on how meaning appears in interaction, through the wording of questions and the interpretation of these questions, revealing ideologies and assumptions for part of all those involved in conversation, and acknowledging people’s identi-

ties, their agency, beliefs, and the influence of historical and institutional factors (Gee, 1999; 2004).

The types of data I used to respond to each one of my research questions are quite similar. For my first two questions,

1. How do undocumented young adults experience the U.S. educational system and make sense of the role that education plays in their lives? How do youths' school/work experiences influence their understanding of education?
2. How do undocumented young adults understand the role that (il)legality plays in their lives? How do the meanings of illegality evolve in relation to their lived experiences during the course of two years?

I used the notes from observations in academic settings, at church, with family and friends, and at work to reflect on how their experiences influence their attitude towards academics and the meaning they give to (il)legality. I read their assignments as well as their Facebook entries, and listened to informal conversations that the participants and I had with their friends, and their family on school, work, personal interests, and their future. I used interviews to purposively formulate questions about their educational and occupational experiences and goals, and the impact of legal status in these experiences and ambitions.

During our conversations, it was essential to talk about their experiences at school, at work, and with the family to fully understand how their academic (dis)engagement, and the role of (il)legality in their lives was shaped by all their commu-

nity of practices. Therefore, gathering data longitudinally and regularly made possible to connect new experiences with renew interests, changing academic identities and understandings of legality. In relation to legality, I sought to implicitly and explicitly discover how illegality is not a fixed concept but a conception whose meaning is ongoing and evolving in relationship to their experiences, their discourse communities, and the ideological and political context they live in.

Since it is often difficult to remain self-aware on how the meaning of illegality changes in one's life, it is through requesting stories about school, police encounters, work, and the media that new positionings and views on the meaning of illegality are raised. Therefore, rather than asking specific questions on how the meaning of illegality was changing, I asked about events that were affecting their lives, and consequently, interrogated how such events affected their sense of illegality. With the use of storytelling and through discourse analysis more nuanced understandings on illegality can be raised.

For the last question,

3. How do they show agency in their discourse and in constructing opportunities within the limited opportunity window given by their legal status?

While seeking to answer my first two research questions on educational experiences and the meaning of illegality, their agentic selves rose in their discourses and practices. By writing on their educational experiences and sense-making on (il)legality, I explicitly also analyzed how the participants performed different academic identities, developed strategies to overcome the limitations of their legal status, and enacted a low profile to remain in the United States. These strategies showed agency in themselves, as it

did their adaptation to the U.S. society. However, to closely analyze their individual sense of agency, I used discourse analysis to disclose how they positioned themselves in discourse in relationship to the macro structures of the society and others (Bamberg et al., 2011) and reveal implicit and explicit strategies in reformulating their identities, and in making sense of who they are in relationship to the world.

### **Personal Nature of this Critical Ethnographic Study**

This critical ethnographic study deals with the limitations of *othering* and writing a partial, non-neutral truth. It deals with developing a critical exploratory study that aims to raise an in-depth understanding of ‘Others’ rather than aiming to free individuals from sources of domination. Further, doing ethnography requires developing sustainable relationships that progress in time and in multiple spaces. And while this became a strength in this study, it could have easily become a weakness if the participants had decided to step out of the study, move out of town, or if they had faced deportation.

As an ethnographer, I deal with the pressure of writing a rigorous qualitative academic study while at the same time writing about an intensely personal experience. While the relationships with the participants made this study possible, the academic writing minimizes the emotional ties developed with the youths. The participants and I spent large amounts of time together; and during most of our interactions, our close relationship made my role as a researcher secondary. Obviously, my senses, intuition, and emotions were the main senses present in my observations and interactions with the participants, and are also part of my reflectivity, interpretation, and writing. Revealing that I write

through my senses and emotions shows lack of objectivity, and ‘damages’ the status given to academic writing that is founded on ‘scientific’ facts and truths; or perhaps, it helps to ‘damage’ the authoritarian status of academic writing. However, this subjective writing is neither based on sloppiness or unprofessionalism, but the result of in-depth reflection, hours of interviews, more than a two-year-long relationship with six young adults, their families, and friends to reflect on their perspective of illegality. It is the writing of years of intense work with multiple methods to give a multivocal and rich understanding of the experiences of undocumented young adults. It is through ethnographic work that I am able to explore, in-depth and analytically, the evolving experiences of undocumented young adults- a nuanced, and rich analysis that statistics or one-time interviews alone cannot reach.

## Chapter 4

### Retrato de los Jóvenes sin Documentos—Portraits of the Undocumented Young Adults

In this chapter, I introduce the six participants. I aim to present and contextualize each participant in order to understand the different migratory experiences and life paths that each one of them undertook. I present them one by one and reveal aspects of their personalities and of their life trajectories that happened before and during the time this study was developed. This allows us to understand the participants in a deeper, more nuanced manner. This chapter also contextualizes the subsequent chapters that examine the discourses and practices of the participants. I conclude the chapter with a table that visually contextualizes and compares the six participants.

This chapter illustrates how, based on the participants' academic, familiar, and occupational experiences, they developed highly diverse life trajectories; trajectories that were at the same time clearly connected to their legal condition. Gonzales (2011) stated how the legal condition of young adults ages 18 to 24 made them experience life similarly. However, the diverse experiences of the participants question such homogenizing approach and foster the plural experiences of youths. Further, as it will be evident below, their lives highly evolved during the two-year study, emphasizing how coming-of-age is a period of transition and change (Arnett, 2000; Rumbaut, 2005). This chapter also reveals how their academic identities are not static but mobile and how work is an essential piece in the life of all the young adult participants.

In addition, the migration stories of the participants reveal the lack of choice that the 1.5- and first-generation youths had on their migration experiences. Research and mainstream discourses that claim the need of a path to citizenship for 1.5 undocumented youths highlight the lack of decision that 1.5-generation youths had in their migration stories (e.g., Gonzales, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Perez, 2009). While most research and mainstream discourses dismiss the reality that many first-generation immigrants are also in schools, these first-generation participants clearly stated how their decision to migrate was not based on their own choice but on their families' circumstances. In other words, the migration stories of first-generation youths were not distant from the stories of the 1.5-generation youths.

**Sarita—Born on February 22, 1989**

“Soy muy floja...me falta fuerza de voluntad”

‘I am lazy...I lack willpower’ (Sarita, September, 2010)

Sarita is an out-going and thoughtful young woman. We met in June 2010 when she was 21. She is one of the most reflective and honest young adults I have spent time with during these two years. She loves reading, writing poetry, drawing, watching Korean movies, and spending time with male and female friends with whom she loves hugging and kissing. Friends of Sarita think of her as a woman who *habla bien inglés* (‘speaks English well’) or as *una testaruda que no quiere ir a la escuela pero su primer año sacaba puro As* (‘a stubborn person who did not want to go to school but during her first year she got only As’; Sarita’s friends, November, 2010). While Sarita is one of the most talented women I have met in art, language learning, and writing, she does not believe in

her skills and her aptitudes to move beyond her ‘undocumented’ lifestyle because she believes that *soy muy floja...me falta fuerza de voluntad* (‘I am lazy... I lack willpower’; Sarita, April, 2012). While she blames herself for her inaptitude in school, at the same time, she frames her everyday life as her *destino* (‘fate’).

Sarita was born in Morelos, Mexico, in February of 1989 in a home where her aunts, grandmother, and mom worked selling homemade tortillas in the street. Her dad had left the family when she was a little girl, and then, one night when Sarita was 14, her mother went to her bed and *me dijo ya me voy, y...me dio un beso a la mejilla y se fue* (‘she told me I am leaving, and... she kissed me on my cheek and she left’; Sarita, September, 2010). Sarita migrated to the U.S. at age 18, after finishing a program in *corte y confección* (‘tailoring and design’; Sarita, November, 2010). Sarita decided to reunite her family (her mother and brother) in Minnesota, knowing that *si mi mamá se hubiera quedado con nosotros yo jamás hubiera venido aquí [en los EEUU.]* (‘if my mom had stayed with us I would have never come here [in the U.S.]’; Sarita, September, 2010). The fact that she arrived at age 18, explains her position in reference to the ‘Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals’ (DACA) policy. Sarita was aware that her age of arrival was an issue. When I asked her if the policy could benefit someone in her family, she stated *no, no creo* (‘no, I don’t think so’; Sarita, July, 2012).

Once she arrived in Minnesota, she enrolled in school because she wanted to learn English and heard of the opportunities available with a high school diploma. When I met her in 2010, she was 21 and struggling to stay in school. She would state that *me está costando levantarme ay! Ayer no fui porque mi cabeza me dolía* (‘it is getting hard for me

to get up ay!. Yesterday I didn't go because my head was hurting'; Sarita, June, 2010). Work was a necessity; paying for rent and her basic needs was essential, especially when she moved out from her mother's and brother's place in the fall of 2010. That fall she never went back to high school. After trying high school a couple of times without success and working in two jobs with abusive physical conditions, she thought about enrolling to a General Educational Development (GED) program: *Yo dije quiero volver a la escuela porque me quedé mal, me lastimaba mucho, en mis manos me hacía muchos moratones* ('I said I want to go back to school because I ended up in bad condition, I hurt my hands a lot, I made myself a lot of bruises'; Sarita, September, 2011). Once she finally went to GED classes, boredom, loneliness, and disinterest embraced her again. She quit after two weeks of classes.

While, based on Arnett (2000) and Rumbaut and Komaie (2010), her transition to adulthood had been mostly completed: by age 21 she moved out from her mother's place and became self-sufficient, she did not feel romantically fulfilled. She ended up living with her on and off (undocumented) boyfriend once her living situation with friends became complicated. In April 2012, just after a week of telling me she had to sell her necklace and ring to pay for the bus and food, and considered moving out of her boyfriend's place she announced in Facebook: *voy a ser mama!!!! n\_n... hohohohoo* ('I am going to be a mom!!!! n\_n..hohohoo'). In December 2012 Sarita had a baby girl.

### **Ricardo—Born on September 10, 1990**

“Uno de mis sueños es terminar la prepa o la high school”

‘One of my dreams is to finish la prepa [Mexican high school] or high school’  
(Ricardo, June, 2010)

Ricardo is a very sensitive and caring man. When I met him in 2010, he was a 20-year-old high school student who expressed being usually tired, stressed, and depressed. That was usually due to the physical work that his jobs required. As he explained, *[mi trabajo] es muy estresante porque siempre ando con sueño o ando con dolor de espalda...tienes que hacer 100 camisas por hora, tienes que ‘apúrate, apúrate’, y es lo que más te estresa porque no te vayan a regañar* (‘[my work] is very stressful because I am always sleepy or with back pain... you have to do 100 shirts per hour, you have to ‘hurry up, hurry up’, and this is what stresses you the most because you don’t want to be scolded’; Ricardo, June, 2010). At that time, the only moments he would talk positively about his life was when mentioning his family and his friends. School, as a part-time student and full-time worker, was difficult, but he found one school that allowed him to be part time and attempted to accomplish *uno de mis sueños es terminar la prepa o la high school* (‘one of my dreams is to finish prepa [Mexican high school] or high school’; Ricardo, June, 2010).

During the first year of research, he tried to find a job that would allow him to study full time and graduate before he was too old. As he noted, *cuando termine la high school ya tendré 22* (‘when I finish high school I will be already 22 years old’; Ricardo, August, 2010). However, he ended up moving from job to job, escaping from abusive environments and work schedules that were taking away his attention from school. During the whole year 2010 and half of the year 2011 he did not find a job compatible with school. He would often express his struggle to be present and awake in school due to his

work schedules: *a veces me da mucho sueño en la escuela...Me canso semasiado y que no aguanto y que quisiera dejar de estudiar* ('at times I get very sleepy in school.... I get too tired and I cannot do this anymore and I would like to stop studying'; Ricardo, November, 2010). Finally, after months of working full time at night and being a full-time student, he decided not to go to school anymore. As he told me, *ya no fui [a la escuela], dejé de ir* ('I did not go anymore [to school], I stopped going'; Ricardo, May, 2011).

Ricardo had immigrated to the U.S. at age 16 without any interest in leaving Mexico. He came with his epileptic mother to reunite his father and siblings. *Yo no me quise venir pero me dije me voy a sacrificar por mi mamá para que la puedan curar* ('I did not want to come but I told myself, I am going to sacrifice for my mom so they can heal her'; Ricardo, June, 2010). When he arrived in the U.S. he was expected to provide economically for the family, therefore, rather than going to school he started working. In fact, as he explained, "*empecé a trabajar el segundo día*" (I started working from day 2; Ricardo, June, 2010) packing and carrying cages of turkeys for 10 to 12 hours per day to support his father's income.

During these two years, he was thinking of marrying and having a family with his girlfriend, not without the drama of having been unfaithful with a legal resident during the year 2012. At the same time, he bought an expensive but 'good' social security number (thus putting himself at risk for potentially accused of identity theft) and found a job as a baker where he finally felt recognized by his supervisor, liked by his co-workers, and knowledgeable. Once, President Obama's DACA policy came out in June 2012, Ricardo started to dream about getting his papers: *increíble! Necesito terminar la high school o*

*agarrar el GED! Qué chido!* (‘incredible! I need to finish high school or get the GED! How amazing!’; Ricardo, June, 2012). However, he arrived in the U.S. at age 16 few months later than required. After discussing the requirements, he still stated, *pero yo tenía 16 pues yo creo que todavía califico no?* (‘but I was 16 years so I think I still qualify, don’t I?’; Ricardo, June, 2012). No, he does not.

### **Noberto—Born on March 18, 1992**

“Excelente; todo me va excelente”

‘Excellent; for me everything is going excellent’ (Noberto, June, 2010).

Noberto is a driven and ambitious young man. During these two years of the study, we had a very tense relationship. We both put limits in our relationship and, differently from the other five participants, we did not become close friends. Since he was involved in an evangelical institution, and an MLM<sup>19</sup> company, relating to him meant often being the target of evangelical discourses, and of his MLM products. While I participated in his church and business events, I avoid getting too involved. From Day one, I was surprised of his *excelente; todo me va excelente* (‘excellent; for me everything is going excellent’) discourse (Noberto, June, 2010). That is how he would describe every aspect of his life—a communication style that I later discovered was learned from the leaders of his MLM business.

When I met Noberto, he was an 18-year-old Indigenous Guatemalan who was a high school student, a fast food restaurant employee, and a member of an MLM compa-

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<sup>19</sup> Multilevel marketing (MLM) is a general term for businesses in which the salesperson is compensated not only for product sales, but also for recruitment of additional salespeople who work ‘down-line’ as product distributors and recruiters (Koehn, 2001).

ny. He was optimistic and expected to accomplish the American dream with flying colors. Noberto, a speaker of Mam (a Mayan language) came to the U.S. at age 16 leaving his widowed mother and younger siblings behind. In the U.S., he was reunited with his older brother and uncle. Following his brother's advice, he started to work with him at a fast food restaurant and attend high school. After about a year, he was introduced to Amway's Latino branch MDE Latino 'by an Ecuadorian undocumented friend who actually backed off [from Amway]'. The message he received from MDE Latino leaders was that *puedo ser millonario...[y] cuando empiezo a ganar más de seis mil dólares en adelante, el gobierno me va a buscar para que me de una visa empresarial* ('I can be a millionaire...[and] when I start earning more than \$6,000 [every month], the government will look for me and to give me a business visa'; Noberto, June, 2010).

Noberto left high school in late 2010, at age 18, to dedicate his time to business, church, and hourly fast food work. In Fall 2011, with encouragement from the church youth pastor, he enrolled in a GED (General Educational Development) program. Since then, he has attended GED classes every weekday morning and participated in bible classes twice weekly, while working 20 hours per week at the fast food restaurant and attending weekly MLM meetings. After more than three years with MDE Latino, Noberto still struggles economically. Nevertheless, he maintains his hopes of becoming wealthy, gaining a U.S. visa, attending a Christian college, and becoming a Christian leader. For the first time, after President Obama announced the 'Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals' (DACA) policy, he became openly interested in his possibilities to obtain a work permit. After talking to the church pastors, he knew that *todavía no [califico] porque voy a*

*cumplir cinco años el diez de abril del 2013* ('I yet do not qualify because it will be five years on April 10 of 2013 [of my arrival in the U.S.]'; Noberto, July, 2012). Further, he arrived in the U.S. three weeks after his 16th birthday. Nevertheless, he still had hope that he would be able to qualify for the work permit.

### **Patricia—Born on May 27, 1990**

'Working two of my jobs = \$\$\$ = ;-)' (Patricia's Facebook, March, 2012)

Patricia is a self-driven, hard-working woman who has energy to work all seven days a week without pause. During the two years I have known her, I saw her graduate from high school, babysit her and her sister's children while thinking of college, and during the last year of the study, begin to center her entire life on work. When I met Patricia, she was a 20-year-old mother of two kids who was one month away from high school graduation. She attended a high school for teen moms and her children became her everyday motivation. She would say how she wanted that *él [mi niño] sepa que yo seguí en la escuela, que tengo mi high school diploma y va a estar orgulloso* ('him [my son] to know that I continued in school, that I have a high school diploma and he will be proud'; Patricia, June, 2010).

Patricia came to the U.S. from Acapulco, Mexico at age 12 with her mother to be reunited with her father. As Patricia explained, around the age of 16, she began *a ver la realidad de un ilegal ... cuando yo quise trabajar, dijo mi papá, los [falsos] papeles cuestan tanto dinero... y yo lo pagué* ('to see the reality of an illegal individual...when I wanted to work my dad told me that the [fake] papers cost money ... and I paid them';

Patricia, June, 2010). With these documents, Patricia was able to work in a fast food restaurant, and around that time, she became pregnant. After the birth of her child, Patricia, her boyfriend, and her baby moved to Texas to search for better job opportunities, but were deported after a routine traffic stop. Patricia soon returned to the U.S., and in Minnesota she gave birth to her second child and enrolled in a high school for teen mothers. She successfully attended high school while working part time at a restaurant and caring for her two children, and graduated in June 2010 with no specific plans.

Roughly a year after graduation, a cousin recruited her to Herbalife by inviting herself to Patricia's house to prepare *licuaditos* ('smoothies'), a common beverage in Mexico. Patricia reports that she was initially hesitant about these costly drinks, but her father started to use them and a month later the entire family believed that Herbalife was effective.

In July 2011, Patricia and her father enrolled as Herbalife supervisors, and in six months they invested more than \$4,000 while working daily at the Herbalife club. By November 2011, Patricia also started working at a factory part time *para más producto [Herbalife], comprar inversión* ('to buy more [Herbalife] product, to buy investments'). However, after seven months with Herbalife, she started to focus on paying the bills and obtaining physical money rather than on investing in Herbalife.

By Spring 2012 her involvement to Herbalife was minimal and left her father to be the main person responsible for the MLM business. At that point, *yo sabia que haciendo mi trabajo [otros diferentes de Herbalife] yo iba agarrar mi cheque seguro y en herbalife puede que no* ('I knew that doing my work [other than Herbalife] I was going to

get my check for sure and in Herbalife it could be that I don't'; Patricia, March, 2012). She was committed to be an employee and make lots of “\$\$\$” as she would write in her Facebook account. She worked in a fast food restaurant, in two restaurants as a dishwasher, and on the weekends she offered to babysit the children of friends from 9 p.m. to midnight. Her need to pay debts, have money for her children, and buy a house in Mexico became her main goals. After President Obama announced the DACA policy, Patricia was excited to apply to obtain her work permit. After speaking with a lawyer, she discovered that being deported in 2008 could negatively affect the possibilities to qualify for the policy. In October 2012, her lawyer told her she would not be able to qualify for the DACA policy because she has been in the U.S. for less than 5 years since her deportation. She got frustrated with herself for having gone to Texas in 2008, a state that made her more vulnerable for deportation.

### **Diego—Born on June 16, 1991**

“Los viernes trabajo haciendo la limpieza; entre semana llego a casa a comer, bañarme, y hacer tarea; le estoy echando ganas”

‘On Fridays I work doing cleaning, during the weekdays I get home and eat, take a shower, I do homework; I am putting forth much effort.’ (Diego, October, 2010)

Diego is a very quiet and shy young adult. During our conversations and interviews he let his mom talk for him most of the time. When I met Diego he was 18 years old and in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. During the two years I have been around him and his family, Diego did not want to have friends or a romantic relationship. His life had been totally focused

on graduating from high school, being with his mother and stepfather, and making money to support the family.

Diego came to the U.S. in June 2007, just five days before he turned 16. In fact, he had told me he had arrived at age 16 but after the ‘Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals’ policy was announced he informed me of the exact date. That meant that by June 2012, he had been in the U.S. for exactly five years. However, by the beginning of 2013 he had not yet been able to prove his arrival before age 16.

His mother had left for the U.S. due to domestic abuse when Diego was 13, and he stayed in Mexico with his grandfather. Once his grandfather also immigrated, he told me that *quise cruzar [porque] yo tenía toda mi familia aquí yo estaba allá solo vivía solo* (‘I wanted to cross [because] I had all my family here and I was there alone I lived alone’; Diego, May, 2010). He needed three attempts to cross the border; he was detained and deported twice, and finally he crossed the border and reunited his mother. Once in Minneapolis, he moved in the apartment where his mother, his *abuelito* (‘grandpa’), and his stepfather lived and went to school with the economic support of his parents. He worked only during school breaks, and when he graduated in June 2011, he was thrilled to start working full-time with a high school diploma. After applying to different jobs advertised in newspapers, and to nationally known companies such as Target and Best Buy, he realized he had to continue working with his parents at a *temporaria* (‘temporary work organization’) for minimum wage (\$7.25). When he graduated he did not think of going back to school, he stated how *quiero trabajar y ganar dinero. Me gustaría estudiar más pero no puedo* (‘I want to work and earn money. I would like to study but I cannot’; Die-

go, June, 2011). This was his mindset until he heard about the possibility to obtain a work permit (DACA policy). While the new policy has made him excited about going back to school, he has few chances to prove he qualifies for the Deferred Action policy. Further, the instability of his current low-wage job and his support at the household has made it impossible for him to save money, to study, to pay the policy fees, or to pay for a lawyer.

### **Antonio—Born on August 29, 1992**

“It pisses me off when gente like this [with documents] que tiene la oportunidad de estudiar don't take it, and gente que quiere la oportunidad no puede”

‘It pisses me off when people like this [with documents] who have the opportunity to study don't take it, and people who want the opportunity cannot have it.’ (Antonio, January, 2011)

Antonio is confident, quiet, smart, and conscientious about his undocumented life. When we met in 2010 he was 18 and a senior in high school. He was very aware of the imposed restrictions of his unauthorized status and the potential paths to citizenship. In 2010, his older brother became a citizen, and Antonio started to internalize the possibility to change his legal status. He understood the importance of education, of saving money, and avoiding driving, drinking, or damaging his ‘good moral character’. As he told me, ‘I don't talk too much to kids who are affiliated to *gangas* I try not to’ (Antonio, November, 2010).

Antonio came to the U.S. with his parents and three older siblings when he was a one-year-old. His parents came from a small town in Morelos, Mexico and were hoping to improve the lives of their children. Antonio was aware of his undocumented status since an early age. *Yo pienso que siempre lo sabía, por la familia yo sabía que había*

*nacido en México* ('I think that I always knew, for the family I knew that I had been born in Mexico'; Antonio, October, 2010). However, 'when I was in 10th grade and a lot of students started to apply for the car license' he realized in which ways his legal status was limiting (Antonio, October, 2010). This affected his interest in school, particularly in middle and high school where he mostly had a 2.0 GPA and lacked a positive outlook towards education. 'I never had interest in school anyway...in my first year [of high school] I had a 2.3 or so, the second year it went down to 2.0, and the third year I dropped to a 1.8' (Antonio, April, 2011). However, his recognition to his parents' hard work and the influence of his friend Víctor in school made a difference in his last year of high school. That year 'I had As' (Antonio, April, 2011).

Antonio applied for legalizing his immigration status in the fall of 2010, a process that can take up to 16 years. While hoping for a positive outcome, his friends and, indirectly, I motivated him to enroll part time in a community college while also working part time in a coffee shop. In Fall 2011, through his father who had been mugged at work and helped the police in the case, Antonio was eligible to apply for a U-Visa, a process that takes about one year to obtain a work permit and three years to develop a potential path towards citizenship (if there are no complications). While waiting for the work visa and working and studying part time, Antonio started believing in his academic abilities. By the summer 2012, he decided to aim for a four-year degree rather than a two-year degree.

Antonio also qualified for the Obama DACA policy. However, he had no interest in applying for it since the U-Visa offered him not just a work permit but also a path towards citizenship. In November 2012 he obtained the U-Visa. Happily, he informed his

boss that perhaps his social security number had been stolen since he had received an official letter saying that he needed a new social security number.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter gives a detailed chronological description of each participant. The descriptions reveal differences and commonalities in the youths' migratory, occupational, and educational experiences. As the individual trajectories illustrate, work conditions were not optimum for the participants. All of them worked in low-wage jobs, and two of them became involved in multi-level marketing businesses. From an educational perspective, this chapter shows how three of the participants graduated from high school and the other three became high school dropouts (the three dropouts were all first-generation young adults). In the next chapters, I analyze how the age of arrival highly determines their possibilities to graduate from high school, as it also determines the meaning given to a high school diploma. In addition, the following three chapters will draw a clear connection between work, school experiences, and the evolving meaning of (il)legality. Below, Table 3 summaries and contrasts the main characteristics of each participant.

Table 3

*Retrato de los Jóvenes sin Documentos*

Name	Region and Country of Origin	Year of U.S. Arrival (Age at Arrival)	Age at Start of Study	School Grade at Start of Study	Living Situation	Major Development/Change over the 2-year Period
Antonio	Mexico, Morelos	1993 (1 year of age)	18	12 <sup>th</sup>	With both parents, siblings and their partners, and their children. A total of 9.	From being uninterested in school to being interested to pursue a 4 year college degree. From being undocumented to being documented: on November 2012 he obtained a work visa through a U-Visa.
Noberto	Guatemala, Quetzaltenango	2008 (16 years of age)	18	11 <sup>th</sup>	Initially with his uncle and brother. By 2011, alone, in a community house with other people.	From being a high school student interested in the AMWAY Business to becoming a dropout highly involved in AMWAY and a devoted evangelist
Patricia	Mexico, Acapulco	2002 (12 years of age)	20	12 <sup>th</sup>	Initially with her two U.S.-born kids and boyfriend. By April 2011, at the house of her parents with her boyfriend and kids.	From graduating from high school to getting involved in Herbalife business, to later investing her time in four jobs.

Name	Region and Country of Origin	Year of U.S. Arrival (Age at Arrival)	Age at Start of Study	School Grade at Start of Study	Living Situation	Major Development/Change over the 2-year Period
Ricardo	Mexico, Morelos	2006 (16 years of age)	20	11 <sup>th</sup>	With his parents, his siblings with their partners, and one child. A total of 10.	From being a high schooler, to being a dropout. From having a fake social security number to buying a 'good' number. And from being sad and unhappy with work and school to being satisfied with his work life.

*(cont.)*

Table 3, continued.

Diego	Mexico, Morelos	2007 (16 years of age minus 5 days)	18	11 <sup>th</sup>	Initially with his mom and legal resident step dad; Fall 2011 plus his cousin; Spring 2012 plus an old woman—all five in one-bedroom apartment.	From being a high schooler to graduate from high school. From having high expectations to find well-paid jobs with a diploma to resigning himself to the same jobs he had before getting the diploma.
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Name	Region and Country of Origin	Year of U.S. Arrival (Age at Arrival)	Age at Start of Study	School Grade at Start of Study	Living Situation	Major Development/Change over the 2-year Period
Sarita	Mexico, Morelos	2007 (18 years of age)	21	12th	Spring 2010 with her mom and brother; Fall 2010 with a friend; Spring 2011 with friends and family; Fall 2011 with boyfriend and another family; Spring 2012 with her mom, her boyfriend, her brother, brother's wife, and a child.	From being a high schooler to become a dropout. And from being single and mostly an inexperienced woman with sex and love to having a boyfriend and a baby in December 2012

## Chapter 5

### Echándole Ganas en la Escuela—Putting a Lot of Effort into Schooling

Contrary to many studies that overlook or dismiss the role of legality on youths' academic experiences (e.g., Ogbu, 1987; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1992; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Zhou, 1997) and unlike studies that simply focus on the impact of legal status in educational achievement (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2008; 2011; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Perez, 2009), this chapter reveals how *not* just legal status is key in explaining youths' educational experiences and outcomes but also (a) age of arrival in the U.S. and (b) personal and family expectations towards schooling and towards being self-sufficient. In fact, as we will see throughout this chapter, age of arrival largely influences youths' expectations toward self-sufficiency. Thus, while this study finds that while the conditions of the young adults' migrations and family expectations are affected by the reality of their legal status, their age of arrival in the U.S. mostly determines their chances to graduate from high school.

More concretely, this chapter explains how *age of arrival* influences the cultural and linguistic capital that these youths have at high school, and how it simultaneously shapes one's orientation towards education. For the 1.5-generation youths, attending high school means to continue their school attendance, moving from middle school to high school. However, for the first-generation youths, in this case those participants who arrived at age 16 or later, enrolling to high school meant to attend a U.S. school for the first

time, and to assess the role that education could play in their lives as late-teenage immigrants. Enrolling for the first time to an unknown U.S. school at an age in which they are able to ‘legally’ work and financially support themselves and their families means losing money (hours of potential work) and dealing with the cultural and linguistic limitations of being in a foreign educational system.

Further, this chapter illustrates how *age of arrival* is key in explaining why some young adults give an *instrumental* or a *symbolic* value to education. The undocumented first-generation young adult participants (those who arrived after age 14) believed in the *instrumental* role of education—that with a high school diploma they could have better occupational opportunities (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). However, the 1.5-generation young adults did not provide an instrumental value to education and had little motivation to be in school until they were able to give to school a positive *symbolic* value (in other words, prestige and status; King [1971/2007]). Once the 1.5-generation participants were able to see education from a prestigious standpoint, they were able to develop a new positioning towards schooling, a positioning that shifted from academic disengagement to academic engagement. This illustrated the fluidity of their academic identities and also revealed their agency—or their capacity to modify their behavior and attitude under particular circumstances.

This chapter is divided in different sections to explore the educational experiences of two main groups and two main time periods. The two main groups are: a) the first-generation young adults and b) the 1.5-generation young adults. Also, the two main time periods are: a) the high school period and b) after the high school period. First, this chap-

ter explores the high school experiences of Antonio and Patricia, the 1.5-generation young adults. It illustrates how their high school experiences needed a critical event or “*turning point*” that led to new identity enactments (Reissman, 2001; Rumbaut, 2005) and positioning towards school. Second, the chapter moves to illustrate the high school experiences of the four motivated first-generation young adults. In this section we see how their academic and professional experiences led them to drop out from school—except for Diego. Third, we explore the educational and professional experiences of these young adults after graduating from high school or after dropping out to see how their varying interest in higher education or in a General Education Diploma (GED) program is highly influenced by their legal status and their professional experiences.

It essential to notice how this chapter brings a nuanced and in-depth analysis of the unique educational experiences of each participant while also revealing the pervasiveness of their legal status that is ubiquitous to their everyday experiences- regardless of their legal awareness. Further, it reveals how the transition to adulthood is a period of discovery, of making and remaking of the self, and of learning the full spectrum of their condition as (permanent or temporary) unauthorized young adult immigrants as they work, search for work, and study.

### **Generation 1.5—Antonio’s and Patricia’s School Experiences**

In this section I explore Antonio’s and Patricia’s school experiences and the turning points in their academic trajectories. Antonio and Patricia are part of the 1.5-

generation youths because they arrived in the United States before they turned 14. Antonio arrived at age 1 and Patricia at age 12.

Antonio and Patricia were both uninterested in school for most of their educational experiences and had low grades in middle and high school. Antonio started school in kindergarten and Patricia in 7th grade. Both told me that in middle school they were enrolled in low performing schools in which most students came from low social economic backgrounds. Both Antonio and Patricia also indicated that the classrooms of their middle schools had several disruptive students that negatively affected the learning environment. Patricia stated that in school she was *peleona y tonta* ('aggressive and foolish') and was involved in fights with female classmates and her boyfriend during most of her school years (Patricia, May, 2010). To the contrary, Antonio avoided disruptive students and peers involved in gangs because *si me meto en eso va a ser a waste of time. Mis padres se están esforzando a que tenga una mejor vida como puedo hacer esto; it makes no sense* ('if I get into this it's going to be a waste of time. My parents are making an effort to give me a better life. How can I do that; it makes no sense'; Antonio, June, 2010). Antonio would regularly mention this stated discourse to explain how his parents had sacrificed for their children by migrating to the United States and how he felt a sense of responsibility to them for that. Patricia would mention the migration stories of her parents, but those stories did not make her keep distance from disruptive students, or as we will see below, did not motivate her to achieve academically.

Antonio and Patricia's low interest in school was reflected in their grades. In high school Patricia changed schools. *[M]e salí de la escuela porque tuve problemas con otras*

*muchachas* (I left school because I had problems with other girls'; Patricia, May, 2010). While they were both aware of being undocumented from an early age, the meaning of illegality took a turn at age 16, when they both realized they could not legally drive or work. Patricia was able to keep a positive outlook on life through finding a job (illegally), gaining money, and partying. Antonio was able to find work too, but his employment did not help him to disregard the negative consequences that were tied to his undocumented status. While his parents insisted that he had to 'better his life' through school he told me, 'I didn't see it that way, *no tengo documentos* ('I don't have documents'), I cannot go to college' (Antonio, October, 2010). In high school, his GPA decreased gradually and reached a 1.80 GPA by the end of his junior year. At that time, he highly respected his parents but did not believe that education would actually better his life. He had adopted a community discourse that pointed out how higher education was impossible for him ('I don't have documents, I cannot go to college')<sup>20</sup>. While in Minnesota undocumented immigrants can enroll in higher education institutions, the lack of federal and state financial aid makes higher education a privilege that very few undocumented youths can afford. So, while Antonio's legal status did not prevent him from going to college, the message he received from the community was that higher education was not for him. In fact, the parents of the participants had no clear understanding of college's requirements, and as the mother of one participant told me, she had heard from a Latina woman that undocumented youths were not allowed to go to college.

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<sup>20</sup> In Minnesota, undocumented youth are allowed to go to College and the 'flat tuition' policy allowed them to get in-state tuition to 28 MN colleges, but not the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. By May 2013, Minnesota passed the Dream Act, allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition to all MN Colleges and Universities while also receiving state financial aid (Navigate MN, 2013).

At that stage, Antonio was academically disengaged, and in order to graduate from high school he needed to change his attitude towards education. Patricia, who was mostly involved in fights, also needed a turning point in her academic life to graduate from high school. In Excerpts 1 and 2 we explore the fluidity of the academic identities of Antonio and Patricia. Antonio’s academic life turned around during his senior year and for Patricia it was during her junior year.

*Excerpt 1: Antonio, October, 2010<sup>21</sup>.*

Original	
01	Antonio ... before I was more kind of lazy, no me importaba (la escuela). no tenía (.)
02	Gemma No tenías interés
03	Antonio No. Por lo mismo que, it does not matter whether I graduate or not.
04	Gemma Pero cambiaste de idea
05	Antonio I guess, well yeah, este, more than anything friends me decían you have to graduate you
06	have to graduate—
07	Gemma Victor?
08	Antonio Yes, and other friends would tell me the same thing. And I started to do the work and
09	then I guess me puse a pensar y digo I guess I need to graduate and get my diploma.
10	And I started to work.
English Translation	
01	Antonio ... before I was more kind of lazy, (school) didn’t matter to me. I had no (.)
02	Gemma You had no interest
03	Antonio No. for the same that, it does not matter whether I graduate or not.
04	Gemma But you changed your mind
05	Antonio I guess, well yeah, well, more than anything friends told me you have to graduate you
06	have to graduate—
07	Gemma Victor?
08	Antonio Yes, and other friends would tell me the same thing. And I started to do the work and
09	then I guess I started to think and said I guess I need to graduate and get my diploma.
10	And I started to work.

Antonio positions himself close to his friends who seem to be the *turning point* in his change of attitude towards school. Discursively, Antonio was not able to clearly make sense of his change in attitude in school, revealing a low sense of agency in his ambiguity

<sup>21</sup> For transcription conventions see appendix A

and by accepting his friends' words. However, this acceptance led to posterior reflection and a more assertive performance of his academic identity by his decision to do school work and graduate (lines 8–10). This excerpt shows fluidity in his academic identity that is categorized by him into three main phases: laziness up to his senior year (poor grades), acceptance of his peers' discourse (senior year when he started to do school work), and an enactment of a hard work academic identity (reflection, working, and school graduation).

Time pressure and peer support became essential for Antonio's academic experiences. He was in his senior year of school and felt pressure to make a decision to graduate, stay another year without his friends, or drop out. He had a strong community of friends who aimed to graduate from high school. Victor was Antonio's best friend, a student who struggled in school as Antonio did, but who, as the only U.S.-born member in his family, was expected to graduate, go to college, and support his undocumented Ecuadorian family. In fact, Antonio's closeness with academic oriented students indexed respect to his parents who wanted him to 'better his life'.

In addition, Excerpt 1, reveals Antonio's legal awareness when he states 'it does not matter if I graduate or not' (line 3), thus pointing out the lack of instrumental value of a high school diploma. The lack of instrumental value remained in his senior year but its symbolic value became intensified. For Antonio, graduating from high school represented a proof to his parents, to his friends, and to the society of his hard work and academic capacities.

Finally, Excerpt 1 also points to Antonio's change in his self-perception; from being lazy to being focused on school. Before his senior year, he presented himself as being 'kind of lazy' (line 1). While he was aware of how his legal status affected his motivation and meaning of education (lines 1–3), he still described himself as lazy and thus with a low capacity to act. As we will see below with the other participants, this is a very common discourse. All the participants envision that through '*echándole gangas*' ('putting a lot of effort') they could accomplish anything they want to, and not accomplishing their goals was an indication of laziness, of lack of strength, and thus, of being undergoers.

Stories and experiences gathered from Antonio in relationship to his years in high school show how Antonio was not motivated to be in school, how he had not meaningful relationships with his teachers (see Chapter 6), how his legal status aggravated his academic attitude, and how some friends and community discourses (wrongly) stated that he could not go to college ('I don't have documents, I cannot go to college'). However, his lack of motivation was compensated by his gradual proficiency in English (by 6th grade he was not an English language learner anymore), his parents' strong influence in his everyday life, and his friends' emotional and academic support—particularly in math. All these voices and experiences were orchestrated by Antonio who was able to produce his own narrative and a new active academic identity.

In the case of Patricia, her change of attitude in reference to school was of a different nature than Antonio's. Patricia was involved in fights with her boyfriend and female friends and did not think of her parents' words in her everyday life. Her interest in

partying and going to malls changed completely when she faced a key turning point at 11th grade. In Excerpt 2, Patricia reveals why she had such a turning point in her life:

*Excerpt 2: Patricia, May, 2010.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Qué pasó? Por qué cambiaste?
02	Patricia	Me quedé embarazada... Porque yo siempre me divertía me iba a los <i>malles</i> iba al baile y
03		me compraba lo que quería y pagaba <i>billes</i> en mi casa, pagaba mi internet y mi celular
04		y yo me sentía que lo tenía todo! Yo salía cuando yo quería, iba a trabajar los fines de
05		semana; o sea todo, yo todo lo tenía y ya quedé embarazada en enero y fue cuando
06		todo cambió; TODO TODO cambió todo de mí.
07	Gemma	Por qué cambiaste?
08	Patricia	Por el niño. Por él porque dije yo no quise que dijeran a mi niño “tu mamá fue así,
09		fue así, tu mamá fue peleona, tu mamá era muy contestona muyyy”. Cambié.
English Translation		
01	Gemma	What happened? Why did you change?
02	Patricia	I got pregnant....because I always had fun I went to the malls went to the dance and
03		I used to buy all I wanted and I paid the bills at my home, paid my internet my cellular
04		and I felt that I had it all! I used to go out when I wanted, I used to work on the
05		weekends; so all, I had it all and then I got pregnant in January and it was when
06		everything changed; EVERYTHING EVERYTHING changed everything in me.
07	Gemma	Why did you change?
08	Patricia	For the boy. For him because I said I didn’t want that my boy was told “your mom was
09		like this, your mom was aggressive. your mom was very mouthy veryyyy”. I changed.

In Excerpt 2, Patricia constructs a past agentive self that stresses how before getting pregnant she ‘had it all’ (line 4), thus noting how going out, working, and having money was what she wanted and needed. This illustrates how Patricia gave very little importance to being educated or to not having documents in order to live happily in the United States during most of her teenage years. Therefore, she presented herself as an *agentive self-constructor* (Bamberg et al., 2011) with high control of her life until she got pregnant. Interestingly, pregnancy made her position herself secondary to her child, who seemed to hold control of her life. Discursively, she does not express how once she became pregnant she *decided* to change her lifestyle, but how ‘everything, everything

changed in me' (line 6), thus taking a more passive role in her description. And further, she stresses how once pregnant, others would describe her as an aggressive woman (lines 8–9), thus losing control over her own identity enactment. This new positioning and role in life constrained her agency but at the same time enabled her to construct a new identity as a mother that transformed her and motivated her to enact a new academic identity. Once pregnant, her priorities changed and she started valuing education. As later stated, *quiero que mis hijos estén orgullosos de mí, que puedan decir que mamá terminó high school* ('I want my kids to be proud of me, that they can say that mom finished high school'; Patricia, May, 2010). Here, she points out to the symbolic value of education as her motivation to graduate from high school. And she used that motivation to apply to a teen mom school that offered day care, and a community of teachers and teen mom students who supported her. She applied herself in school, continued working part time, and transformed her self-interests to those of her children's.

What really motivated Patricia to graduate from school were her two unexpected pregnancies at grades 11 and 12. As sometimes happens to other teen moms, motherhood can push one out of school or actually give meaning to education (Luttrell, 2003). In this case, Patricia never considered important the symbolic value of education until she became aware of her imminent motherhood.

Similarly to Antonio, Patricia gave a symbolic value to education, but differently from Antonio, it was not Patricia's friends or the discourse of her parents what made her focus on graduating from school. While she had their economic support, she never referred to her parents as her motive to be in school. For her, it was her pregnancy, her

pride, and her English ability what made it possible. Nevertheless, her parents helped her finance her migration to Minnesota once she was deported to Mexico when she was 18. Her return to the U.S. with her boyfriend and child had a cost of \$7,000. But, she came back to Minnesota with the commitment to graduate from high school, work part time, and raise her child (it was not until senior year that she had two kids). And, with a strong sense of purpose and agency, she did it

Patricia's words and experiences reveal how her school experience was negatively affected by her troublesome social life, and her initial absence of linguistic and cultural capital ('when I got here...I started seventh grade and I didn't like the U.S. because they [peers] make fun of me because I didn't speak English'; Patricia, May, 2010). Her legal status became substantial in defining her life in the U.S., but she did not frame her legal status as responsible for her lack of interest in school (in the same manner she did when referencing college). Nevertheless, she graduated from high school at age 20 thanks to her pride, her pregnancies, her English skills, and while not explicitly stated by her, thanks to her parents' support.

In this first section, we saw how Antonio and Patricia (1.5-generation youths) had no interest in school for most of their time in the K-12 educational system. These findings fit with other work and are supported, for instance, by Suárez-Orozco et al.'s (2008) study in which undocumented youths were part of those students who were 'declining academic achievers'. Antonio and Patricia demonstrate the fluidity of academic identities and how their identities as low achievers reversed in their last years of high school. Not much research focuses on the fluidity of academic identities nor on the educational expe-

riences of regular 1.5 undocumented students like Patricia and Antonio. While most studies perceive academic identities as static (e.g., Gonzales, 2011; Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Portes & Zhou, 1992), most studies also have a focus on high-achieving 1.5-generation undocumented youths (Chavez et al., 2007; Enriquez, 2011; Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Gonzales, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Mangan, 2010; Perez, 2009) rather than non-extraordinary 1.5 youths.

Further, while King (1971/2007) states that the symbolic value of education (status and prestige) is higher in middle class youths and in particular woman, in this study we see that lower class youths, in particular one of the most marginalized groups (undocumented Latino youths), have no other option than giving a symbolic meaning to education in order to achieve academically. Naturally, achieving academically for professional reasons (instrumental value) makes no sense for Patricia and Antonio.

Ogbu (1978) stated that ‘barriers in adult opportunity structures’ negatively influence minority youths’ education, yet how youths interpret these barriers depends on each minority group. To explain the difference in educational attainment among minority groups, Ogbu and Simons (1998) revealed the role of the instrumental and symbolic value given to education as key to understanding the experiences of minority groups. However, Ogbu and Simons (1998) defined the symbolic value of education as the threat to the culture and language of minority students rather than status and prestige. Based on Ogbu and Simons (1998) theory, undocumented youths should perceive formal education as a threat to their culture and language. This threat, together with the lack of instrumental value that education has for undocumented students, should lead undocumented

youths to reject education and adopt an oppositional attitude. However, Patricia and Antonio did not take on an oppositional culture (not even when they were indifferent about school). Instead they actually gave prestige and status to educational achievements.

Finally, in this section we also see how Patricia and Antonio, while uninterested in school, still had time to learn English and adapt to the school system. Antonio had been in U.S. schools since Kindergarten and Patricia, for six years. Collier and Thomas (1989) found that students who speak a different language at home than in school needed approximately five to seven years to achieve comparable grades of those of their native-speaking peers, and MacSwan and Pray (2005) found that students needed about three years (with a variation from one year to six) to attain native-like oral proficiency in English. Antonio's and Patricia's English proficiency was quite good, given the fact that once they decided to put an effort into school, they had no difficulties in graduating. In fact, Antonio got As in his senior year and Patricia was able to take one class as a PSEO (Post-Secondary Enrollment Option<sup>22</sup>) student in a community college. Therefore, their English language proficiency made their investment in schooling result in academic progress. As we will see in the next section, this capacity to turn their academic experiences around in such a short time was not a possibility for the first-generation young adults who had more linguistic and cultural constraints than the 1.5 generation.

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<sup>22</sup> Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) is a program that allows students in their junior or senior year to earn college credit while in high school (Minnesota Department of Education) <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/CollReadi/PSEO/index.html>

### **First-generation Students' High School Experiences**

In this section we explore the academic experiences of the first-generation young adults to observe how age of arrival (at age 16 or later) affected their academic experiences in several ways: they lacked English skills and an understanding of the U.S. school culture, and they had expectations to be financially independent. These characteristics highly limited their possibilities to graduate from high school.

Crossing the border at age 16 or later, at an age in which they were old enough to earn a wage, affected their understanding of accommodation into the United States. These first-generation young adults expect or were expected to financially support themselves and be part of the American dream. For them, enrolling in schools, learning English, and earning a high school diploma meant improving their professional opportunities. In other words, in this section we see how first-generation young adults underestimate the role of their legal status by expecting to receive occupational opportunities from academic credentials. Therefore, unlike the 1.5 generation they give an instrumental value to education.

Sarita was 18 when she arrived in Minnesota and Ricardo, Noberto, and Diego were 16 (Diego was almost 16). All of them started working within a week after arriving to the U.S. thanks to family contacts. Each stated that they wanted to work and support themselves. This interest in working framed their dreams to succeed economically. Further, all of them seemed to believe that gaining education would improve their occupational lives in the United States, thus they dismissed the impact of their legal status in

their educational, professional, and economic goals. They did not fully believe that their legal status could prevent them from most occupational opportunities and lived under the ideology that by *echándole ganas* ('putting an effort') they could make the 'American dream' come true.

For Ricardo and Diego, graduating from high school became the most essential aspect to improve their lives in the U.S.: *Quiero estudiar para tener una vida mejor, tener un buen trabajo* ('I want to study to have a better life, to have a good job'; Diego, May, 2010).

Aquí, obteniendo tu certificado de high school puedes tener cualquier trabajo y más si hablo inglés. Por eso me estoy desarrollando en inglés, por eso me estoy empeñando lo suficiente, mucho y creo que lo estoy consiguiendo...si yo me lo propongo [estudiar] lo voy a cumplir. (Ricardo, June, 2010)

Here, by obtaining your high school certificate you can have any job and even more if I speak English. That is the reason why I am developing my English skills, for this reason I am putting enough effort, a lot and I think I am making it...if I make this decision [to study] I am going to accomplish it'. (Ricardo, June, 2010)

Ricardo shows agency (with a sense of power and a capacity to act) in his discourse in which he becomes the subject and agent with a clear educational goal. He gives an instrumental value to education and to having English skills since he relates educational attainment with professional opportunities. Further, he believes that he can graduate from high school if he puts an effort: 'I am putting enough effort... I am going to accomplish it'. This quote reveals how he believed that by *echándole ganas* he could achieve anything. In other words, he believed that not graduating from high school would be his own fault. In Diego and Ricardo's words we see how they show a lack of legal

awareness, a lack of a full understanding of the meaning of their immigration status when they give an instrumental value to their education and so much power to their efforts.

This lack of legal awareness and emphasis on one's personal strength to accomplish one's dreams is intensified in the following statement by Ricardo:

No es necesario tener documentos. Si yo me lo propongo yo puedo estudiar aquí o donde sea, puedo cumplir mi sueño; que no hace falta los documentos, si me lo propongo yo voy a ser alguien. (Ricardo, June, 2010)

It is not necessary to have documents. If I make my mind I can study here or wherever, I can accomplish my dream; documents are not necessary, if I make my mind I will become someone. (Ricardo, June, 2010)

These youths do not have the same legal awareness as Patricia and Antonio (the 1.5-generation youths). And, interestingly, it is this lack of awareness that brings more motivation to be in school.

In addition, Ricardo repeatedly told me how graduating from high school *es mi gran sueño... el día que esté con mi certificado voy a ser muy feliz* ('it's my grand dream...the day that will have my diploma I will be very happy'; Ricardo, June, 2010). Clearly, Ricardo gave a symbolic value to the diploma. From our dialogues, Ricardo was a young adult highly motivated to do well in school; but by the time he enrolled in a U.S. school, he was 18 and had not much time to learn English and adapt to the U.S. educational system before turning 22 years old.

On the other hand, Sarita, who came at age 18, was more moderate with her educational objectives. She did not frame graduating from high school as one of her main goals. Her most important goal was to work and sustain herself economically. *Quiero sacar mi diploma pero por ahora tengo cosas más importantes que son como tratar de*

*tener una casa dónde vivir, tener de comer, de vestir* ('I want to obtain my diploma but for now I have more important things like trying to have a house where to live, to have food, and clothes'; Sarita, June, 2010). Therefore, she valued education but it was not prioritized over work. She also valued learning English and she said she learned it at both school and work. Learning English had actually an instrumental value for all of them. Above, Ricardo mentioned the importance of learning English, and Patricia, Sarita, and Noberto had indicated that knowing English allowed them to have more occupational options in fast food restaurants. In fact, once Sarita and Noberto learned some English they were able to attend to costumers rather than just working in the kitchen (even though they were paid the same minimal wage).

Sarita also felt that her abilities to be successful in school were mostly based on her intelligence, a trait that she believed to lack. Based on her art teacher, her friends, and my own observations, she had high skills in art, poetry, and in written and oral English. However, Sarita did not believe in herself. She had a colleague who graduated from high school and went to a community college, and when I asked if she could graduate and go to college as her peer, she responded, *a veces pienso que él es diferente a mí él es inteligente! Jejeje* ('sometimes I think that he is different from me, he is intelligent! hehehe'; Sarita, March, 2011). This tendency of self-blaming to explain a lack of academic accomplishments was also present in Antonio's self-perception of laziness (see Excerpt 1). In fact, believing that she lacked intelligence meant believing in the stereotypes imbedded in mainstream discourses that devalue Latinos and other people of color (Abrego, 2006; Rumbaut, 2009; Suárez-Orozco 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). For Sarita, the

“social mirroring” affected her sense of self (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In a way, Sarita gave more status and power to the mainstream discourses than to her friends and teachers who praised her academic skills. She had a gift for language learning and art but never pursued her educational interests.

This self-perception of laziness and of lacking intelligence was present in both generational groups. Age of arrival did not seem to influence their academic self-concept.

Noberto’s attitude towards schooling was initially affected by his brother and later, by his enrollment with the MDE Latino organization (the Latino branch of Amway)—this Multilevel marketing (MLM) business is explored in detail in Chapter 7. Upon the advice of his brother, Noberto enrolled in school in order to achieve long-term success. However, his attitude towards schooling started to fade as he became a member of the MLM business. The MLM business changed his perception of public education as *the* only path towards employment opportunities. While he believed in the importance of education, little by little he lost interest in the traditional U.S. education system and believed in the teachings of his MDE Latino ‘business school’ to achieve knowledge, and personal and economic growth:

con dinero y sin inteligencia de aquí (indicando su cabeza), a lo mejor hubiera hecho algunas cosas pero de que me sirva materiales sin conocimiento... un autor que me gusta es John Maxwell<sup>23</sup> él dijo, tu tienes que llenar tu cabeza primero y tu cabeza se cargará de llenar tu bolsillo. (Noberto, June, 2010)

with money and without intelligence from here (pointing his head), maybe I could have done some things but what is the point of having materials without knowledge...an author that I like, John Maxwell<sup>2</sup> he said, you

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<sup>23</sup> John Maxwell is an evangelical Christian author, speaker, and pastor who has written more than 60 books, primarily focusing on leadership from a Christian outlook.

have to fill your brain first and your brain will be in charge of filling your pocket. (Noberto, June, 2010)

The Discourse of MDE Latino, through Spanish conferences, Spanish CDs, and Spanish books founded the belief that he could become an orator and a millionaire regardless of his English skills, his legal status, and without having a high school degree. As the quote indexes, Noberto, under the teachings of MDE Latino, read and studied every day. He became highly proficient in Spanish (as a Mam speaker, he had minimal skills in Spanish when he arrived in the U.S.) and had a clear trajectory on how to become knowledgeable and rich. In fact, under MDE Latino teachings, the traditional path of public education to work became meaningless.

Sarita's, Noberto's, and Ricardo's need to economically survive for themselves and the difficulties to start learning English at age 16 or 18 made their U.S. school experiences hard, and unrelated to their everyday lives. Noberto found a way to escape from it by investing his time and energy in learning how to become a businessman through the Spanish discourses of MDE Latino. After less than a year since entering to the company he quit from school (December 2010). As he explained in Excerpt 3, high school took too much time and he could not find meaning of all the hours he invested in it.

*Excerpt 3: Noberto, January, 2011.*

Original		
01	Noberto	...la high school obligado tienes que estar 4 años allí...es que era mucho tiempo. Me
02		canso mucho. Estaba todos los días de 8 a 5 de la tarde... Es que la verdad estoy
03		invirtiendo mucho muchísimo tiempo y me están dando información a mí que no
04		voy a necesitar en este momento. No necesito esta información que me están dando,
05		necesito información que me va a ayudar mucho. Si puedo, después ya me voy a meter
06		en una escuela privada quizás.
07	Gemma	Porque la gente que está detrás de ti en MDE Latino tiene educación?
08	Noberto	Hay personas que no saben ni leer y ganan más dinero que yo.

09	Gemma	Wow
10	Noberto	Pero tienen una sabiduría diferente que un alumno que está en la escuela pública y
11		después aprenden a leer a través de MDE Latino... Por ejemplo, un ejemplo, no
12		saben mucho sobre la naturaleza pero saben cómo manejar negocios, jejeje. Porque
13		ese es nuestro sueño no?
English Translation		
01	Noberto	...in high school it is compulsory to be there for 4 years... this was a lot of time. I get
02		very tired. I was every day from 8 to 5pm... The truth is that I am
03		investing a lot large amounts of time and they are giving me information that I am not
04		going to need in this moment. I don't need this information that they are giving me, I
05		need information that is going to help me a lot. If I can, then later I will enroll
06		in a private school perhaps.
07	Gemma	Because do the people behind you in MDE Latino have an education?
08	Noberto	There are people who don't know how to read and they make more money than me.
09	Gemma	Wow
10	Noberto	But they have a different wisdom than a student who is in the public school and
11		then they learn to read through MDE Latino... For example, one example, they don't
12		know much about nature but they know how to deal with business, hehehe. Because
13		that's our dream huh?

Here Noberto discursively performs an agentic self, a person with a high capacity to act and decide what is right and the best for him. He reveals how in the MLM discourse community, literacy, and thus general education, is not necessary for making money and becoming successful (line 8). Further, he reveals the strong impact that the MDE Latino Discourse had on him compared that the public school Discourse (Gee, 1989). He believed to be receiving more meaningful knowledge through MDE Latino teachings than in high school (lines 4–5 and 11–12). MDE Latino is a company that is able to explain the importance of having knowledge to build a successful business. In fact, the same organization provides Latino members with the necessary skills to become entrepreneurs. Compared to the other participants, Noberto had acquired a broader academic and business-like Spanish vocabulary. Noberto saw how the MDE Latino organization taught him literacy skills as a means to becoming a competent business leader, while the public school system offered him knowledge for the sake of knowledge (lines

3–4). Consequently, Noberto questioned school’s knowledge (lines 3–4). These contradictory approaches to learning motivated Noberto to invest all his time and energy into MDE Latino since the organization had a clear path and discourse to reach economic success, a path that regular high schools did not offer him.

Sarita, who was a quick learner with high abilities to learn English, became bored and interested in school after less than a year enrolled. Similarly to Ricardo, her fulltime work schedule made waking up for school mostly impossible *me está costando levantarme ay!* (‘I am having a hard time getting up!’; Sarita, June, 2010). She quit school in June 2010. Ricardo quit a bit later, in Spring 2011. Sarita and Ricardo did not blame the Discourse of the school to explain their lack of academic attainment but themselves. Sarita blamed herself for quitting: *soy muy floja...me falta fuerza de voluntad* (I am lazy...I lack willpower; Sarita, September, 2010). And Ricardo stressed his feelings of exhaustion for trying so hard to do both: study and work full time:

Voy a la escuela y sólo duermo cuatro horas diarias y es bien difícil para mí porque a veces siento que no tiene sentido para mí como estar estudiando o seguir en la escuela. Como no sé, como desesperación porque a veces me da mucho sueño a la escuela y luego digo “ya no voy a ir” porque no aguanto y me gana el sueño, el cansancio. Es mucha presión para mí trabajar por la noche e ir a la escuela. Me canso demasiado y que no aguanto y que quisiera dejar de estudiar porque de trabajar no voy a dejar de trabajar. (Ricardo, November, 2010)

I am going to school and I just sleep four hours daily and it is really difficult for me because sometimes I feel that it does not make sense for me to be studying or to continue in school. Like I don’t know, like desperation because sometimes I get really sleepy in school and then I say “I don’t want to go anymore” because I cannot make it, my lack of sleep and tiredness wins me over. It is a lot of pressure for me to work at night and go to school. I get too tired and I cannot do it anymore and I would like to stop studying because working I am not going to stop working. (Ricardo, November, 2010)

Ricardo talked about his tiredness to work full time at night and go to school in the morning. But he was also clear in ranking his priorities based on the cultural model in which he was brought up. For Ricardo, work is essential ('I am not going to stop working'). Thus, it is necessary for being self-sufficient, paying the bills, and for one's personal needs. Once he recognized that working and studying full time was becoming impossible, he knew what to do next (quit school). While these first-generation students imagined how learning English and obtaining a diploma would open doors to them, they found no means to successfully study while working full time. Importantly though, these youths did not quit school for not believing in the educational system as Ogbu (1978) and Ogbu and Simmons (1978) suggest, but for not having enough hours per day, a flexible amount of time to graduate, and the necessary English skills. Below, Sarita explains the difficulties she experienced with English language in U.S. schools:

yo no soy nativa de inglés, por ejemplo hay cosas que no entiendo o que sí que entiendo pero no entiendo exactamente lo que quieren decir. Por ejemplo dicen "haz una tesis sobre esto y esto y aquello." Entiendo que quieren lo que haga pero no en qué manera. O yo voy a hacer la tesis y ella va a decir "está mal aquí aquí y aquí" y yo "por qué! Por qué! No entiendo." Necesito un maestro que sepa español. (Sarita, February, 2012)

I am not a native English speaker, for example there are things I don't understand or that I do understand but I don't understand exactly what they say. For example, they say "do a thesis about this and this and that." I understand what they want me to do but not how. Or I am going to write the thesis and she is going to say "it's wrong here, here and here" and I "why!! Why!" I don't understand." I need a teacher who knows Spanish. (Sarita, February, 2012)

In Sarita's words, it was not just English that became complicated in school but actually understanding the school culture and its rules in reference to academic English writing. The way students wrote in Mexico and Guatemala differed not just by the lan-

guage they use but also by the teachers' expectations and the rules imbedded in academic writing (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Harper & Jong, 2004).

Diego, differently from the other three first-generation students, did not rank working as his first priority due to his parents' insistence to focus on school first. While he still worked full-time during the breaks and worked part-time during his first year in school, he realized he could not study effectively while working.

El primer año cuando entré en la escuela fue muy duro jejeje, me desvelaba; de la escuela empezaba a trabajar y del trabajo aquí (a casa) volvía y todo, eran como las 11 o 12 de la noche. (Diego, May, 2010)

The first year I went to school it was very hard hehehe. I did my best; from school I was going to work and from work I went here (home) and all, it was like 11 or 12 at night. (Diego, May, 2010)

After the first year, Diego, along with his parents decided to fully dedicate himself to school and leave the part-time job. His parents supported him economically—an uncommon reality among the other first-generation students. Further, his motivation to be in school was influenced by his parents' discourses who believed, similarly to the other first-generation students, that while his legal status was limiting, his education would open new occupational doors. Below, we see Diego's stepfather giving advice to Diego:

Saca tu GED, ya con tu GED en caso de que ya no se puede estudiar ya puedes agarrar un trabajito más o menos. Casi donde quieras te piden tu GED y sin el GED va a ser más difícil; sin documentos, sin hablar inglés. Ya hablando inglés y con el GED aunque sin documentos a veces dan oportunidad a personas que hablan el inglés. Pues yo le digo que está bien (que estudie) y habiendo la oportunidad, que bueno verdad? Que le eche ganas a estudiar. (Diego's stepfather, May 2010)

Get your GED, once you get your GED, in case you cannot study anymore you already can get a little job more or less. Almost everywhere you go they ask you for your GED and without the GED it is going to be harder; without documents, without speaking English. But speaking English and with the GED even without having documents sometimes they give you

the opportunity to people who speak English. So I tell him that it's good (that he is studying) and that having the opportunity, how good isn't it? He needs to put an effort to his studies. (Diego's stepfather, May, 2010)

Diego's stepfather reveals his instrumental outlook to education. He believed that education and English skills will improve Diego's possibilities. The stepfather also disclosed that Diego's education is perceived as a privilege. 'How good isn't it? He said. Implicitly, he is saying, "How good, isn't it, that the United States or us (parents) allow him to study?" With his words, he implies that he has the right to ask him to work for the family or/and that undocumented immigrants should be thankful for being allowed to study. In that case he would assume the right of being criminalized and of presumably having fewer rights than U.S. citizens and documented migrants. That would not be surprising, since, as we have seen, mainstream discourses affect self-perceptions and understanding of self-worth (Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007; Suárez-Orozco 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Diego graduated from high school in June 2011. While he passed the exams, and did a final project in English (through the help of bilingual teachers), his English skills were minimal. I was unable to understand him in English and he avoided any opportunity I gave him to communicate in English. While he wanted to translate medical and legal documents to his parents and communicate with technicians who were putting internet or a phone line at the apartment, he was unable to do so and asked me for help. Nevertheless, from the four first-generation young adults, he was the only one to graduate from high school and he hoped that the diploma would change his life.

The first-generation youths of this study had a different approach to school than Antonio and Patricia. For the 1.5-generation youths, enrolling to high school was the ‘normal’ step to take after middle school. For the first-generation students going to school was not a simple step in their accommodation to the U.S. but a conscientious choice. They were 16 or older and thus ‘legally’ able to work when they arrived in the U.S. Deciding to enroll in school meant to reassess the purpose of their migration, think of the role of education in their lives, face the lack of information and understanding of a new educational system, and reevaluate the expectations given to them by the family and themselves.

Once the four first-generation participants decided to enroll in high school, they all had family members who supported their decision to both study and work. However, they realized through their own experiences that emotional support was not enough. The cultural models (Gee, 2004) of the first-generation young adults prompted them to be independent and self-sufficient. Sarita and Ricardo did not want to ask for their parents’ economic support and ask them to *romperse la espalda por mí* (‘break their backs for me’; Ricardo, February, 2011). This sense of self-sufficiency was common among all participants, but was stronger among the first-generation group. The first-generation youths did not want to ask for help but actually help their families. Diego, the only first-generation student who had economic support from his parents many times felt inadequate and would ask their parents to allow him to work *sin descontrolarme* (‘without losing control’; Diego, October, 2010). In a different situation, Noberto could not even ask for help since he had to provide for himself and his family back in Guatemala. For the

first-generation youths migrating mostly meant to prioritize family and work over education since staying in Mexico would have been the easiest route towards obtaining a high school diploma.

The educational experiences between first- and 1.5-generation youths were quite different. While all participants worked (Antonio and Patricia were also working but part time), the high school experiences between the first generation and the 1.5 were distinct. For the first-generation youths, the lack of understanding of the U.S. educational system and of the English language in high school, as well as the strong emphasis that these youths put on self-sufficiency and work, made graduating from high school an almost impossible dream among first-generation youths. Again, while three of the first-generation participants dropped out from high school that did not mean that they held an oppositional culture to the one of the U.S. schools, as Ogbu and Simons (1987) suggest. They were eager to learn English and graduate from high school, but while they knew they had to *eharle ganas*, that proved insufficient. They could claim to be lazy or not to work hard enough in school. But the educational structural system, their English abilities, and economic needs made graduating from high school mostly a dream rather than an achievable goal.

In the next section we move beyond high school to understand the meaning of education for first- and 1.5-generation young adults after graduating or dropping out from high school. The following subsections reveal the important role of professional opportunities, economic means, and legal status to explain first- and 1.5-generation youths' interest in high education and General Educational Development (GED) programs.

## Meaning and Role of Education after High School

### First-generation Youths

In this section we see how the work expectations and work conditions of the first-generation young adults influenced their decision to go back to school. Further, their discourses around work reveal how the first-generation young adults perceive their lack of occupational opportunities as a consequence of their lack of academic credentials. In contrast, the 1.5 generation perceives it as a consequence of their legal status.

Sarita, Ricardo, and Noberto dropped out from high school, but all three considered going back to school and obtaining a General Education Diploma (GED) during times of harsh work experiences. Sarita had been working for three years in a fast food restaurant with bare minimal possibilities for improvement (her salary increased 0.40 cents in three years). She decided to try a new job with a better start salary (\$ 8/hour). She started working in a bakery but the physical conditions were severe. These caused her to feel disillusioned, and made her think of school: *Yo dije quiero volver a la escuela porque me quedé mal, me lastimaba mucho, en mis manos me hacía muchos moratones* ('I said I want to go back to school because I ended up in bad condition, I hurt my hands a lot, I gave myself a lot of bruises'; Sarita, September, 2011). After several talks we had about going back to school during the first year and a half, what actually tipped the balance were not my questions about schooling or my identity as a Ph.D. student, but the unsatisfying job conditions she was in, thus emphasizing how work and being self-sufficient were her main priorities. She enrolled in the GED classes in Fall 2011 but going to school lasted only two weeks, since boredom with classes took over her life again.

Namás había dos alumnas y hacia frio, y me iba aburrir! ahaah!” Ah! Todavía me da cosa. Eso es lo curioso es que sí que quiero agarrar mi diploma pero namás pensar en ir a ese lugar pues no... yo cuando no me siento a gusto no aprendo. (Sarita, December, 2011)

There were just two students and it was cold, and I was going there to get bored! Ahaaa! Ah! It still feels itchy. The curious thing is that I still want to get my diploma but just thinking about that place then no... when I don't feel comfortable I don't learn. (Sarita, December, 2011)

Sarita shows agency in her discourse, as well as awareness of herself and under which conditions she cannot learn. Sarita's cultural model (her conscious and unconscious understanding on how things work [Gee, 2004]) clashed with the structure and culture of the GED program. In her GED program geography class, there were just two students who were not Latino. In her English class, most students were much older than she was and there was no teacher who spoke Spanish. She felt alone in the midst of older non-Latino students who did not speak Spanish and she had difficulties following English speaking teachers. She felt isolated and unmotivated. She went back to a new fast food restaurant and months later, when she felt unsatisfied with her job, she reminded herself of her bad experience in the GED program: *nomás de pensar en como obtener el diploma digo "never mind voy a por el arroz", jejeje* ('just thinking about how to obtain the diploma, I say "never mind I am going for the rice" heheh'; Sarita, February, 2012).

Noberto started taking GED classes in Fall 2011. He was particularly interested in learning English. He decided to enroll in school thanks to his pastor and MDE Latino business leader who recommended that he take classes again:

Excerpt 4: Noberto, September, 2011.

Original		
01	Gemma	Por qué piensas que los del <i>business</i> te dicen que termines la <i>high school</i> ahora?
02	Noberto	Porque, un ejemplo, puedo ir al <i>college</i> o más adelante cuando voy a conferencias puedo
03		dar conferencias en inglés o en español, porque han llegado personas en la
04		conferencia que se les tiene que traducir. Han llegado americanos de altos niveles y
05		tienen que ser traducidos en español. Todo lo que dicen. O han llegado hispanos de
06		alto nivel que tiene que estar un americano para que los traduzca en inglés. Pero si tu
07		hablaras los idiomas no hace falta traducir; es importante.
English Translation		
01	Gemma	Why do you think those from the business tell you to finish high school now?
02	Noberto	Because one example, I can go to college or later when I go to conferences I can
03		give conferences in English or in Spanish, because there have come people in the
04		conference who needed to be interpreted. There have been Americans of high ranks who
05		need to be translated in Spanish. Everything they say. Or there have been Hispanos of
06		high ranks who need to have an American so this person translates in English. But if you
07		spoke the languages it is not necessary to translate; it is important.

Here Noberto is very clear of the linguistic benefits of going back to school. He did not go back to high school but joined a GED program which allowed him to take fewer classes and be more flexible with his time. In this excerpt, he stresses the role of education in language learning and the importance of learning Spanish and English for economic/professional reasons—therefore he gives both languages an instrumental value. However, in the excerpt he also embraces the mainstream stereotype that ‘Americans’ are people who speak English (lines 5–6). He disregards the heterogeneity of a terminology (American) that can embrace people of different races, ethnicities, and who speak different languages.

Ricardo also thought of enrolling in a GED program but he changed his mind in November 2011 when he finally found a job as a baker that he really enjoyed. During the first year and a half of the study he worked at six different jobs, mostly in abusive environments. Ricardo framed these hostile work encounters as *racist* even though the preju-

dice he encountered was mostly among nonwhite Latinos, and sometimes also among members of his own ethnic group (Mexicans) who had higher roles than he did. *Fui a otra lavandería pero duré dos semanas porque la manager era una racista... era hispana pero quería que le hicieras las cosas así rápido de volada* ('I went to another but I lasted two weeks because the manager was a racist... she was Hispanic but she wanted me to do things for her really fast'; Ricardo, November, 2011). Ricardo described tension at work in terms of racism in this quote and many others, like when he explained how he fought (the only time in his life) with a Salvadoran coworker who insulted him at work. He made sense of those hostile encounters at work in terms of racism rather than in terms of personality differences, and thus in his discourse, he implicitly suggests how people of color can also be racist towards their own racial group since not just white people internalize the mainstream stereotypes towards ethnic/racial groups (Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Thankfully, by November 2011, he was able to find the first workplace where he enjoyed working and felt respected. Interestingly, he framed his first good work experience also in terms of race: *creo que aquí no hay racismo...hay de todo morenos, latinos, blancos, y el supervisor es mexicano y él es muy buena onda conmigo* ('I think that here there is no racism...there is everything, Blacks, Latinos, Whites, and the supervisor is Mexican and he is very nice with me'; Ricardo, November, 2011).

These examples show how work expectations and work conditions were determinant in influencing the decisions to go back to school for Noberto, Sarita, and Ricardo.

This again, stresses their outlook on education as instrumental to improving their occupational experiences regardless of their legal status.

Diego, the only undocumented first-generation youth to graduate from high school had expectations to use his diploma for improving his work opportunities. The summer after graduating he was excited to apply to different jobs and save money. *El high school diploma está bién. Ahora quiero trabajar y ganar dinero. Me gustaría estudiar más pero no puedo....quiero ahorrar mucho dinero* ('the high school diploma is good. Now I want to work and earn money. I would like to study more but I cannot...I want to save a lot of money'; Diego, June, 2011). He applied to Best Buy, Target, and some well-regarded restaurants in downtown Minneapolis that required a high school diploma, and paid \$12 an hour. He was enthusiastic; he was ready to finally support himself and his family. A couple of months later, he realized that it was not going to be that easy to get a better paying job when he realized that *no me concidieron ninguna entrevista* ('they haven't given me an interview'; Diego, August, 2011) and he continued to have unstable work with his mother at a *temporaria* ('temporary work organization'). Seven months after graduating from high school, I asked again about his job search:

*Excerpt 5: Diego, February, 2012.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Al principio estabas aplicando a la Target al Best Buy
02	Diego	Y a muchos lugares
03	Gemma	Y ahora ya no?
04	Mother	Pues ya no aplica ya no
05	Gemma	Por qué?
06	Diego	No me llaman! y la Target paga 7,25 con (el high school) diploma
07	Gemma	Con diploma! y te llamaron?
08	Diego	No. Necesito papeles buenos.

English Translation		
01	Gemma	At the beginning you were applying to Target and Best Buy
02	Diego	And to many other places
03	Gemma	And you don't do that anymore?
04	Mother	Well he does not apply anymore not anymore
05	Gemma	Why?
06	Diego	They don't call me! And at Target they pay 7,25 with a (high school) diploma
07	Gemma	With a diploma! And they call you?
08	Diego	No. I need good papers.

In this excerpt, Diego points out the self-discovery of two facts: first, that having *papeles buenos* (a valid social security number) is more important than having a high school diploma (lines 7–8). He initially thought this reality was not true for all jobs and secondly, that having documents does not always imply a better salary. He realized that some documented people with a high school diploma were still earning a minimal wage, since he believed that at Target all employees were documented. Therefore, in few months his excitement started to fade and faced the crude reality that his high school diploma was not helping him economically or professionally. While Diego's approach on education is different from the 1.5 generation (Antonio and Patricia stated their lack of belief in the role of education in their professional lives), his discoveries support Gleeson and Gonzales's (2012) study that states how schools sell a meritocratic view of education that fails to prepare undocumented youths for life in U.S. society after graduation.

In summary, the first-generation youths have the expectation that a GED or high school diploma will make a difference in their lives. This is evident by their motivation to go back to school when they encountered harsh work conditions or hoped to improve their occupational opportunities. However, the only participant with a high school diplo-

ma discovered that his beliefs on education were unrealistic. When in April 2012, I asked Diego if graduating from high school had been worth it, he felt conflicted:

*Excerpt 6: Diego, April, 2012.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Y valió la pena tanto esfuerzo Diego (en la escuela)?
02	Diego	Sí
03	Mother	Verdad?
04	Diego	Pues sí ((voz baja)) (.)
05	Gemma	Lo volverías a hacer (estudiar)? Si volvieras a estar allí, y si sabes cómo estás
06		ahora lo volverías a hacer?
07	Diego	No, ya no ya no.
08	Gemma	Por qué no?
09	Diego	Está difícil en la escuela y afuera
English Translation		
01	Gemma	And it was worth it so much effort Diego (in the school)?
02	Diego	Yes
03	Mother	True?
04	Diego	Yes ((low intonation)) (.)
05	Gemma	Would you do it again? (to study)? If you were back there, and you know how you are
06		now would you do it again?
07	Diego	No, not anymore not anymore
08	Gemma	Why not?
09	Diego	It's really hard in school and out here.

In this excerpt, Diego questions the purpose of education. He did not question schooling while he was in school but he did once he graduated. In fact, how worth it was it for him to get a diploma and struggle in school while not supporting himself and making his parents pay for his clothes, rent, and food? It started to sound unreasonable and useless to study in the U.S. He had worked very hard to graduate and he was in the same situation as his parents who had not studied. Furthermore, he had lost money in his educational journey.

Unlike Ricardo, Sarita, and Noberto—who knew of the limitations of their legal status but still believed in education—Diego questioned the value of education once he

graduated from high school and started searching for better-paying employment opportunities. His unsuccessful search made him aware of the large impact that his legal status had on employment options, a realization that the rest of the first-generation young adults (who were high school dropouts) did not have. On the other hand, Antonio and Patricia, the 1.5-generation youths, were very conscientious that their legal status was more determinant than their educational outcomes in explaining their occupational options. Therefore, with the six participants we can see different approaches to understanding legal status, education, and employment opportunities based on their age of arrival in the U.S., and their experiences searching for work. Nevertheless, there was another layer that tended to be omitted by the participants: the role of race in occupational opportunities. While Ricardo was aware of how racism played a role in work environments he did not phrase it as limiting one's occupational opportunities. During the two years I was with the participants, the role that race played in their lives was mostly unmentioned. It was Victor, Antonio's best friend and a U.S. Ecuadorian high school graduate, who highlighted the impact of racial discrimination in the occupational world. As we will see in Excerpt 7, Victor states how race has negatively affected his work opportunities, a statement that became questioned by Antonio.

A few sentences prior to Excerpt 7, Victor mentioned how having papers had not yet made a difference in his life, and he felt equal to his undocumented siblings in reference to job opportunities. He added that throughout his life, he felt 'more like an undocumented student than a citizen' due to his looks (Victor, November, 2011). After Victor made this statement, Antonio responded, 'I am sorry Victor but I have to disagree' (An-

tonio. November, 2011). Victor’s perspective on education and his sentiment that education had made no difference in his life offended Antonio. See Excerpt 7:

*Excerpt 7: Antonio and Victor, November, 2011.*

Original		
01	Victor	yeah because you have a different point of view [A: right] because you ARE an
02		undocumented student [A: exactly] but I live like an undocumented student.
03	Antonio	Pero la cosa es que tu sí lo tienes. You have the documents, you can say you feel like it
04		but you know, the thing that it is different is that you have it (papers) I don’t and I am
05		always aware of that.
06	Victor	Still they don’t care about that [A: that is not the point] in any jobs—
07	Antonio	it is NOT the poooint because you still have it though. That is my point dude!—
08	Victor	So what [A: that is how society no no no no no] that is the way I look.
09	Antonio	Obviously it is the way you look, but it is also lack of education too. This society is
10		based on education you have to have education, you see? It may be the way you look
11		that is one factor, but you are not smart if you don’t have the required skills. It can be
12		because of that if you don’t have the background to get the job that is why you don’t get
13		it. ((tension. Silence. Antonio hits with his hands he table))
14	Gemma	Mmmm, because you have tried to apply to jobs? ((to Victor))
15	Victor	I have a job now but not a real job to pay taxes after two or three years applying for jobs.
16		I did have the skills and they didn’t hire me at all.
17	Gemma	Not even getting to the interview?
18	Victor	I did get to two interviews but they told me that I had no experience—
19	Antonio	No experience?
20	Victor	Yeah
21	Antonio	Dude, this is about other factors. Like I told you, no experience that is probably the
22		reason why you didn’t get the job.
23	Victor	But why I should have had experience if I applied for a job that said no experience
24		required?

In this excerpt, Victor points out how his physical appearance resulted in a lack of occupational opportunities (line 8). Antonio delegitimizes his point by stressing the key roles of education and work experiences for someone who is a legal citizen (lines 9–12). Further, Antonio shows hostility towards Victor due to his strong awareness of Victor’s privileges (lines 3–7). The tense exchange between Victor and Antonio (who state they are best friends) reveals the different understanding on how life in the United States is experienced between legal and non-legal residents. Victor refers to his experiences in the

U.S. in terms of racism while Antonio frames it in terms of legal status. The vision that legal status is what limits undocumented young adults' lives is clearly stated by Antonio, who, while not ignoring the role of race in the experiences of Latino youths, does not incorporate that discourse into his life (lines 8–9). In other words, while he does not delegitimize the role of race in the U.S. society, Antonio believes that education and hard work can outweigh racial discrimination (lines 9–11).

All participants found jobs through family and friends' contacts, and thus did not have to deal with job searches and interviews as Victor did. Diego is the only participant who decided to search for jobs that required a high school diploma and then he assumed his lack of success applying for jobs was a consequence of his legal status – not as a consequence of his race or language background (see Excerpt 5).

However, the line that separates race, legal status, and language skills is blurred, since these terms are many times framed as synonymous by mainstream discourses (King & Punti, 2012). In other words, whether a Latino young adult is discriminated based on their race, language skills, or legal status is unclear since many Anglo Americans tend to assume that individuals who look Latino or speak Spanish are undocumented Mexican immigrants (Martin, 2009; Rumbaut, 2009). Consequently, while each one of these characteristics (race, ethnicity, legal status, and Spanish language) seems to negatively impact their work searches, close analysis of these youths' quotes reveals how the 1.5 generation tends to envision their lack of occupational opportunities as being due to their legal status and the first-generation youths to their lack of educational achievement. Nevertheless,

Victor, a Latino U.S. citizen, stresses how his look (race) was *the main reason* why he was not hired in jobs he was qualified for.

In short, our conversations revealed how their positioning towards occupational opportunities was mostly steady (not for Diego) and affected by their *age of arrival* in the United States (being the 1.5 generation more aware of the negative effect of their legal status on occupational opportunities), their *academic credentials* (those without a high school diploma expected that education could help them professionally), and their *legal status* (Victor, the documented student, referred to race as the main obstacle towards quality employment). Therefore, Victor brought into light another layer of discrimination that Latino youths face and that the six participants mostly failed to mention.

### **1.5-generation Young Adults after High School**

In this section, we return to Patricia and Antonio, the 1.5-generation youths who graduated from high school after turning their academic identities around. We see how the symbolic value they gave to education becomes insufficient for enrolling in a higher education program if one has no financial aid and no perspective to regularize one's legal status.

Once Patricia and Antonio graduated from high school they both focused on working since they had no economic means to go to college. However both thought of continuing to higher education with different results based on their personal circumstances.

**Patricia's after high school experiences.** Two months after graduating from

high school I asked Patricia how she felt since graduating:

*Excerpt 8: Patricia, August, 2010.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Tu querías graduarte y ahora que lo conseguiste como te sientes?
02	Patricia	No me siento satisfecha todavía [G: no?] y ese es mi miedo, si voy al colegio porque yo
03		investigué y si voy al colegio no voy a poder ejercer mi carrera. O sea, no se puede.
04		Ahorita yo pude entrar al mall, a tiendas, yo podía trabajar al Wells Fargo porque namás
05		se necesita el high school diploma y un poco de práctica, un curso y no puedo! Y yo
06		tengo mi diploma! Y yo entiendo el inglés y yo lo hablo o sea yo me puedo defender y
07		sin amargo sigo en xxx (fast food restaurant) cuando uno puede estar sentado tomando
08		llamadas. Tengo una amiga que hace copias, recibe llamadas, traduce las cartas a español
09		o inglés, tiene internet. Pero yo no puedo. Si voy al colegio siento que va a pasar
10		lo mismo porque no voy a poder ejercer mi carrera.
11	Gemma	Pero quieres ir?
12	Patricia	Si quiero ir.
13	Gemma	Pero por qué?
14	Patricia	...yo quiero que mi hijo diga 'mi mamá fue al colegio, mi mamá sabe hablar inglés, y
15		mi mamá me enseña. Mi mamá se graduó de la high school'. O sea, cuando yo llegué a
16		los EEUU yo fui a middle school, yo no entendía y yo no sabía cómo hacerlo y
17		se burlaban de mí cuando yo leía! Y cuando mi mamá iba necesitaba un traductor
18		y a mí me inspira por progresar y no quedarme así. Yo ahora yo digo tengo un
19		apartamento y yo en cinco años quiero una casa.
English Translation		
01	Gemma	You wanted to graduate and now that you did it how do you feel?
02	Patricia	I don't feel satisfied yet [G: no?] and this is my fear because I investigated if I want to go
03		to college and if I go to college I won't be able to practice my career. So, it is impossible.
04		Now I could get in malls, stores, I could work at Wells Fargo because all is
05		necessary it's a high school diploma and a bit of practice, a course and I cannot! And I
06		have my diploma! And I understand English and I speak it so I can defend myself and
07		nevertheless I continue in xx (fast food restaurant) when one can be seated getting
08		calls. I have a friend that makes copies, receives calls, translate letters to Spanish
09		or English, has internet. But I cannot. If I go to college I feel that it is going to happen
10		the same because I won't be able to work on my career.
11	Gemma	But you want to go?
12	Patricia	Yes I want
13	Gemma	But why?
14	Patricia	... I want my son to say 'my mom went to college, my mom knows to speak English,
15		my mom teaches me. My mom graduated from high school'. So when I arrived to
16		the U.S. I went to middle school I didn't understand and I did not know how to do it.
17		They made fun of me when I read! And when my mom went she needed an interpreter
18		and for me I aim to prosper and not to stay like this. Now I say I have an
19		apartment and in five years I want to have a house.

In this excerpt, Patricia shows clear awareness and understanding of the implications behind her legal status. She points out the limitation of her legality for current and future work opportunities and the incongruence of going to college for professional reasons (lines 3–10). However, her dream to prosper and be a good role model for her children is still in her mind; she gives high importance to the symbolic value of education in her attempts to be a good mother (lines 14–17). Patricia points out how she does not want to be like her mother who did not (and does not) speak English (lines 17-18). As Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) stated, some Mexican youths are embarrassed by their parents' lack of English proficiency (p. 195). However, while embarrassed about their parents' English skills, Mexican youths often also “feel a sense of obligation toward the family” (p. 117), a sentiment that was common among all participants (including Patricia).

Finally, in this excerpt, Patricia shows high ambition in her discourse when she gives examples of how small her structural opportunity window to prosper is, and how she wants to live in a bigger house in five years (lines 18–19). Her sense of agency is high; mostly due to her motivation to provide quality lives to her children, and due to her high school degree and English proficiency.

Patricia's dream to enroll in higher education did not happen after a year of graduating from high school nor in the following two years. In fact, since graduating from high school she worked in a fast food restaurant and took care of her and her sister's children every morning. Her life changed completely in July 2011 when she was asked to try 'licuaditos' by a cousin and her father and herself got involved in Herbalife, an MLM

company that similar to MDE Latino promised her to become wealthy while working as entrepreneurs selling teas and recruiting new Herbalife members. Her sense of self changed under the Discourse of Herbalife, and by following the doctrines of the company she believed that her legal status would not impede her economic success. As soon as she enrolled in Herbalife her dream to pursue higher education dissipated. This is evident in Excerpt 9, from November, 2011:

*Excerpt 9: Patricia, November, 2011.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Ahora mismo ir a la escuela ya no te interesa?
02	Patricia	No tengo tiempo y además, yo iba a ir para eso para aprender a hacer ventas.
03	Gemma	Oh, tienes el trabajo que te interesa?
04	Patricia	Si, ahorita namás me falta ganar más—buscar más gente.
English Translation		
01	Gemma	Right now going to school is not important for you?
02	Patricia	I don't have time and also, I was going to go for that for learning how to sell.
03	Gemma	Oh, do you have the job you are interested in?
04	Patricia	Yes, now all I need is to earn more—to look for more people.

The path towards economic success that Herbalife represents seemed to satisfy the needs of Patricia in a similar way that did MDE Latino for Noberto (see Chapter 7). As Patricia said, all she needed was to ‘earn more money’ (line 4); and the MLM company had a plan on how to achieve that: recruit new members, sell teas, attend trainings, and invest in the company. Like Ricardo and Noberto, when Patricia felt that her job was potentially leading to a path of improvement and economic reward, she stopped focusing on education. In this last quote we see how Patricia minimizes the symbolic value she had been giving to education by focusing on her professional career: ‘I was going to go [to college] for learning how to sell’ (line 2). Therefore, traditional education had no much

meaning for her when she was involved at the MLM company. (As we saw above, Norberto dropped out from high school while involved in the MLM company).

MLM business discourses reveal a path towards professional achievement and economic rewards that traditional means cannot offer to undocumented immigrants. In Chapter 7, I disclose the role of MLM companies in Latino communities, Latino immigrants, and in particularly undocumented Latinos who are targeted by the leaders of these companies due to their vulnerability as unauthorized members. The aspiration of all these young adults is to leave poverty behind. When undocumented young adults feel trapped, unable to make the economic advances by traditional means, they need to reinvent themselves and find other professional alternatives to build a trajectory that shows opportunity for economic life and economic improvement. MLM companies have become powerful mechanisms in devising opportunity for growth through the lives of unauthorized migrants—agentic migrants who seek paths for improvement.

**Antonio.** Antonio graduated from high school and started working more hours at the same coffee place that paid a minimal wage of \$7.25/hour. He had visited a lawyer to regulate his legal status thanks to his older brother who married a Puerto Rican woman and obtained his citizenship in 2010. However, the process for changing the legal status of undocumented Mexican immigrants through family members is long: *la abogada nos dijo que puede ser de un año hasta 16. No sabemos, no es como seguro...pero si que va a ser largo* ('the lawyer told us that it could be between one and 16 years. We don't know, it is not sure... but it is going to be long'; Antonio, October, 2010). Antonio was thinking about enrolling in college but he had no money and a blurry future for 15 years. Howev-

er, half a year after graduating from high school he enrolled as a part-time student at the same community college that his friend Victor was attending. In Excerpt 10 below, we see how Antonio did not see himself going to college until he reported being persuaded to do so by his friends:

*Excerpt 10: Antonio, February, 2011.*

		Original
01	Antonio	...I didn't want to go to school, hehehe, if I hadn't had people to tell me to go.
02	Gemma	Who were those people?
03	Antonio	My friend Victor...and you didn't tell me but you helped me in a way, so I really
04		appreciate that because it made me start thinking about it. And Lisa...they helped me a
05		lot "you need to start doing this and this" because I kept saying "next time next time, I
06		will go to school next time." So, it was a good thing to have someone to tell me to go to
07		school
08	Gemma	Do you think is good or bad?
09	Antonio	For me, it is good, otherwise I won't get it done. hehe.. I don't feel bad that I am
10		spending all this amount of money. It is a good thing.

Antonio stresses the role of discourse communities in giving him possibilities for agency, in this case to act academically. He points out again to the importance of positioning oneself close to his friends who are in college and whose discourses 'made him think about [college]' (line 4). Excerpt 10 illustrates how relationships and discourses give Antonio the possibilities of new opportunities and perceptions of the self. In addition, in this excerpt, he put into words the lack of neutrality of my work as a researcher. He identified me as being influential 'in a way' in his educational career (lines 3–4). We were looking for scholarships together, talked about education every other week, and I would talk about my experience as an international student pursuing a PhD in education. As a critical ethnographer, I was highly conscious that I was not neutral nor did I aim to

be neutral in my work, but was interested in providing new tools and discourses that could strategically open new doors for him. However, as we have seen, my identity as a PhD student did not influence the first-generation young adults to continue high school or Patricia to enroll in college.

Antonio clearly valued education and through the orchestration of different friends' and mainstream voices he 'remade himself' (Moje & Lewis, 2007) as a potential college-goer aware of his legal status and economic difficulties. He had not saved enough money to take two classes at college. But he decided to ask for economic support to his siblings and parents to pay part of the \$1500 for the two classes and the books he bought. Since January 2011, he continued working part time and taking two classes every semester. In the Fall of 2011, I helped Antonio to apply for a U-Visa together with his father, who had been the victim of a theft while delivering pizzas many years ago. This type of visa is given to undocumented migrants who have been victims of a crime, who report to the police the incident, and commit themselves to help in the investigation. Antonio was worried he would not obtain the visa until he found out that his brother had been rewarded with a U-Visa in the spring 2012. That meant he just had to wait few more months. This reality motivated him to think about pursuing a four-year college rather than a two-year technical degree on computer support administration. In the next excerpt, Antonio and I discuss what made Antonio decide to pursue a four-year degree:

*Excerpt 11: Antonio, April, 2012.*

Original		
01	Gemma	What makes you think of going to a 4-year institution?
02	Antonio	It would help, no? But el <i>dinero</i> ('money'), it always goes back to that.

03	Gemma	So, if it wasn't for <i>el dinero tu si que vas</i> ('the money you would be going')
04	Antonio	<i>Sí seguro</i> ('yes, for sure')....
05	Gemma	<i>Pero qué o quién te influyó a tomar esta decisión?</i> ('what or who influenced you in this decision?')
06	Antonio	I don't know, I was just thinking about it. I guess, I first had a bit of a doubt that I could
07		do a four-year, I don't know.
08	Gemma	Your own capacity. Am I smart enough?
09	Antonio	A little bit of that yes. And then, I was 'if someone else can do it I can do it, right?' I
10		guess what really did it was a friend of us who is transferring to the University of
11		Minnesota and we had the same English class you know!
12	Gemma	Yeap! and you did better than he did.
13	Antonio	Yea. Hehehe.

Antonio's academic career seems to be largely influenced by his friends (line 10) and the prospect of becoming a legal resident (although not explicitly stated here). In this excerpt, he uses his relationship with a student who was going to a four-year college to position himself close to a four-year institution. This peer was indirectly responsible for making Antonio reassess his own intelligence. He made him believe that Antonio also had intelligence, a trait he doubted to have (lines 6–9). As we pointed out previously, Antonio had perceived himself as lazy (Excerpt 1) and as stated here of lacking intelligence. Under the influence of mainstream meritocratic discourses and the participants' belief that *echándole ganas* they can accomplish their dreams, they tend to blame themselves for poor grades rather than to the constraining sociocultural and political factors that limit one's capacity to act and inhibits one's motivation.

This sense of inaptitude seems to be common among those undocumented youths who do not excel academically. Such a feeling serves them to believe they are 'where they supposed to be' by society standards when working in unskilled jobs. Therefore, while most of these youths are aware of the influence of their legal status, lack of cultural capital, work schedule, and English skills in influencing their academic experiences, they

still acquire the dominant cultural view that not doing well in school equals lacking intelligence.

In addition, similarly to previous excerpts, Antonio refers back to his peers to explain each one of the steps he has made about education. Nevertheless, his enrollment to college was also concomitant to the fact that he saw the possibilities to become a legal resident. As he pointed out in the Spring 2011, when I asked how he was dealing with his ‘illegality’ he answered,

*Pues* (‘well’) now the only way I can deal with it is by waiting for the papers, it is the only thing that gives meaning to me to get an education and to do nothing wrong... *pero si no hubiera tenido esta oportunidad no hubiera estudiado* (‘but if I had not had this opportunity I wouldn’t have studied’). (Antonio, April, 2011)

In other words, while he stresses the role of his friends in pushing him to join school, he simultaneously states how he would have not attended college without the possibility to change his legal status. His educational discourses changed in focus at different times. Sometimes it was his friends, other times his legal status, or the symbolic value of education that mostly explained his academic career; but undoubtedly all of them shaped his fluid academic identity, as well as his initial disbelief in his school capacities. His narrative on his educational trajectory was still developing and thus, was in constant reconstruction.

In this section, we see how Patricia and Antonio follow two divergent paths. While Patricia became immersed in a nontraditional professional path that promises her wealth and an entrepreneurial career, Antonio goes into higher education thanks to his peers, his family, and the potential regularization of his legal status. While both never

stopped giving to education a symbolic value, the instrumental role of education seems to become necessary to continue into higher education. In other words, the limitations of their legal status gain prominence after high school.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this chapter, I underlined the main factors that explain the academic trajectories of my six participants. The participants' discourses, ideologies, and experiences reveal how age of arrival in the U.S. is the most determinant characteristic in explaining high school graduation. The data analyzed here suggest that age of arrival in the U.S. is more relevant than English proficiency in explaining high school graduation. In fact, age of arrival highly determines the degree of English proficiency these youths have in high school. But, it also implies different personal and family expectations towards financial autonomy, and different cultural models (Gee, 2004). Age of arrival shows how the first-generation young adults have a particular need (or requirement from their parents), to be independent and support economically their families; a demand that makes difficult their academic engagement.

Arriving in the United States as a child or as a mid/late teenager builds them with different cultural models that influence their outlook to education. The first-generation young adults believe that academic attainment will improve their occupational lives (they give an instrumental value to school), but arrive in the United States with no English skills and with the expectation to work toward financial independence and supporting the family. The low levels of English proficiency by high school years, and the need to work

full time limit the possibilities of the academically motivated first-generation youths to graduate from high school. On the other hand, the 1.5-generation youths question the value that education has in their lives since they believe that their legal status determines their professional opportunities (lack of instrumental value). However, despite their educational disbelief, these 1.5 generation still make graduating from high school a possibility. Having been in the U.S. school system for some years, having some English proficiency, and not being expected to fully support themselves and their families, allow them to have the time and the skills (if they can find the motivation [give symbolic value to education]) to graduate.

Patricia and Antonio (1.5 generation youths) did not give an instrumental role in educational outcomes and their academic engagement was low. Both had a turning point in their educational careers that was led by their focus on the symbolic value of education. This new educational meaning prompted a new attitude towards school and revealed how their academic identities were not static. They proved how labeling students as *good* or *bad*, as *intelligent* or *unintelligent* or even as *academic slow decliners* or *precipitous decliners* (e.g., Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008 ) ignores the complexity and fluidity of their academic attitudes as well as their agency in making academic decisions.

Table 4

*Meaning and Experiences of High School Education*

Undocumented Youths	Meaning of Education	Expectations Cultural Models	Support in Education	Educational Issues that Affect Motivation	Turning Point in Educational Life
First generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instrumental (legal status perceived as not that influential)</li> <li>• Symbolic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be economically independent and support their families</li> <li>• Work full time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bilingual Spanish/English teachers</li> <li>• Peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time-Pressure to graduate.</li> <li>• Working full time</li> <li>• Lack of cultural and linguistic capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhaustion</li> <li>• Having to give up school due to work schedules and tiredness.</li> </ul>
1.5 generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbolic (legal status perceived as clearly influential)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support their families economically if possible</li> <li>• Study full time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptation to the U.S. schools' culture and language</li> <li>• ELL classes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of utility of educational credentials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New motivational source to pushes them to graduate:</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Pregnancy</li> </ul>

In Table 4, I conceptualize (schematically) the educational experiences of the undocumented young adults. I group the meanings given to education as symbolic or instrumental. The instrumental value indicates their perception that education could enhance their occupational opportunities and thus, that their legal status is not fully determinant of their occupational opportunities. The symbolic meaning was assigned when they mentioned how educational credentials would give them status and respect by families and friends. This symbolic meaning (of status and prestige) corresponds to the definition given for King (1978/2007) on his educational study. None of the participants had a negative approach to the U.S. educational system. None of them had a sense that the school was affecting their cultures negatively. In fact, despite their time in schools, all of them identified with their parents' cultures and ethnicity. Even Antonio, who came at age one and was more comfortable speaking in English than Spanish, did not think that his 'Mexicanness' was threatened (see Excerpt 12).

*Excerpt 12: Antonio, April, 2012.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Te consideras americano?
02	Antonio	No
03	Gemma	Para nada?
04	Antonio	No, soy mexicano!
English Translation		
01	Gemma	Do you consider yourself American?
02	Antonio	No
03	Gemma	Not at all?
04	Antonio	No, I am Mexican

Also, Antonio considered his own responsibility to speak Spanish and not the responsibility of the school. Several times, he asked me to remind him to speak Spanish

during our conversations. However, he moved to English unconsciously and I followed him. While he would not say so, his tendency to move to English reflected how school was in fact responsible of his subtractive bilingualism (Valenzuela, 1999).

This chapter also illustrates an incongruent irony: how, under the participants' circumstances, the more motivated they were to be in school the fewer possibilities they had to graduate. As this chapter discloses, the first-generation young adults were highly enthusiastic to be in school but had very small chances to graduate. On the other hand, the two 1.5-generation participants lacked motivation, but had more options to graduate due to their English skills, and their adaptation to the U.S. system. In fact, motivation seems to depend on the participants' awareness of the meaning of their legal status, and thus the longer the participants had been in the United States, the more time they had to discover the meaning of (il)legality, and consequently, to lose motivation in school. This seems to support Ogbu and Simons (1998) study, which claimed that minority students withdraw from school when they don't see a connection between academic credentials and occupational opportunities. In addition, this research has some commonalities with Portes and Rumbaut (2001) and Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) studies—even though they did not control for legal status. In their research, the immigrants who had been in the United States the longest had, in general, less academic aspirations and motivation than the most recent immigrants. This is also present in this study, those who had been the longest in the United States (Patricia and Antonio, the 1.5 generation) had less motivation and academic aspirations than the recent immigrants (the first-generation youths)—who were also less aware of the meaning of their illegality.

Further, this chapter supports the findings of Gonzales (2011) and Perez (2009) in highlighting how legal status, and in particular the lack of financial aid and occupational opportunities, hampers youths' high school graduation and college enrollment. Antonio and Patricia disclosed how enrolling in higher education required more than a mere love of learning, but also an instrumental purpose as well as financial support. Further, Antonio (not Patricia) also revealed how his high school graduation was hampered by his immigration status. Nevertheless, while this reality seems to be evident for the 1.5 generation, this reasoning does not transfer to the first-generation youths. The first-generation youths did not drop out for lacking financial aid or occupational opportunities, but due to their English skills and their personal expectation to financially support themselves.

Finally, in this chapter we observe how none of the participants had low motivation to be in school due to the belief that their race and ethnicity (in other words, racism) would limit their professional opportunities. All of them believed in the U.S. educational system as a path to personal recognition and economic success, and tended to base their academic attainment to their own work ethics and capacities. All of them believed that by *enchándole ganas* they could accomplish their dreams regardless of their circumstances. While they were aware of their need for bilingual teachers, of their economic hardships, and the limitations of their legal status, they still believed that by *echándole ganas* they could confront all obstacles and graduate from school. This vision essentializes their personal agency—illustrated by their *echándole ganas* expression that views one personal strength as *the* explanation to one's academic trajectories) and was revealed in several instances. For example, Antonio referred to his poor grades in terms of his laziness; Ri-

cardo dropped out from high school and felt that he was not strong enough to work and study full time; Sarita pointed out how she was not going to school because she was *floja* ('lazy'); and Noberto stated how by *echándole ganas* he would become an orator, a pastor, and a wealthy man thanks to MDE Latino his church leaders. At the end, through their assumption that they lacked strength, they supported the mainstream discourse that portrays them as lazy and unintelligent.

None of the participants blamed the school system or immigration policies to explain their academic attainment; on the contrary, they praised the U.S. educational system over the Mexican or Guatemalan ones and genuinely devalued the constraints imposed by the U.S. political structures. Therefore, their 'dual frame of reference' as well as the host society's discourses that transmit meritocratic values and stereotypical and discriminatory views on Latino immigrants affect immigrant youths' identity formation (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) as well as their perception as students.

## Chapter 6

### El Significado de (Il)legalidad en el Día a Día de los Jóvenes Indocumentados—

### The Meaning of (Il)legality in the Everyday Life of Undocumented Young Adults

This chapter examines the meaning these young adults give to their legal status. In the previous chapter on education, the meaning of (il)legality was underlying their academic and work experiences. Here, I analyze how they consciously talk about their legal status, how their legal status invades their private lives, and how this meaning of (il)legality evolves during their transition to adulthood.

This chapter draws from the literature on undocumented Latinos to reflect and analyze the experiences of the participants. The field has focused on how illegality is produced by the state (e.g., Coutin, 2005; De Genova, 2005; Ngai, 2004) and how state and local policies criminalize Latino American immigrants (e.g., Dick, 2011; Martin, 2009, Rumbaut, 2009, Schiffman & Weiner, 2012). However, very few studies explore how undocumented immigrants perceive their legal status and how they learn to live in illegality. Menjívar (2011) states how Central Americans who live in limbo (in process of regularizing their status) are “hyper aware” of their legal status and live in constant fear of deportation. Gonzales (2011) explores the life experiences of 1.5-generation young adults to discover three different phases of accommodation to legality based on youth’s ages (16 to 18 years old, 18 to 24, and 24 to 29). Abrego (2011) sees how the meaning of illegality differs from first- and 1.5-generation undocumented immigrants. She states how the first-generation immigrants see their illegality in terms of *fear* and the 1.5 generation in terms

of *stigma*. As we will see below, these rigid categories, based on age and generation (Abrego 2011; Gonzales, 2011), and the oppressive outlook on the meaning of legality (Menjívar, 2011), disregard the fluidity of the meaning of (il)legality and the strong connection of the perception of one's legal status with one's particular experiences.

This chapter is divided in three sections. I first analyze how undocumented young adults learn to live 'in illegality' and make sense of their lives as undocumented immigrants. This leads to an exploration of how these youths learn to perform *invisibility* for fear of deportation and discrimination, and to pursue a 'normalized' life. Finally, in the section on love, I explore how the personal lives of undocumented young adults are also affected by the pervasiveness of their legal status. Overall, this chapter demonstrates how the meaning of (il)legality is fluid and connected to the everyday experiences they encounter at work, in school, and with their families and friends. Further, it also illustrates that these youths show agency by their capacity to find strategies to avoid deportation and discrimination.

### **Legal Status: Understanding Their Everyday Life and Strategies for Performing Invisibility**

During the two years I spent with the participants, the theme of legality was mostly brought up by me or by them only when talking about their educational and work experiences. In general, when we talked about their daily lives, their legal status was not mentioned or was not placed in the center of their stories. They had assumed their legal status as permanent (except for Antonio who was regularizing his legal status and thus

was in a legal limbo [Menjívar, 2006]) and therefore, they adapted their lives around such reality. Rather than constantly thinking of their illegality they were able to find happiness in their daily lives. The normalization of their undocumented lives is explained by Antonio in Excerpt 13:

*Excerpt 13: Antonio, April, 2011.*

Original		
01	Gemma	So you try to have a normal life and kind of forgetting it? putting it aside?
02	Antonio	I don't think about it at all right now! If I think about it, it is maybe from people that ask
03		about it.
04	Gemma	Like me! hehe.
05	Antonio	Yes, but other than that, in another way no (.) I mean, <i>tengo tengo que enfocarme en la</i>
06		<i>escuela but puedo tener un degree</i> <sup>a</sup> . But then what! So, afterwards it will affect me. It
07		will be like “oh you bastards! I paid this amount and now what!”
08	Gemma	Yeah
09	Antonio	Other than that, oh well I live...
10	Gemma	...are you happy?
11	Antonio	Of course not having documents is affecting my happiness. But I am happy. I have a
12		home, food to eat, and work. I am good, I am happy.

<sup>a</sup> I mean I have to focus on school but I can have a degree but then what?

In this excerpt, Antonio puts into words why the participants do not bring their legal status into conversation most of the time: “I don’t think about it at all right now!” (line 2). While Antonio, as well as the other participants, are aware that their lives are fully affected by their legal status (lines 6–7), they learned to accept their undocumented lives and find meaning within their limited options and opportunities (lines 11–12). He was focused on attending school and doing the homework, working part time, and being with his family and friends. Antonio, as well as the other participants, was able to normalize his life as an undocumented young adult and, as he says, “to find happiness within his reach.” As Antonio reveals, happiness is not an ‘all or nothing’ sentiment, but an

emotion that is partially affected by his legal status (lines 10–12). Antonio’s excerpt reveals how under the Bamberg et al. (2011) approach, he shows agency. Bamberg et al. (2011) explained how in discourse, those who show agency position themselves as “strong, in control and self-determined” (p. 187). In other words, their sense of self comes through their discourse as agents who construct the world rather than as ‘undergoers’ who are being constructed by the world. Antonio shows agency by disclosing himself as an individual aware of the meaning of his legal status (lines 6-7) who chooses to be happy and value what he has rather than focusing on what he does not have (lines 11-12). However, as we will see below, this sentiment varies by situation, is rooted in daily experiences, and his understanding of happiness is influenced by his college attendance.

In addition to accommodating to their legal reality, participants co-constructed with others and with me the meaning of their legal status as they experienced school, work, family; in other words, their lives in the United States. As Ricardo explains in Excerpt 14, his perception of legality changed during the six years he had been in the U.S. In fact, I was able to experience his change in attitude during the two years of the study. His perception of legality was highly influenced by his work, his family, and his educational experiences. When I met him for first time in 2010, he pointed out how ‘from the beginning I *knew* I didn’t have documents but I *had* to accept it. *Still* one of my dreams *is* to have documents ... and *visit* my grandmother in Mexico and make true the dreams I have here; my italics, Ricardo, June, 2010). In this quote he uses the past tense (see italics) to state how ‘he had to accept’ his lack of documents, but he changes to the present tense to remark that he has *yet* not accepted his legal condition since he still dreams to

regulate his legal status and visit his grandmother. His grandmother died in March 2011, and by the end of 2011, he had become less frustrated and more accepting of his legal condition, a time in which he finally found a job in which he felt respected by his co-workers and supervisors, and where he received a salary above the minimal wage. In addition, by the end of 2011 he was not attending school anymore. As he stated,

*Excerpt 14: Ricardo, December, 2011.*

Original	
01	Gemma Cómo piensas estos días en eso de ser un ‘ilegal’? ((haciendo comillas con las manos))
02	Ricardo Me da igual creo. Ya me da igual! Porque de todos modos siempre he sobrevivido y
03	como sé que en general he vivido de esta manera
04	Gemma Y antes, te importaba más que ahora?
05	Ricardo Antes sí, pero ahorita no me interesa.
06	Gemma Mmm, and porque no te interesa ya?
07	Ricardo Pues porque siempre he vivido de esta manera. O sea antes decía yo decía yo quisiera
08	tener papeles papeles para obtener un buen trabajo, pero ahora me da igual porque voy a
09	poder sobrevivir siendo legal o no. Ilegal, aquí quien trabaja eres TU no los papeles.
10	Trabajas de cualquier manera, uno busca la manera de tratar de buscar un buen trabajo o
11	tratar de trabajar. Como digo, los que trabajan son las personas, es uno y no los papeles.
English Translation	
01	Gemma How do you think these days about being an ‘illegal’? ((indicates quotation marks with her hands))
02	Ricardo I don’t care I think. I don’t care! Because anyway I always have survived and
03	since I know that in general I have lived this way
04	Gemma And before, did it matter more than now?
05	Ricardo Earlier on yes, but now I am not interested in it.
06	Gemma Mmm, and why aren’t you interested anymore?
07	Ricardo Well because I always lived this way. So, before I used to say I used to say I would like
08	to have papers to get a better job but now I don’t care because I am going to be
09	able to survive being legal or not. Illegal, here who works it’s YOU and not the papers.
10	You work anyway, one looks for the way to find a good job or
11	to try to work. As I say, those who work are people, it’s oneself and not the papers.

By 2012, Ricardo had fully changed his perception of his legal status, from dreaming about regulating this status in 2010, to an “I don’t care!” statement at the end of 2011 (line 2). To explain his drastic change (that is highly affected by having found hap-

piness at work) he describes his unauthorized life as the life he has ‘always’ lived (line 7). By using ‘always’ rather than about a third of his life (six years out of 21), he transmits a sense of adaptation, acceptance, and stability of his undocumented life. Having worked continuously for the six years he had been in the U.S., he realized that the papers could not take away his agency, his capacity to work, to find happiness, and make a living. In his discourse it is the ‘person’ rather than ‘the papers’ who are central in his life experiences (lines 9–11); thus fostering a positive sense of self and attitude toward life in the U.S. under his unsettling conditions. He does not view his person as constructed in and through the legal discourse (not having papers) but as a person who agentively constructs who he is (Bamberg et al., 2011). Finally, he defines the limitations of his legal status in terms of work opportunities (not as limiting his academic opportunities or his sense of belonging). Since he found ways to work he was able to transcend one of the main limitations of his legal status. For him, this was the most important or only limitation since he believed that by *échandole ganas* he could graduate from school and he had a strong sense of Mexicanness and connection to Mexico, and thus he had no need to feel identified with the U.S.

While all participants were able to make sense of their lives in the U.S. from a positive lens, at different moments, all of them felt particularly vulnerable and aware of the impediments of their legal status. That seemed to impact their self-esteem and their happiness. As Ricardo said in June 2010, when I asked how he felt about being undocumented, he stated,

me siento menos que todos; me siento como a veces me siento como inútil  
o no sé, yo siempre he tenido esa idea, me siento el hombre más feo del

mundo, que la depresión me hace a veces me hace que me siento más bajo que cualquiera.

I feel less than anybody else; I feel like sometimes I feel like useless or I don't know. I always have had this idea, I feel the ugliest man in the world, depression makes me sometimes makes me feel lower than anybody.

Ricardo expressed these feelings at a time when he was working and studying fulltime unsuccessfully, a particularly stressful time that did not help him to hold a positive conception of himself but to blame himself for not being *strong* enough to study and work. In a similar note, Antonio was discussing with his friend Victor their feelings of belonging in the U.S., and for the first time (with me) he was able to fully disclose his sense of helplessness:

no joke cause I was crying the other day about that fuck, cause I don't belong you know.... you know some days you are in a mood that you are so depressed that you can think so much about the bad things but that's the problem we cannot think about the bad things; think about the good things. If anything, that I have learned from psychology. (Antonio, November, 2011)

As Antonio has learned in school and in his own skin, he needs to avoid focusing in the consequences of his legal status to find happiness and hold meaning in his life. However, he arrived at age one in the U.S. and has had no place to call home since. In addition, Antonio's meaning of legality has also been affected by his enrollment in college. While he, as the rest of the participants, has learned to accept his condition as undocumented, college has also given him new lens to look at the world, his legal condition, his happiness, and to question his beliefs:

Excerpt 15: Antonio, December, 2011.

Original		
01	Gemma	Do you think that what it means to be undocumented has changed since you started college in the past year?
02		
03	Antonio	Yes, definitely. <i>Antes</i> , I mean, <i>yo pensaba</i> , I
04		actually believed the media that we don't pay
05		taxes. I was thinking that.
06	Gemma	<i>Pero tu pagabas taxas no?</i>
07	Antonio	<i>Sí, pero</i> I believed what I heard in the media but
08		it is
09		not true. Now that I am in school, I have done
10		research <i>y comprendo mejor la situación</i> .
11		(‘and I understand the situation better’)
12	Gemma	Why do you think that the media is lying?
13	Antonio	Mmm, now I don't remember how I connected them both... I will put it this way, I see
14		more things now. Now I read more about it and understand better...
15	Gemma	...ahora estás viendo más discriminación
16		(‘Now you see more discrimination’)
17		y antes (before college) no
18		(‘and before [before college] no’)
19	Antonio	No es tanto que es dicriminación
20		(‘It's not as much about discrimina-
21		tion’)
22		it is like, it is subtle discrimination; not explicit but implicit. Not telling your shit up
23		front.

In Excerpt 15, Antonio suggested that the media influences the self-perception of undocumented young adults and consequently on having a positive or negative image of themselves (lines 3–5). He became aware that he is a better person than he thought he was once he was able to challenge his previous mainstream knowledge that criminalized undocumented immigrants for not paying taxes. Attending college, and in particular the learning he has embraced in college, has renewed his sense of self, or as Moje and Lewis (2007) would put it, this learning has remade Antonio into a new self. This new perception of himself supports Moje and Lewis (2007), and Lave (1996) arguments that indicate how learning can be conceptualized as shifts in one's identity. Antonio was the only participant to attend college during these two years of the research. He made evident then, how college brings an extra layer of awareness and critical thinking on the meaning of

legality that can lead to positive self-awareness but also to incorporate social and political mistrust (lines 7, 8, and 12). He is more resentful with respect to politics, and more critical of the media; and while he points out how he mostly does not think of his legal status, college's assignments make him dig on his legal condition and reconstruct his legal identity. In other words, entering into college meant to gain access to new discourses and in particular a new discourse community (Discourse) that provides him with tools and relationships to remake his self-perception. Further, he had to orchestrate these new discourses together with the discourses of the mainstream community and produce his own voice (Bakhtin, 1981).

Transitioning to adulthood is a period of “enabling identity transformations” (Rumbaut, 2005, p. 1043), a time in which the participants are exposed to many different experiences and thus maturing, learning, and becoming more aware of the consequences of their legal status. This explains that they all had moments of sadness, feelings of depression, anger, and frustration when they realized they could not obtain financial aid, had no place to call home, were aware of media misinformation, or were rejected from work due to their legal status. Being rejected from work opportunities due to their legal status happened to all participants (except for Antonio who always worked in the same coffee place): Diego and Ricardo had their fake social security numbers checked and had to leave work. Patricia was offered a position in a Wells Fargo and was not able to take it, and Sarita was asked by her manager to be promoted at her fast food restaurant but her undocumented status prevented that from happening.

In addition, the participants also expressed frustration when they realized that they could not qualify for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. All but Sarita, who arrived at age 18, showed enthusiasm with the new 2012 policy, and had the initial expectation to regulate their legal status. For instance, in December 2011, (see above) Ricardo stated how he did not care anymore about his legal status. In June 2012, after President Obama's speech, however, he told me, *necesito terminar la high school, agarrar el GED, me quedé así wow! Oh my god! Que chido!...porque llegué a los 16 años, califico no?* ('I need to finish high school, to get the GED, I was like wow! Oh my god! How cool!...because I arrived at age 16, and I qualify, don't I?'). Or Diego told me 'did you hear the news? I am going to regulate my legal status!' (Diego, June, 2012). However, none of them was able to regulate their legal status, not even Diego who arrived in the U.S. 5 days before his 16th birthday. He was not able to demonstrate this fact. Patricia, who came at age 12, was not able to qualify because she was deported in 2008 and the DACA policy requires undocumented youths to have been in the U.S. for at least 5 consecutive years. The feeling of frustration was clear in Patricia when in October 2012 her lawyer informed her that she could not qualify. At that moment she wrote the following statement in Facebook:

Por no escuchar los consejos de mis viejos ni medir las consecuencias no podre ir a mi Mexico hasta k haya nueva ley y todo por pendeja..mi pinche recor.

For not listening the advice of my parents and measure the consequences (of being deported) I won't be able to go to my Mexico until a new policy passes and all for being stupid...my stupid record.

In this statement, Patricia shows frustration, but not towards the legal system or the limitations of the new policy, but towards herself, for having been deported and not having thought of potential consequences of deportation. This sense of guilt (she calls herself stupid) and her sense of agency make her dismiss the powerful role of the structures in affecting her life. She felt frustrated for not having listened to her parents who told her not to go to Texas. But she did not show anger or frustration to the state patrol agent who stopped her for no apparent reason. While being deported has highly limited her agency—she has not been able to obtain a work permit—she also learned from the experience. Learning brings agency, and as we will see in Excerpt 16, the learning experience she had in Texas gave her the capacity to tactically develop new strategies to avoid deportation in Minnesota.

Nevertheless, apart from periods of time and moments in which their anger and frustration manifested, they were able to make sense of their lives in the U.S. through the happiness that family and friends brought, and by comparing their lives from their own experiences or family discourses about Mexico or Guatemala<sup>24</sup>. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) define this capacity to compare experiences from their home countries as having a ‘dual frame of reference’. This frame enables recent immigrants to feel that their lives in the United States are better than their lives left behind and provide psychological support in understanding their lives in the U.S. However, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) compare first- and second-generation immigrants and aver how the second generation lacks this dual frame of reference and has more difficulties to accept

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<sup>24</sup> As Ricardo explained ‘Earlier [in Mexico] we were really poor. I know that the only thing we ate were toasts with beans and cheese. Well, not even cheese because we just put salt on hard tortillas...we did not have food to eat’ (June, 2012).

their lives in the United States as optimal. However, Antonio, who came in the United States at age one and could be considered a second-generation immigrant was able to relate to his parents' Mexican experiences and believe that his life in the United States was better than if he had lived in Mexico. However, as we saw above, he was also the participant who had the most difficulty in developing a sense of belonging, since he had no place to call home.

In this section, we see how young adults adapt to living as undocumented Latinos. They are able to focus on their everyday lives and partly keep their minds off of their legal limitations. However, these young adults also expressed anger and frustration at several points in their lives as a consequence of their legal status. This adaptation to their legal reality is not steady but actually quite rocky since they are not immune to policy in their daily experiences. While Ricardo adapted to his reality, he clearly showed a continuing reconstruction of the meaning of his legal status. In June 2010 he gave to his legal status a meaning of immobility by claiming the impossibility to visit his grandmother in Mexico. In December 2011 he gave to his legal status an occupational meaning and rejected caring about his legal status anymore since he was happily working at that point. By June 2012, he gave to his legal status a meaning of opportunity when he stated 'how cool!' when he saw the opportunity to qualify for DACA and become documented. However, when I asked in September 2012 if he had found out with a lawyer his possibilities to regulate his status he stated *ahorita estoy mas enfocado en otras cosas...perdí el amor de mi vida* '(right now I am more focus on other things...I lost the love of my life').

As we will see below in the last section called “Love and Legal Status,” participants prioritize love over their legal status. Their need for love becomes more important than their need to regulate their immigration status. Further, Ricardo also reveals how everyday life shapes the meaning of illegality. While his legal status always affects his possibilities of mobility and of finding work, these limitations become more or less accentuated at different times; thus illustrating how the meaning of legality is fluid and adaptable to these youths’ lives.

### **Rejecting Fear While Acting on Fear:**

#### **Performing Invisibility (Pasar Desapercibidos)**

In this section, I focus on how participants learn to perform invisibility to hide their undocumented self. Living in invisibility gives them more opportunities to work, make a living, and remain in the United States. Further, I illustrate that while most participants reject the notion of fearing deportation, they all acted on that very same fear of deportation and discrimination.

All participants adapted to the limitations given by their legal status and showed agency and capability to adapt, shift their identities, and modify their lives as undocumented immigrants. They all found ways to live a ‘normalized’ life in which work, family, and love were fundamental. To live a ‘normal’ life meant to learn to keep their undocumented selves as invisible as possible in public. While living like ‘documented’ people (and thus hiding their undocumented status) was necessary to survive (work) and remain in the U.S. (avoid deportation), making a living and developing their own life trajectories

implied putting in danger their invisibility. Half of the participants drove without a driving license (the other three did not drive), all of them worked using ‘fake’ social security numbers, and Diego and Ricardo bought ‘good’ social security numbers when they had their fake numbers checked. Surviving as an undocumented person forced them to live against the law and to find resources that promoted more risky unlawful practices—such as practicing identity theft (buying good social security numbers) to have more chances of stable work. This search for strategies in performing and redefining their legal identities came from their agentic selves and from the learning they received from the experiences of the undocumented immigrants of their communities; in other words, they use their cultural models (Gee, 2004) and funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) to find resources to improve their lives.

Patricia showed agency in finding strategies to live a ‘normalized’ life, and in being strategic in keeping her undocumented self as invisible as possible. As we stated above, Patricia had been deported together with her boyfriend and son in 2008 when they were driving in Texas and were stopped by a border patrol for no apparent reason. Such traumatic learning experience explains her strong emphasis in keeping maximum invisibility while driving. While Patricia could not change the color of her skin and the attitude of police towards racial profiling, she did change the type of car she drove. In November 2011 she bought a car that was \$10,000 and in excellent shape.

*Excerpt 16: Patricia, March, 2012.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Es caro este carro, el mío me costó 2 mil de segunda mano pero el tuyo 10 mil es mucho!
02	Patricia	Sí ya, pero fijate que me da menos miedo manejar con este carro.

03	Gemma	Miedo por?
04	Patricia	Por la policía, siento menos siento menos, como me siento más segura más capaz de
05		manejar en un carro que ellos no pueden imaginar que una latina lo traiga, una ilegal lo
06		traiga.
07	Gemma	Ya
08	Patricia	Siento que como que no me ponen tanta atención porque hay carros, y yo me
09		acuerdo que namás se quedan viendo, namás para ver si se pone nerviosa o no se pone
10		nerviosa.
11	Gemma	Has visto eso?
12	Patricia	Ooohh sii! Yo con el otro carro, el otro carro que traía era un poco más tensa, que a lo
13		mejor le fallaba una luz, a lo mejor me hallaba, como que estaba yo másss—
14	Gemma	Preocupada.
15	Patricia	Como ahorita si yo quiero ir a xxx (kids' party center), nos vamos a llevar el gris
16		porque es más seguro, es más cierto. No hay ningún peligro de llegar de aquí a allá.
English Translation		
01	Gemma	It's expensive this car, mine it was 2,000 second hand but yours 10,000 is a lot!
02	Patricia	Yes of course, but see how it makes me less fearful to drive with this car.
03	Gemma	Fear of?
04	Patricia	Of the police, I feel less I feel less, like I feel more secure more able to
05		drive in a car in which they cannot imagine that a Latina is driving it, an illegal person
06		has it.
07	Gemma	Yeah
08	Patricia	I feel that they don't put that much attention on me because there are cars, and I
09		remember how they just keep looking at, just to see if she gets nervous or does not get
10		nervous.
11	Gemma	Have you seen that?
12	Patricia	Ooohh yees! With the other car I drove I felt a bit more tense, that maybe the
13		light was broken, maybe they found me, like I was like moore—
14	Gemma	Worried.
15	Patricia	Like if now I want to go to xxx (kids' party center), we are going to take the gray one
16		because it is more secure, it is more certain. There is no danger to get from here to there.

Patricia clearly states how her strategic search for invisibility is based on her fear of deportation (lines 2–6). For Patricia, being able to live a ‘normalized’ life required hiding her undocumented identity. She shows agency in interpreting and understanding how police behave (through looking at the car Latinos drive, see line 8) and finding measures to go beneath the radar. However, such strategy also meant to spend much more money on a car. To assure less visibility and thus, more safety, cost her more money. This is also the case for those who want to buy a ‘good’ rather than fake social security number, the former being much more expensive (about \$1,500). While being undocumented is by it-

self an expensive practice (crossing the border and paying lawyers for legal consultation can cost thousands of dollars), adding extra measures of invisibility is very costly. Living a ‘normalized’ life and faking a documented identity means spending large amounts of money, a solution that becomes extremely difficult when saving money becomes almost impossible under minimum wage salaries. However, the fear of being arrested and the need to work pushed them to find new strategies during their young adult years.

While all participants aimed to hide their undocumented identity in public, all rejected the notion of fearing deportation (except for Patricia who expressed fear behind her decision to buy an expensive car). They expressed to live ‘normal’ lives in which they did not often think about their legal status, nevertheless, they all took initiatives to protect themselves from being deported or from being perceived by the public as undocumented individuals. Therefore, while they *discursively* rejected the notion of fear and expressed how they lived ‘normal’ lives, in reality, they *acted* on their fear of deportation and discrimination.

In the last few years, several undocumented young adults have ‘come out’ as undocumented individuals in the media (Jones, 2010, Seif, 2011), most of them were successful college students or professionals (such as José Antonio Vargas<sup>25</sup>) highly invested in politics. More commonly, undocumented youths—like these participants—actually developed strategies that helped them to *pasar desapercibidos* (‘go unnoticed’). Going unnoticed allowed them to avoid potential discrimination, job loss, animosity, and deportation—not just for themselves but also for their families.

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<sup>25</sup> Jose Antonio Vargas He worked for The San Francisco Chronicle, The Philadelphia Daily News, The Washington Post and the Huffington Post. He came out publicly in 2011 (Vargas, 2011). He is now an activist for his advocacy group Define American.

*Pasar desapercibidos* was what Sarita said undocumented immigrants had to do in order to live in the United States. They had to avoid working in places where there are more possibilities to get the social security number checked and avoid situations in which their invisibility was in danger. Prior to the following excerpt, Sarita was telling me how she would like to work for a U.S. clothing store, but how, in these clothing stores she would get her social security number checked right away. This realization made her conclude the following:

*Excerpt 17: Sarita, March, 2011.*

Original	
01	Sarita Yo siento que un inmigrante que no tiene seguro lo que quiere tratar de hacer
02	aquí es pasar desapercibido. La mayoría, no sé si lo has notado, pero
03	casi no ves a ningún hispano trabajando en ninguna de estas tiendas (en a mal) porque
04	saben que si entran lo más seguro es que les chequeen su seguro...
05	...la mayoría de nosotros pensamos que pasa [lo de ser deportado] porque pasa algo.
06	Sabemos como estamos en este país y lo mínimo que tenemos que hacer es respetar
07	sus leyes. Se supone que si no cumplimos es obvio de que vengan a por nosotros. Mi
08	mamá ya lleva 6 años, jamás ha tenido problemas y sigue acá. Mis
09	tíos que llevan bastante, mi papá ya tenía aquí como 19 años y jamás tuvo
10	problemas. Pero hace un año también faltó a corte (como uno de sus amigos) y también se
11	lo llevaron, a él y a su esposa.
English Translation	
01	Sarita I feel that an immigrant who does not have a social security what he/she wants to try to do
02	here is to go unnoticed. Most of them, I don't know if you have noticed that, but it is
03	almost unseen to see an Hispano working in any of these stores (in a mall) because they
04	know that if they get in most likely that they will get their social securities checked...
05	... most of us think that it happens [to be deported] because something happens.
06	We know how we are in this country and the bear minimum we have to do is to respect
07	their laws. It's clear that if we don't follow the rules obviously they come for us.
08	My mom has been here 6 years, never has had problems and she continues here. My
09	uncles have been here for a while, my dad had been here for 19 years and he never had
10	problems. But a year ago he also skipped court (like one of her friends) and he was also
11	deported, he and his wife.

In this excerpt we see how Sarita takes culpability for her 'illegality' and accepts that she needs to 'at the bear minimum' be invisible and respect the law (lines 6–7). In

other words, she assimilated the mainstream messages that target her as an ‘illegal’ person and responds to it by living in anonymity and respecting the rules. She believes that not getting in trouble is not just the *only* way but the *right* way to remain in the United States (lines 6–7). And it is through the experiences of her family and friends that she learned the meaning of acting ‘wrong’—wrong here means not following the rules, which leads to visibility and deportation. She does not state which rules she means, but based on the experiences of her father and friend who were deported, she implies that undocumented immigrants cannot drink and drive, or get a ticket and avoid court, which were the issues that deportees she knew faced. Therefore, in this excerpt 17 Sarita is stating how she does not perform invisibility out of fear of deportation but actually out of respect to the U.S.

In addition, through the experiences and discourses of friends and family Sarita has learned not just the importance of going to court if cited but also of where not to work in order to keep her invisible status (lines 2–4). These funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) and cultural model (Gee, 2004) were common among all participants who were aware of which work places checked or could check their social security numbers and thus could disclose their legal identity. Finally, in Sarita’s Excerpt 17, we see how she blurs the distinction between racial identity and documented identity and portrays the Hispanic population of Minnesota as undocumented (lines 2–3). While she is aware of the fallacy of her words (that not all Latino immigrants are undocumented), she repeats the dominant discourses of the media that pervasively portray undocumented immigrants as criminals and as Hispanic (Rumbaut, 2009). This belief in the media explains why Sarita self-identifies

as an immigrant who is *guilty* of living in the U.S., and normalizes her performance of an invisible self. Her discourse constructs her persona underneath the sociopolitical and structural forces she lives in, and thus she does not focus on her agency but on the power of structures in defining who she is. Perhaps, and based on Antonio's experience in college, Sarita would have not been so comfortable and acceptant of being targeted as an 'illegal immigrant' if she had attended college.

As previously stated, these youths often avoided using the word *fear* to describe their lives in the U.S. but at the same time, they all showed agency in developing strategies to protect themselves from deportation and discrimination. This attitude was also common in Antonio's paradoxical vision of his unauthorized life. Antonio stated that *yo nunca he tenido miedo de ser arrestado* ('I have never been scared of being arrested'; Oct, 2010). However, Antonio never drove and avoided talking to his coworkers and professors about his legal situation. In a sense, he had no fear of being arrested because he was sure to hide his legal status and did not participate in activities (driving) that might uncover his legal status. In the following excerpt, Antonio and I discussed his fear to talk to coworkers and professors about this legal status. At work, he had a conversation with his coworker and friend about not traveling to Mexico. He didn't say the entire truth when he simply stated *no quiero ir* ('I don't want to go'; February, 2011). Further, he avoided writing about his legal status in a high school writing assignment that asked him about an event or situation that had affected his life. And, in his college English class, he did a group presentation on immigration that talked about undocumented youths, and while he was openly supportive of unauthorized migration, he never identified himself as

one. I asked him about those decisions, and he, as usual, was resistant to state that his attitude was based on fear.

*Excerpt 18: Antonio, April, 2011.*

		Original	
01	Gemma	You can talk about your situation to everyone but at the same time, here [at work], you don't	
02			
03	Antonio	<i>Solamente aquí</i>	because <i>por el trabajo</i> ('Just here because of work')
04	Gemma	<i>Pero a los profesores tampoco</i>	('But to the professors either')
05	Antonio	Oh, I don't care about that.	
06	Gemma	But you didn't want to write about it on your assignments.	
07	Antonio	I would	
08	Gemma	You wouldn't	
09	Antonio	They don't need to know. It is something I don't care about, it is just school you know,	
10		<i>para que tienen que saber ellos. Aquí no</i>	('why do they need to know. Here no
11		<i>porque es mi trabajo porque pueden</i>	because is my work because they can
12		<i>chequear, solamente por eso</i>	check, just for that')
13	Gemma	I am not saying that you shouldn't be worried about talking about it and if you wanted to	
14		keep that as a secret is because it's dangerous.	

In this excerpt, Antonio makes it clear that at work he does not want to talk about his legal status and that professors don't need to know about it (lines 3–5). Differently from Gonzales's (2010) findings that illustrate how disclosing the legal status to teachers can lead to academic support and information for college, Antonio does not think that coming out can be helpful for him. While he did not clearly mention why he never brought up his legal status in school it was likely due to potential misjudgment and the unknown consequences. For instance, in a previous interview, when I asked if he was worried that people would think of him as a bad person if they knew of his legal status he admitted that he somehow worried of dealing with those who *empiecen a actuar diferente towards me* ('start acting differently towards me'; Antonio, February, 2011). In other words, his act of keeping his legal self hidden was driven by fear of misjudgment and

other unknown consequences. At work, stating his legal status could lead to checking his social security number and the numbers of the four close family members who worked with him. Antonio was religiously careful of not saying the word “undocumented” aloud when he was talking with me at work; he was always extremely protective of his family<sup>26</sup>.

Unlike the other participants who were very cautious at work to keep their legal status hidden, Patricia as well as Noberto revealed their legal status to the members of their Multilevel Marketing (MLM)<sup>27</sup> companies since this was ‘normalized’ and considered a clear reason why they should be members of the company. These companies were giving an alternative path towards educational and economic opportunities—a path in which legal status had no significance. Therefore, they were able to disclose their legal selves at work without fear of repercussion since most entrepreneurs and leaders were or had been themselves undocumented immigrants.

In contrast, with new social security numbers, Ricardo and Diego performed a new legal identity. They used ‘good’ social security numbers at work after having had their previous ‘fake’ social security numbers checked. For Ricardo, working under a different name was uncomfortable. He continued to hide his true identity at work and pretended he was someone else; he continued to perform invisibility by wearing a mask.

estoy trabajando con un nombre falso.... me sacan cosas y temas así como que como que no contesto. No contesto en esos momentos porque qué puedo contestar si yo no soy la persona que creen.

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<sup>26</sup> In Chapter 5, Antonio commented on how during most of his high school years doubted that school could improve his life: ‘I didn’t see it that way, *no tengo documentos* (‘I don’t have documents’), I cannot go to college’ (Antonio, October, 2010). That conversation took place at his work place and this setting most likely explains why he avoided saying in English ‘I don’t have documents’ while most of the conversation was in English.

<sup>27</sup> Multilevel marketing (MLM) is a general term for businesses in which the salesperson is compensated not only for product sales, but also for recruitment of additional salespeople who work ‘down-line’ as product distributors and recruiters (Koehn, 2001).

I am working with a false name... they talk about things and themes then like I don't answer. I don't answer in those moments because I cannot answer if I am not the person they think. (Ricardo, March, 2012)

In this quote, Ricardo shows insecurity. He had a feeling of discomfort by performing a different persona and hiding his real self. He felt uncomfortable lying about doing taxes and talking about the possibility to go to Mexico when his coworkers asked about it. While he could not do taxes (they belonged to someone else) and was still unable to travel outside the U.S., his coworkers assumed he could travel to Mexico and get his money back through taxes. However, he was fearful and did not feel confident enough to disclose his true identity to his coworkers- even to those who had no documents. [*M]e da pena si me entiendes y que digan "ay! es ilegal" o así* ('I feel bad if you understand me and that they say "ay! he is illegal" or like that'; Ricardo, March, 2012). He did not want to lose status among his colleagues. Furthermore, he did not know what could happen if they found out he was undocumented.

All participants had to perform different identities to disclose or disguise their undocumented identity. In some cases they disclosed their true legal status (at home, with friends), and at some other moments they performed a 'documented' or 'ambiguous' legal identity. Similarly to Sigona's study (2012) on undocumented immigrants in the UK, the participants of this study had to decide how much to disclose to friends, teachers, and coworkers. While most of them did not express fear in revealing their legal status, keeping an ambiguous legal identity seemed more logical in unknown spaces, or situations in which they felt unsure about the responses and consequences from others. In other words, while rejecting feeling fear of being arrested or deported they actively prevented visibility

due to societal discrimination and potential deportation—or in Sarita’s case, for respect to the U.S. laws.

These youths were very aware of their ‘deportability’ status (De Genova, 2004). Deportability is a structural limitation that forces them to become agentic individuals in portraying invisibly. As we saw, they bought expensive cars, good social security numbers, kept their legal self secretive, and many of them aimed to buy a house back in their home countries. The purpose of buying a house was actually twofold: (a) to go and visit family (or actually live there) and, (b) to have a place to stay in case of deportation. Diego sometimes would actually state his desire to go back to Mexico to live there. As he told me, *quiero vivir en Mexico en unos años y comprarme una casa allá* (‘in some years I want to live in Mexico and to buy a house there’; Diego, June, 2011). This illustrates his strong ties to his home country. At other times, though, he showed agency in preparing himself for a potential deportation when talking about his interest in buying a house in Mexico. For instance, I asked Diego his preference between going to college and working full time. I wanted to understand the reasoning behind his preferences. Excerpt 19 shows his answer:

*Excerpt 19: Diego, January, 2011.*

Original		
01	Diego	Pues, trabajar porque sabes que vas pa Mexico y cómo llevo
02	Gemma	O sea que si un día te agarran si no tienes dinero que?
03	Diego	No tengo dinero no tengo casa a dónde voy?
04	Gemma	Por eso piensas que es mejor trabajar?
05	Diego	Y que yo también le quiero ayudar a mi papa, por el proceso [de ciudadanía] que está
06		haciendo también.
English Translation		
01	Diego	Well, work because you know that you go to Mexico and how I get there
02	Gemma	So that if one day they get you, if you don’t have money what [do you do]?

03	Diego	I don't have money I don't have a house where do I go?
04	Gemma	That is the reason why you think it is better to work?
05	Diego	And also because I want to help my dad, for the process of [citizenship] he is
06		doing also.

Ricardo, Patricia and Noberto echoed Diego's proactive outlook. All of them wanted to buy a house in their home countries for pleasure but also to have a safe place in case of deportation. As Ricardo said in June 2012 *yo sé que no estoy seguro que en este país, se que algún día me van a sacar* ('I know that I am not safe in this country, I know that someday they will kick me out'). These young adults fear that, for reasons based on policy, their time in the United States is temporary. All of them knew of family members who have been deported, and while Sarita thought that by following 'the right rules' they would not be deported, there were many examples of relatives that had been deported unexpectedly. Antonio's grandfather was deported because 'they went to get him at work I don't know why, but they got him and returned him to Mexico' (Antonio, October, 2010). The same happened to Patricia, as she was unexpectedly stopped by a border patrol for no apparent reason and also deported to Mexico. When I confronted Sarita with the quotidian unexpected possibilities of deportation, she responded *las cosas pasan por algo quizás su vida aquí su vida no estaba acá; tal vez está allá* ('things happen for a reason. Perhaps his life here [of a friend who was deported], his life was not here; maybe it is over there'; Sarita, October, 2010).

Sarita's prefers not to judge governmental practices or to feel fear about potential deportation. She believes in practicing 'the right rules', and if even she is deported under these right practices she will simply believe that her life was not anymore in the United

States but in Mexico. In other words, she claimed to believe in her *fate*, that ‘things happen for a reason’. Sarita’s approach helped her to make sense of her life from a positive lens; not to blame others or the political system but to believe that it is her fate that explains her present and future life experiences.

In these first two sections of this chapter, we see how undocumented young adults mostly do not talk about their legal status and seem to focus on finding happiness in their lives. Their legal status affects their everyday life but they learn to accommodate to their realities and mostly to not talk about their undocumented status. We also see how living a ‘normalized’ life implies performing invisibility and finding strategies to remain invisible. By hiding their legal self they intend to remain in the United States and avoid discrimination. This invisible performance is based on fear, a sentiment they mostly deny, but on which they also act. Abrego (2011) states that the first-generation immigrants feel *fear* when they think of the meaning of their legal status and the 1.5 generation feel they are *stigmatized* by it. In this ethnographic study, we see how the meaning of (il)legality cannot be dichotomized since both fear and stigma (as well as acceptance/resignation) are part of their lives. Also, this study reveals that these youths do not live paralyzed by fear or in a state of ‘hyper legal awareness’ (e.g., Menjívar, 2011). Menjívar portrays her participants as constantly fearful and depressed while she focuses on “the power of the state in constituting and reconstituting immigrants through the legal categories it creates” (p. 378). In other words, she omits her participants’ sense of strength and agency.

Participants’ actions and discourses reveal how the evolution and adaptation of the meaning of (il)legality is closer to Gonzales’s (2011) study. Gonzales (2011) reports

that there are three phases of transition to adulthood—phases that show a gradual acceptance of the meaning of illegality. First, he describes *discovery* (16–18), second *learning to be illegal* (18 to 24), and third *copying* (24 to 29). While my study focuses on young adults who are 18 to 24, and in the phase of ‘learning to be illegal’, all of them already are learning how to cope with their illegality. Further, this study reveals how the process of learning to be illegal is different by each participant based on their contexts and experiences. All learn to assess when and where to disclose their legal status and show agency in constructing their lives rather than simply accepting their life as low-wage workers, as Gonzales (2011) suggests.

In fact, all these youths aimed to live like any other young adult but they actually had to learn how to be undocumented young adults. They learned to perform a documented self in some situations and in others to hide their undocumented identity. They had to use their funds of knowledge to search for jobs and to decide where and to whom to disclose their legal status. While these youths’ lives were framed by their lack of papers, they were able to give agency to their persona rather than to their papers (see Excerpt 14) in discourse as well as to focus on the issues and interests that characterize many documented young adults: belonging to their community of friends, having a family life, finding love, and being able to make money to buy what they needed and wanted. To keep a positive sense of self, undocumented young adults must find spaces “in which they can make life meaningful...[and] try to sustain a proud sense of self despite state policies that strip them of dignity” (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 253). For these six participants

those spaces were at home with the family, with their partners, with their friends, at the MLM businesses, and for Noberto and Diego, at church.

### **Love and Legal Status**

Undocumented young adults talked about seeking happiness in different ways; and how love, work, friends, and family seemed to be the main sources of happiness in their lives. At least, these were the common topics of conversation they wanted to have with me, and the areas into which they seemed to invest more time and energy. In fact, these young adults were not different from other young adults in their focus on friendship and love. In this section, I focus on the role that love played in their lives. Ricardo and Sarita were the two participants who would center our conversations mostly on friends and love and were highly invested in their romantic and sexual lives.

At several times during the two years of the research, the conversations with the six participants were framed around love. Most of the time, these conversations did not touch upon legality issues but in few occasions they did. Even the most basic needs were clouded by the ubiquitous influence of their legal status. For instance, Antonio started dating one of his coworkers at age 18. His girlfriend was a U.S.-born woman, and a year after they started dating she told him she would marry him to help him with the papers. Antonio absolutely rejected that option in March 2011. As provided in Excerpt 20, in the summer of 2011, we remembered the exchange he had had with his girlfriend.

Excerpt 20: Antonio, August, 2011.

Original		
01	Antonio	Casarse es una cosa y los papeles otra. Prefiero no casarme. I don't know
02		I just feel that I don't wanna do that
03	Gemma	Hubiera sido posible conseguir los papeles así?
04	Antonio	Si si.
05	Gemma	No hubieras tenido que irte como por 10 años o algo así?
06	Antonio	No no creo. Me parece que es como como de 6 meses a un año que te tienes que salir
English Translation		
01	Antonio	Getting married is one thing and papers another one. I prefer not to marry. I don't know
02		I just feel that I don't wanna do that.
03	Gemma	Would have it been possible to get the papers this way?
04	Antonio	Yes yes.
05	Gemma	Wouldn't have you had to go for 10 years or something like that?
06	Antonio	No I don't think. It seems to me that is like 6 months or a year that you need to leave

Like Ricardo, Antonio's views on love and marriage were similar. Antonio also understood that changing his legal status was quick and easy through the vows. Ricardo had an undocumented girlfriend but had an affair with a woman who was a legal resident and told him she would help him to get documents. Ricardo, puzzled, reportedly replied to her:

yo no quiero que tu pienses que voy a estar contigo por los papeles" digo, los papeles, yo le dije que no me importaban, que no me importaban pero se lo dije en si (.) si me importaría agarrarlos entiendes? Pero no estoy completamente seguro si es con ella con quien quiero estar, entiendes?... de que me sirve de tener papeles si voy a ser infeliz toda mi vida. entiendes? (April, 2012)

I don't want you to think that I am going to be with you for the papers" I say, I told her I didn't care about the papers, that I didn't care but I told her to tell her. (.) I would care to get them you understand? But I am not completely sure if it is with her with whom I want to be, do you understand? ... what's the point of having papers if I am going to be unhappy all my life? Do you understand? (Ricardo, April, 2012)

Ricardo showed insecurity in his statements. He seemed to seek assurance in his conversation with me by telling me 'do you understand'? He was trying to do the 'right'

thing in reference to love but he felt conflicted when hearing he could regularize his papers, thus potentially changing his undocumented life for good. As we stated above, Ricardo's priority was finding true love over having papers (when he could not focus on finding out if he was eligible for the DACA policy when he lost 'the love of his life'). In other words, love was perceived as the main path towards happiness and love ranked above legality in terms of happiness. When I asked Sarita how she thought she could get documents she said: *lo mejor es casarme con un americano pero casarme por los papeles es que no. No va* ('the best option is to get married with an American but marrying for the papers it's a no. it's not right'; Sarita, March, 2011).

For all these young adults who were transitioning to adulthood, marriage without love was perceived as an unhappy life trajectory even when it could mean gaining documents. They all gave more value to love than to their legal status, thus they romanticized the concept of love and marriage. They idealized love while believing that marriage could help them to get documents in the *short run*. In fact, they all had examples of family or friends of friends who had regulated their legal status quickly through marriage (in less than a year). I questioned such quick legalization processes. Based on my own search for answers, I talked to immigrant lawyers who defined such regularization process as a difficult *long term* path to legal residence. This long process requires undocumented immigrants to ask for pardon in their countries of origin and be there for 10 years before returning in the United States. There were rare exceptions where undocumented immigrants could obtain a waiver and stay in the U.S. To be able to remain in the United States during their regularization process, the U.S.-citizen partner and their children had

to prove ‘extreme hardship’ if living in the U.S. without the undocumented parent/spouse for 10 years. Obtaining this waiver is very difficult since economic or emotional hardships are not considered ‘extreme hardships’. As Stutman and Brady-Amoon (2011) stated, “the mere loss of employment or inability to maintain one’s standard of living, pursue a chosen profession, endure separation of a family member or cultural readjustment, in and of themselves, would not constitute extreme hardship because these are difficulties intrinsic to any migration to a foreign place” (p. 379).

The contrary views that the participants and I had on this topic helped me realize the lack of clarity and conformity on the discourses that explained how undocumented youths could become legal residents. For me, mainstream, community, and lawyer discourses were confusing and unhelpful. And, perhaps, that is how they are. Menjívar (2006; 2011) stated how the process to regularize undocumented immigrants’ status is complex, subjective, long, and with unknown outcomes. This subjectivity and lack of clarity of the process explains why the Federal Trade Commission (2011) states that undocumented immigrants must be careful with ‘notarios’ and other so-called ‘lawyers’ who actually are scammers who seek to take advantage of immigrants. Therefore, the processes in which their relatives were able to regularize their legal status through marriage were unclear to me and to the same participants. They all thought they could marry a U.S. citizen (or, as Ricardo state above, a legal resident) and quickly become legal residents, but nobody knew how the process worked. Regardless of the disparity of discourses and opinions on legalization processes through marriage, their discourses revealed how lacking papers was pervasive in all aspects of young adults’ life.

Their romantic view on love and on forming a family framed their project to find happiness. This path towards happiness aimed to be independent from their legal status. Differently from work, education, driving, traveling, etc., family and love life were one of the few spaces in which legal status could be put aside. These youths were entitled to fall in love and construct a family as any other young adult, and find spaces where their life was meaningful (Fine & Weis, 1998). However, their approach to love and marriage was not static and in the same way that the meaning of illegality changed during their transition to adulthood, their perception towards love and marriage was also fluid. Patricia was the first participant to experience a more realistic view of love since she cohabited with her undocumented boyfriend beginning at age 17. No other participant lived with their partners when I met them. Sarita moved with her undocumented boyfriend in November 2011 without feeling sure about her love towards him. Sarita mostly hoped to find love in a similar way that the romantic Korean movies she watched did: a poor girl falling in the hands of a rich prince. Once she became pregnant in March 2012 her romantic approach to love changed.

...buscaba a mi hombre ideal perfecto que yo lo ame, que yo lo quiera. Ay sí pero ahorita ya que no importa mucho es que ok, él es el papa, él es el papa de mi hijo..... lo que es importante es que te traten bien o que le importe trabajar y ganar dinero para el hijo. Como que las prioridades han cambiado.

... I was looking for the ideal perfect man to whom I love, to whom I want. Ay yes but now it does not matter much since ok, he is the dad, he is the dad of my child. What is important is to be treated well or that he cares about working and that he earns money for the child. Like priorities have changed. (Sarita, April, 2012)

In this quote, Sarita discloses a change in her understanding of love and partnership. Her initial search for true love transitioned to having a partner who provides for the child and home. Therefore, it is possible that the youths' approach on love and marriage could become less romanticized in the next few years for all of them. However, the fact that these young adults were not interested in marriage to legalize their situation contradicts many mainstream discourses that talk about prearranged marriages for legal purposes and anchor babies. While this reality exists, it is not how undocumented Latino young adults—at least none of the undocumented young adults I met—planned to live their lives.

This section has highlighted the need to keep safe spaces for undocumented young adults, spaces where they can put aside their legal status, even when the pervasiveness of their legal status reaches their love lives. In addition, from the beginning of this chapter, we have seen how the six undocumented youths hold complex views on (il)legality and a romanticized view on love. Specifically, we have seen how performing invisibility, and thus implicitly feeling fear of deportation and of stigmatization, is common among most participants—those who came as kids and those who came at age 16 or later.

### **Discussion and Conclusion: Meaning of (Il)legality**

This chapter explored how these young adults accommodate to living in illegality, how they hide and disclose their undocumented identity in different domains, and how love and legal status are separate matters but at the same time intertwined.

While the legal status of the undocumented youths embraces all domains of their lives, they learn to accept their lives and find happiness and meaning within the limited opportunity window given to them. Learning to put aside their legal selves does not mean that these young adults never felt frustrated, angry, and sad by their legal limitations. Accommodating to their lives as undocumented young adults imply acceptance, and coping (using a term from Gonzales, 2011) but Antonio's educational experiences illustrate how higher levels of education bring uneasiness and frustration rather than comfort. In fact, the meaning of (il)legality becomes fluid and changing among these youths, and this meaning evolves in relation to their daily experiences in school, at work, and in the community. Differently from Gonzales (2011) who seeks to homogenize the transition to adulthood by 1.5-generation undocumented young adults, this study avoids looking at developing a monolithic understanding of illegality. Rather, it strives to deeply understand how illegality affects and is lived by different undocumented young adults. We see how Patricia clearly states and acts on her sense of fear of deportation; how Antonio acts on his fear but does not discursively states living in fear; and how Sarita avoids having a sentiment of fear by stating to follow her fate and the U.S. 'rules'. This complex and fluid understanding of illegality also puts into question Abrego's (2011) research that dichotomizes the views on illegality between 1.5- and first-generation immigrants.

In addition, this study seeks to disclose, as Sigona (2012) did on his study on undocumented immigrants in the UK, the participants' agency; or in Ahearn's (2001) words, their "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 118). Sigona does not develop an analysis of the undocumented immigrants' discourses to disclose how they position

themselves as agentic in their narratives but he claims that their decision to disclose or not disclose their legal self is also a personal strategy that shows agency. It is clear that participants have agency within the structural oppression in which they live, and from which the sociologist Cecilia Menjívar (2011) analyses the oppressed live experiences of Central American immigrants. The participants of this study, though, illustrate how undocumented young adults do learn to live in illegality not as agentless individuals, but as individuals who learn from experiences, who adapt, transform, and strategically pursue improvement of their lives. In other words, while their legal status, the political system, the mainstream discourses oppress and limit the capacity to act on the part of the participants, their lived experiences and their funds of knowledge also help them to develop strategies to protect themselves from discrimination, animosity, and deportation.

The section on love stresses how these youths need spaces in which they can put aside their legal status and develop a positive sense of self. Family, friends, church, and love are those spaces in which their lives are meaningful and can be developed regardless of their legal status. Nevertheless, this section reveals how their intention to separate their love life from the political system is unsuccessful. The pervasiveness of their legal status inundates all their worlds, even their naïve romantic ones.

Finally, this chapter, and in harmony with the previous one on education, continues to reveal how prototypical mainstream discourses are erroneous (Rumbaut, 2009); these undocumented young adults are *not uninterested* in school, are *not* involved in gangs and violent crime, are *not* searching for prearranged marriages and anchor babies, and are *not* passive but agentic individuals. Also, as revealed by all participants, undocu-

mented young adults do *not* aim to remain in the United States; they aim to develop transnational selves that immigration policies prevent by immobilizing them in the United States.

## Chapter 7

### Undocumented Young Adults *Authoring* the Discourses of Agency<sup>28</sup> of Multilevel Marketing Business

Estamos creando una cultura de hombres y mujeres libres económicamente! La libertad empieza a dentro de nosotros diciendo, ‘Yo valgo. Yo merezco. Yo nací para triunfar. Yo puedo ser rico, sano y feliz. Puedo tenerlo todo porque tengo un Dios que me lo puede dar todo.’

‘We are creating a culture of economically free men and women! Liberty begins inside ourselves when we say, ‘I count. I’m worth it. I was born to triumph. I can be rich, healthy and happy. I can have it all because I have a God that can give it all to me.’

Antonio Maldonado, Head of MDE Latino, at an Amway Conference in 2009,  
Susana Ramirez, 2009)

In this critical ethnography I have analyzed educational experiences and the meaning of illegality of the participants while addressing how they position themselves as agentic individuals through their discourse (Bamberg et al., 2011) and their practices. In this chapter, I focus on how Noberto and Patricia position themselves as agentic individuals as they incorporate the discourses of agency produced by Herbalife and Amway organizations. Therefore, while in the previous chapters I focused on how the participants strategically performed invisibility, and became academic achievers or nonachievers during their transition to adulthood, in this chapter the analysis is on the power of Multilevel Marketing (MLM) companies in promoting discourses of agency. In fact, these discourses of agency can do both, morally sanction its members (Patricia and Noberto) if they

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<sup>28</sup> This chapter is very close to the coauthored article Puntí & King (2013) “*A Perfect Storm for Undocumented Latino Youth? Multilevel Marketing, Discourses of Advancement and Language Policy*” cowritten with my adviser Dr. Kendall King that was published in 2013 in the edited volume of *Multilingual Matters* “Language Policy and (Dis)citizenship.” Differently from the coauthored article that theoretically addressed the *entextualization* of MLM discourses, this chapter explores how Latino young adults interiorize and *author* (Bakhtin, 1981) the discourses of agency of the two MLM organizations.

participate in some discourses or activities that are not supported by MLM Discourses, or enable them with powerful identities and tools to expand their “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 118).

This chapter reveals how undocumented young adults find strategies to develop a professional life outside the mainstream occupational world. It is evident that their legal status jeopardizes their possibilities for social mobility and limits their agency in the traditional professional fields, but an MLM business opens a door for social mobility and unimagined opportunities regardless of their legal status, educational levels, and English skills. The participants reinvent themselves as they participate in Herbalife’s and Amway’s discourse communities (Discourse; Gee, 1989; 2009). Patricia’s and Noberto’s agency is revealed in their discourses and in their “strategic making and remaking of [their] selves, identities, activities, relationships (...) as embedded within relations of power” (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 18). Undoubtedly, these participants are agents embedded within the power dynamics of two highly hierarchical structures, one of which (Amway) in an evangelist Christian corporation (Nadesan, 1999).

These corporations promote but also constrain access to discourses, which is one of the characteristics of discourse communities (Discourses). As Gee (1989) reminds us, Discourses are inherently ideological, that is they depend on viewpoints one must speak and act, in the case of these MLM companies, free market and Christian values. They are also resistant to scrutiny as the discourse itself defines what counts as acceptable criticism; in these MLM contexts, for instance, any doubts about the organizations are framed as personal failings and negative thinking (Nadesan, 1999). Further, discourses are

formed in part in opposition to other discourses (e.g., that education is essential for financial success) and put forth certain viewpoints at the expense of others (e.g., being a business owner vs. being a lowly employee). Finally, as will be apparent below, these discourses are ultimately related to the social distribution of power and social hierarchies.

### **Multilevel Marketing Business (MDE Latino and Herbalife)**

Multilevel Marketing (MLM) is a general term for businesses in which the salesperson is compensated not only for product sales, but also for recruitment of additional salespeople who work ‘down line’ as product distributors and recruiters. The Direct Selling Association estimates there were 15.8 million MLM salespeople in the U.S. in 2010. Many MLM companies are household names, including Amway, Avon, Herbalife and Equinox. MLM businesses can be legal or illegal, depending on the extent to which they operate as pyramid or ‘endless chain’ schemes. Such “schemes ask people to make an investment and, in return, grant them a license to recruit others who, in turn, recruit still others into the scheme” (Koehn, 2001, p. 153). These pyramids are illegal and unethical because they are (a) deceptive; and (b) recruitment-centered rather than product-centered businesses.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> As defined by U.S. courts, in order to operate legitimately in the U.S., MLM companies must: (a) “monitor performance of independent agents to ensure that they really are making retail sales, (b) have buy-back policies in place so that independent contractors do not get stuck with excess product, (c) charge low up-front-fees for the right to market the MLM product, (4) make purchases of sales training materials completely voluntary” (Koehn, 2001: 156). MLM businesses frequently have faced legal challenges for failing to meet these guidelines. For instance in 2010, Amway was charged with operating as a pyramid scheme in which distributors rarely sell products to outside customers, but only to other new distributors they bring in. In the face of this major class-action lawsuit, Amway agreed to pay \$55 million to former distributors, as well as to closely oversee high-level distributors who run training businesses.

MLM businesses such as Amway and Herbalife have made significant inroads within U.S. Latino communities. For instance, fully 64% of Herbalife's distributors in the U.S. are Latino (Correal, 2010). Both companies market directly to Spanish speakers in the U.S. by purchasing Spanish-language commercials and maintaining an all-Spanish language version of their websites and bilingual customer service lines. Herbalife has adapted its business model (via innovations by distributors in Zapotecas, Mexico) to fit preferences of its Latino participants. Most significant in this respect are the no-commitment, low-fee Herbalife nutrition clubs where customers and potential future distributors drink teas (for \$4.00). In turn, Amway's most aggressive recruitment strategies come from midlevel distributors, known as 'Accreditation PLUS' teams such as MDE Latino, Camino El Exito, and Proyecto Libertad. These distributors, many of them functioning exclusively in Spanish, are permitted by Amway to sell motivational and training materials and to host recruitment and training events.

For many MLM recruiters, recent immigrant Latinos are perceived to be an optimal target. As stated bluntly in a YouTube video entitled, 'Network Marketing: The Hispanic Market' (Glycodoc, 2010), Latinos are an ideal audience for recruiters (and merit Spanish-language materials in particular), given their (a) lack of English skills and preference for Spanish-medium sales exchanges, (b) cultural tradition of face-to-face selling, (c) 'entrepreneurial spirit', (d) interest in science-based products related to health and beauty, and (e) strong and dense community networks. Some of these claims are in fact supported empirically. For instance, focus group research finds that Latino internet users prefer buying from websites that highlight Latino families and communities; show re-

spect to U.S. Latinos; and have Latino role models as inspiring successful figures (Singh, Baack, Kundu, & Hurtado, 2008).

While the practices of U.S. Latino communities are undoubtedly more complex and varied, for ambitious, hardworking, and undocumented young adults, MLM schemes can be highly appealing, providing the discourse of a means to financial, educational, and social advancement. Through engagement with MLM texts (at training events, via written promotional materials), MLM recruits are motivated to invest and participate, begin to adopt an MLM worldview of success, and acquire the shared MLM discourses of agency and opportunity.

### **Patricia and Noberto in MLM Businesses**

After Patricia graduated from high school (June 2010), she stayed home taking care of her children and her sister's daughters. She felt unsatisfied at home and kept thinking of joining college to change her situational unhappy life as a nanny. About a year after graduating from high school she discovered Herbalife through a cousin who was selling *licuaditos* ('smoothies'). She had heard of these *licuaditos* before but she had never put much attention to it. She was thinking of losing weight and became interested in the Herbalife Discourse that introduced her to messages of wealth, a healthy lifestyle, and a community of undocumented Latino entrepreneurs. She strategically remade herself and incorporated a new identity as an entrepreneur by becoming a member of Herbalife Discourse.

Noberto joined MDE Latino (the Latino branch of Amway) few months before I met him thanks to an Ecuadorian undocumented friend who actually backed off [from

Amway]’. The discourse of agency received by MDE Latino leaders was that *puedo ser millonario...[y] cuando empiezo a ganar más de seis mil dólares en adelante, el gobierno me va a buscar para que me de una visa empresarial* (‘I can be a millionaire...[and] when I start earning more than \$6,000 [every month], the government will look for me and to give me a business visa’; Noberto, June, 2010). Under new discourses and expectations Noberto developed new relationships with the leaders and members of MDE Latino and change his relationships with his old friends. In a way, his social, occupational, academic, and religious lives fully transformed when his self-incorporated a new MDE Latino identity.

The MLM discourses of agency that friends explained to Patricia and Noberto facilitated their entrance to the companies. The fact that friends introduced them to the MLM business illustrates how ‘friends’ is one of the main strategies that these companies use to develop a *downline* distribution chain (Groß, 2010; Koehn, 2001). The business promotes growth through the incorporation of MLM members’ friends and family, a strategy that was also followed by Patricia and Noberto.

### **Building an MLM Community**

The structure, values, and goals inherent in the discourse community of MLM schemes is maintained by the same participants who recruit new participants and who must act as a “model of trust in the company” since showing any doubt discourages those lower on the hierarchy and thus weakens their own possibilities for moving up the hierarchy (Groß, 2010, p. 65). The strong community development is coconstructed through

regular weekly and monthly meetings. These events have a fixed, repetitive organization; set participant structures and roles; and recurrent topics, themes and arguments. In this sense, these events function as rituals as they are repeated actions of a symbolic nature (Du Bois, 2003). As Kapchan (1995) noted, rituals are “multisemiotic modes of cultural expression” in which performances of communicative events are processes of group and individual transformation (p. 480). For instance, the individual transformation becomes evident in MLM events which require participants to demonstrate enthusiasm in defined ways (e.g., repeated chanting of *éxito!* [‘success!’] and *campeón* [‘champion’]), and to follow a ‘successful’ dress code (e.g., MDE Latino men were black suits and red ties). Through these events, participants are socialized into a MLM Discourse, and begin to construct an individual identity as a successful entrepreneur and a collective identity as a supportive, dynamic business community member.

Amway and Herbalife give the participants tools and resources to perform entrepreneur identities and participate in these new economic opportunities that were nonexistent before joining these MLM companies. MDE Latino and Herbalife define themselves as ‘private business schools’ (Noberto) since they offer business lessons in Spanish through books, CDs, and trainings that aim to support their new entrepreneur identity and professional trajectory. MLM recruits take on, and through mandatory ritualized meetings, are socialized into, very particular identities and discourses.

MLM discourses are powerful and effective in part because they are in Spanish, and thus accessible to Spanish-dominant recruits. As noted above, all of the materials (websites, training seminars, brochures, and videos) are available in Spanish. In this re-

gard, MLM language policies are more adaptive and responsive to the needs and preferences of immigrants than most other U.S. institutions, including schools. As I stated above, there is evidence suggesting that Latinos prefer websites showcasing Latinos as role models and focusing on their communities (Sigh et al., 2008), qualities that MLM companies actively strive for. In addition, MLM Discourse becomes very appealing to undocumented Latino young adults since they transmit that hard work leads to economic reward (regardless of one's legal status), and that family and community building is essential for the MLM community. Further, the lived experiences and cultural background of the leaders are close to the experiences of undocumented Latino such as Patricia and Noberto, thus creating an environment of trust, respect, and understanding.

In fact, MLM discourses purposefully reflect participants' life experiences. Not only are training and sales pitches provided *in a language* that participants best understand, but they are framed within a shared cultural context that validates participants' experiences (Korzenny & Korzenny, 2005). For instance, in one training event I attended, a regional leader of Herbalife testified to his own early immigration experiences, explaining that when he first arrived to the U.S.: *Yo no tenía nada. Tenía que trabajar todo el día por nada, por un 'muy bien muy bien trabaja trabaja' y con suerte no te gritaban, y vivía amontonado en el sótano con otras siete personas.* ('I didn't have anything. I had to work all day for nothing, for 'very good, very good work, work' and with luck they didn't yell at you, and I lived cramped in a basement with seven other people'; training session, December, 2011). Similar shared immigration experiences were highlighted at an MDE Latino training session (November, 2010). To a room of 25 enthusiastic distributors

in a suburban chain hotel, the speaker began by asking—rhetorically—why everyone came to the U.S. He then went on to answer: *aquí en los Estados Unidos...hay mayores oportunidades de ganar dinero, de prosperar. Nadie se viene por el frío. Nadie se viene por la nieve...ni siquiera porque les gusta!* (‘here in the United States...there are higher opportunities to earn money, of improving. Nobody comes for the cold. Nobody comes here for the snow...not even because they like it!’).

This rhetoric establishes a shared experience of immigration and common motivations for migrating. Within this constructed ingroup space, participants can be frank about the fact that they would prefer to be elsewhere and that they are here in the U.S. to earn money. These shared vantage points are referenced in each meeting, and function to promote a sense of trust and cohesiveness amongst the recruits, but more importantly, between these recruits and MLM leaders.

Through the medium of Spanish and with these shared experiences as a starting point, three MLM discourses are transmitted to MLM recruits who interpret them and adapt them to their lives as their lives adapt to their discourses (developing new identities). In Bakhtin’s (1981) words, MLM recruits develop a ‘space of authoring’ in which they internalize those discourses and identities in a dialogical manner since their inner speech and active identities are ever forming (Holland et al., 1998). Therefore, Patricia and Noberto produce their own discourses when responding to the voices of the community, the school, mainstream ideologies, and MLM discourses “that encounter one another and coexist in the consciousness” of Patricia and Noberto (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291). They

orchestrate these voices and produce utterances and practices that authorize the world and shape their sense of self. As Bakhtin (1981) states:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language...but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (p. 293–294)

This perspective is what explains how the discourses of the MLM business became part of Patricia and Noberto who appropriated them and made them their own. In this process of authoring they developed new identities and adapted those messages to their own lives.

The three main discourses transmitted from the MLM and *authored* by Patricia and Noberto were: a) hard work results in success; b) MLM gives you access to education, training, and self-improvement; and c) we support family and community advancement while helping others. These messages were acquired and interpreted by Patricia and Noberto who, under the supervision and guidance of MLM leaders, developed strategies to accomplish economic success and an entrepreneur identity.

### **Hard Work Results in Success**

The first and perhaps most prominent MLM discourse is that *hard work results in success*, and in particular, that financial success depends on one's effort, *not* on one's legal status or formal education. Amway's Spanish-language website emphasizes that *Amway cree que el trabajo arduo debe ser recompensado* ('Amway believes that hard work

should be rewarded’; <http://www.amway.com>). Likewise, an Amway motivational speaker (November 2011) told participants: *el éxito de tu negocio depende de ti, de que tan duro trabajes* (‘the success of your business depends on you, on how hard you work’). Similarly, Herbalife’s website stresses that as an independent distributor, *se gana lo que se merece* (‘one earns what one deserves’; <http://www.herbalife.com>). Further, Spanish-language recruitment materials for both companies highlight that *no se necesitan papeles* (‘one does not need papers’). Overall, these messages convey to recruits the valued and rare sentiment “of being treated in a fair way [by] having a fair chance to succeed individually” (Groß, 2010, p.70).

However, in all MLM schemes, relatively few distributors earn a living wage or make a return on their initial investment in products and training. Just one quarter of 1% (0.26%) of Amway distributors earn more than \$40,000 a year (O'Donnell, 2011). While Herbalife has a relatively low start-up cost (\$87.95), the average distributor earns about \$2,400 a year (Correal, 2010). In addition, many MLM investors spend significant sums to attend training sessions and purchase ‘educational’ materials. Those items are MLM schemes’ second product line—often sold at a high profit margin (Brodsky, 1998).

Patricia fully embraced this belief that hard work leads to success and reconstructed her work life and priorities. During the summer and fall of 2011, she labored daily in the Herbalife nutrition club. Seven days a week, she woke at 5:30 a.m. to serve teas at the club at 6:00. Her responsibilities entailed preparing the teas and cleaning the rented space. Working this many early hours in addition to attending regular training sessions and passing out flyers in public areas was challenging given that she also was primary

caretaker for two young children as well as a factory employee. As evident in Excerpt 21, Patricia authorizes the MLM discourse on hard work. Her commitment to Herbalife was due to her emotional, professional, economic, and social commitment to this discourse community. She seemed to embrace Herbalife’s promise of ‘fair system’ and the premise that financial success is not dependent on formal education or legal status.

*Excerpt 21: Patricia, November, 2011.*

Original	
01 Gemma	Y ahora ya no piensas sobre el hecho de tener papeles?
02 Patricia	Esto...esta compañía no pide papeles. hay mucha gente que yo he visto... hay
03	gente que no sabía leer ni sabía ni escribir, y Herbalife no les cierra la puerta,
04	no necesita colegio, ni necesita high school, si es ilegal o no es
05	ilegal. Por eso me IDENTIFICO con Herbalife. SIII me gusta MUcho
06 Gemma	O sea no impORTA tu situación legal, no les importa. Tu puedes trabajar con ellos
07 Patricia	Y por ejemplo si me deportan, yo puedo hacer Herbalife en México.
English Translation	
01 Gemma	And now you don’t think about the fact of having papers?
02 Patricia	So...this company doesn’t ask for papers. there are a lot of people that I’ve seen...there
03	are people who didn’t know how to read or write, and Herbalife doesn’t close the door to
04	them, you don’t need college, nor you need high school, if one is illegal or is not
05	illegal. For that reason I IDENTIFY with Herbalife. YEEES I like it a LOT.
06 Gemma	So it doesn’t MATter your legal situation, they don’t care. You can work with them
07 Patricia	And for example if I am deported, I can do Herbalife in Mexico.

Patricia expresses the meritocratic idea of ‘no papers needed’ in the first person, noting that she, personally, has seen individuals from a wide range of backgrounds do well in Herbalife (lines 2–4). She aligns herself with Herbalife explicitly because the company opens the door to everybody: “for that reason I identify with Herbalife” (line 5). Further, she extrapolates this notion of hard work to her own life circumstances, which include the possibility of deportation (line 7). In this way, Herbalife discourse provides a means for Patricia to imagine a successful life, one which is dependent on hard work, *not*

on legal status or even place of residence. Within this discourse community, believing that she can earn money regardless of her education and legal status leads to new representation of one’s legal identity, one in which undocumented Latinos are not less valuable or less capable than U.S. citizens. Under this discourse, Patricia’s sense of agency becomes less constrained and open to many possibilities—not just in the U.S. but also in Mexico.

Noberto also *authored* the ‘hard work’ discourse. He seemed to believe that his work would be rewarded, and to value his investment in Amway because his legal status would not limit his earnings or his position in the company. He relayed many stories, such as the one in Excerpt 22, which suggested that he fully embraced Amway’s success stories and the irrelevance of his legal status.

*Excerpt 22: Noberto, September, 2010.*

Original		
01	Gemma	Ha habido alguna situación en que no tener documentos ha sido un problema en los
02		meses pasados?
03	Noberto	En alguna situación pero ya no me interesé.
04	Gemma	Qué significa?
05	Noberto	Que una vez me dice un amigo “hay trabajo donde estoy. Trabajo por 13 dólares en
06		una empresa y está bien; 13 dólares la hora está bien” y me dice “tienes papeles?”
07		“No” le digo. Y me dice “lo siento mi amigo” me dice “pero no se va a poder”.
08		Y yo dije “tengo un negocio donde nadie me dice cuanto tengo que ganar y puedo
09		ganar la cantidad que yo quiera!” le digo. O sea no me puse frustrado si me explico?
10		No me puse a pensar “AY si tuviera papeles, si yo tuviera papeles” no, Nada de eso,
11		fuera de la mente, como que no existió, nada. Esa oportunidad la perdí porque no
12		tenía papeles, pero no me desanimé porque en primer lugar tenía mi negocio yo
13		puedo ganar la cantidad que yo quiera! No 13 dólares la hora, sino 20 dólares la hora.
English Translation		
01	Gemma	There has been any situation in which not having documents has become a problem in the
02		last months?
03	Noberto	In some situation(s) but it didn’t interest me
04	Gemma	What does that mean?
05	Noberto	That once a friend told me “there is work where I am. I work for 13 dollars in a
06		company and it’s ok; 13 dollars per hour it’s ok” and he tells me “do you have papers?”
07		“No” I tell him. And he tells me “I am sorry” my friend tells me “but it won’t be possible”

08	And I said “I have a business where no one tells me how much I have to earn and I can
09	earn the quantity that I want!” I told him. Soo I didn’t get frustrated do I explain myself?
10	I didn’t start thinking “AY if I had papers, if I had papers” no. NOthing like that,
11	out of the mind, like it didn’t exist at all. I lost that opportunity because I didn’t
12	have papers but I didn’t get discouraged because in first place I had my business I
13	can earn the amount I want! No 13 dollars per hour, but 20 dollars per hour.

Noberto’s excerpt reveals how he adopted into his everyday life the discourse of success of MLM discourse community. Noberto’s story gives us insight into his internal thought process that shows a particular vision of his social and economic position. As he notes, not being able to work in a job that pays \$13/hour does not make him feel sorry for himself (lines 8–10). Thanks to MLM discourse of success he refuses to be discouraged since he believes to be able to earn whatever he wants (lines 7–8). He frames the advantages of being an Amway entrepreneur in the first person: “I have a business where no one tells how much I have to earn” (line 7). Thus, the discourse of earning what one is worth provides him with agency for saving face, maintaining positive self-esteem, and an optimistic stance in the face of disappointment and job ineligibility.

These excerpts illustrate how for undocumented young adults, the MLM discourse of *hard work = success* has particular appeal and serves them as a strategy to cope with their own life circumstances and legal status. In other words, MLM Discourse provides them with tools, discourses and perspectives necessary to position themselves with confidence in relation to work and illegality. Further, and perhaps equally appealingly, MLM organizations promise not only economic advancement but also professional training and self-improvement. Providing training and thus knowledge helps the leaders of the discourse community to deliver and control ideological discourses to its members. The knowledge gained in their training allows Patricia and Noberto to advance in their new

professional trajectories and to gain a sense of agency to achieve their professional and economic goals.

### **Access to Education, Training, and Self-improvement**

An additional MLM discourse is that MLM schemes provide *access to education, training and self-improvement*. For instance, Amway's website promises that *desde capacitación específica sobre productos hasta educación comercial, capacitación para mejorar y programas con mentores, tendrás acceso a recursos que te ayudarán a generar negocios de Amway* ('from product-specific training, to business education, self-improvement training, and mentoring programs, you'll have access to resources to help you build a successful Amway business'). Herbalife's Spanish-language promotional magazine (*Herbalife Today en Español*, 2009) promotes Herbalife's *capacitación que apoya el crecimiento de su compañía a través de reuniones y eventos para los Distribuidores junto con materiales y herramientas avanzadas de mercadeo...* ('training system that supports the growth of your business through meetings and events for Distributors, together materials and advanced marketing tools'). For Patricia and Noberto, this notion of self-improvement and education was an important investment and attraction, and connected to their life experiences.

Patricia regularly attended the weekly training sessions to learn about Herbalife products. As she explained: *Bueno cada jueves se habla de diferentes cosas. Como que dan ideas de cómo hacer ventas. Hablan sobre la compañía, de los productos... hay diferentes cosas todos los jueves, diferentes maneras que te dicen como aprender a vender,*

*la ética de Herbalife, lo que es Herbalife, como hacer un club.* ('Well, each Thursday they talk about different things. They give ideas about how to make sales. They talk about the company, about the products... there are different things each Thursday, different ways to tell you how to learn to sell, the ethics of Herbalife, what Herbalife is, how to make a club'; Patricia, December, 2011).

Mandatory weekly training sessions are common within MLM schemes (Fitzpatrick & Reynolds, 1997). Yet while these sessions are billed as 'trainings' (Patricia refers to them as *capacitaciones*), a central function is to keep distributors motivated and engaged within the discourse community, and also to recruit new members. As suggested above, these sessions have ritualistic features, including chants, formal dress code, and first-person testimonials. These trainings create an environment of engagement, excitement, and community building, that were integral in convincing Patricia and Noberto to commit their time and energy to their MLM businesses.

Amway training sessions often include positive language, Evangelical themes and rhetoric, as Evangelism and business success are tightly linked within MDE Latino. Amway leaders advocate bible study, church attendance, and the study of self-improvement Christian books with business themes (e.g., by authors such as Dale Carnegie and John C. Maxwell). Noberto valued and took very seriously the training component of Amway. He clearly revealed how he *authored* MDE Latino Discourse when he judged members he suspected were not doing the pertinent weekly readings. Noberto told me how he knew if someone had not done the required readings, *por ejemplo, un socio mío me dijo "ay tengo una mala noticia, se me olvidó tu Ipod."* *Una mala noticia a lo mejor suena bien*

*no? Pero nosotros no hablamos así* ('for example, one of my partners told me "ah I have bad news, I forgot your Ipod." Bad news maybe sounds good huh? but we don't talk like that; Noberto, November, 2010). As he told me, they cannot use negative words in their discourses. Everything is excellent, fantastic, and incredible. While he adopted the use of positive language and thinking of the MLM Discourse he also incorporated the MLM ideology that states how Amway training is of higher quality than formal education.

... ahorita estoy aprendiendo más sobre la organización. es una organización mucho más grande. para mí, para mí en todos los respetos es un+... es una organización mucho más grande que un college. porque en primer lugar, te enseñan cómo ganar dinero. el college lo hace. te enseña a aprender los principios y valores de la vida. el college te enseña a lo mejor un 70 o 80% creo. pero un paso más grande te enseña a tener una relación con Dios. el college no lo hace. esta es la diferencia. esto me enseñó a mí yo no era cristiano antes. decía que creía en Dios pero no sabía quién era Dios. entonces cuando me metí en esta organización me enseñaron cómo hacer dinero, cómo socializarme con la gente, comportarme bien, no maltratar a nadie, así. cosas importantes de la vida.

...right now I am learning more about the organization. it is an organization much bigger. for me, for me in every respect it is a+... an organization much bigger than a college. because in the first place, they teach you how to earn money. in college they do. they teach you to learn the principles and the values of life. in college they teach you perhaps 70 or 80% I think. but a bigger step is to teach you to have a relationship with God. in college they don't do this. this is the difference. they taught this to me and I was not a Christian before. I said I believed in God but I did not know who God was. so when I entered this organization they taught me how to make money, how to socialize with people, how to behave myself, how to not mistreat anyone; things like this which are important in life. (interview, December, 2011)

In the quote, Noberto illustrates how he acknowledges the mainstream discourse that encourages college attendance but how he developed his own voice by unauthorizing the mainstream discourse and incorporating the discourse of his MLM community into his life. Further, his statement reveals the ideological power of the messages he received

by MLM trainings, books, and CDs he needed to read/listen every month and how they became an ‘authoritative discourse’ (Bakhtin, 1981). The authoritative evangelical discourse of the MLM discourse community devalues a mainstream discourse for its lack of a Christian undertone. For Norberto, Amway training was more meaningful than traditional schooling because it taught him how to earn money, but also how to be a better person. Here Norberto also personalizes (or *authors*) a common Evangelical conversion discourse. A central component of conversion is accepting Christ (being ‘reborn’); this entails establishing a personal relationship with God (as Norberto notes here), but also of rejecting one’s former (inferior, sinful) self (Engelke, 2004; Santos, 2012). In this excerpt, Norberto reveals how MLM Discourse gave him the tools for his religious transformation. He contrasts his former self (who was a Christian in name only) with his current self (who ‘knows God’, who knows how to make money, and how to treat others). Notable here is the way Norberto’s description of his conversion, and the discontinuity between current and former selves, relates conversion not just to Christian beliefs, but to knowledge about making money and capitalist norms.

As Nadesan (1999) explains, evangelical Christian corporations empower the individual through their total submission to the will of God and to the same executives who see themselves as spirituals ‘gurus’ or, as the wife of an Amway leader stated, as the same Jesus<sup>30</sup>. The evangelical corporations’ philosophy “holds individuals accountable for their own economic self-sufficiency and contends that rewards follow from a combination of Christian spirituality and positive thinking” (p. 24 ). As we see below, through

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<sup>30</sup> "When I look at him, I see Jesus. I want you to listen to him—I know that you'll see Jesus too."  
—Mike Wallace on "60 Minutes" quoting Birdie Yager talking about her husband, Dexter, at an Amway rally.

the evangelical discourse of MDE Latino, Noberto felt empowered to *unauthorize* the discourse of a teacher in his GED program, who in his eyes, was introducing ideas and a discourse against the authoritative evangelical MDE Latino discourse:

*Excerpt 23: Noberto, December, 2011.*

Original		
01	Noberto	Nos pusieron este, a investigar sobre la vida de los dioses de china! Meh...y este
02		y me pone una hoja que dice que en China hay alrededor de 300 dioses, que hay
03		dioses como hombres con sus esposas ...y deben de inventarlo y le dije
04		'mejor esto no lo voy a hacer'.
05	Gemma	Por qué no? Es la historia
06	Noberto	Porque es falso... te están metiendo cosas (en la cabeza) que no debes estar
07		metiéndote en la cabeza.
English Translation		
01	Noberto	They put us mm, to investigate about the life of the gods in China! Meh... and well
02		and he gives me a handout that says that in China there are about 300 gods, that there
03		are gods like men and their wives....and they must invent it and I told him that
04		'better if I am not doing it'
05	Gemma	Why not? It's history
06	Noberto	Because it's false... they are putting things (in your head) that you shouldn't
07		put in your head.

As Gee (1989) indicated, Discourses are inherently ideological, they are resistant to scrutiny, and are formed in opposition to other discourses. These are all clearly evident traits of MLM Discourses that, as this excerpt reveals, became interpreted, *authored*, and applied by Noberto in a GED classroom.

### **Building Strong Communities and Families while Helping Others**

While a central thrust of MLM discourses is personal agency and advancement, MLM texts also promote a model for success that includes family and community advancement. The weekly training sessions, for instance, routinely present examples of

MLM families and stress the importance of family involvement and community support. In this vein, Amway's website emphasizes that *juntos, continuamos teniendo éxito al construir una comunidad fuerte, brindando capacitación y apoyo, y ayudando a los empresarios en cada paso del camino* ('together, we continue having success by building a strong community, bringing training and support, and helping the entrepreneurs step by step'). Claims such as these on their websites, and even more directly in face-to-face training sessions, illustrate Amway's strategic use of discourses that are powerful and attractive for potential Latino recruits (Singh et al., 2008).

This sort of MLM community support is important for Noberto who longs for a close family unit and a paternal figure given that most of his family is in Guatemala and his father died when Noberto was a child. As he stated in reference to his MDE leader, *él es como mi papá, él puede aconsejarme. Él me desafía mucho y yo le digo que quiero que me corrija* ('he is like my dad, he can give me advice. He challenges me a lot and I tell him I want him to correct me'; Noberto, March, 2012). In fact, Noberto's only relatives living in the U.S. (uncle and brother) distanced themselves from him due to his MLM involvement. MDE Latino provides a support network for Noberto but also asks him to limit his involvement with people who are not supportive of the MLM Discourse. Those who do not believe in the discourses of agency and advancement of MLM are perceived as losers (in Noberto's words) or "sinful and/or lost souls" (Nadesan, 1999, p. 34). In addition, those individuals who question MLM Discourse also question its members. For instance, Noberto stated multiple times that he felt ostracized by his fast food coworkers

as well as by his school peers. The family support he receives within the MLM organization (and in church) is essential for his continuous involvement with MDE Latino.

Patricia, in contrast, already had a strong family life prior to Herbalife. Most of her family lives in the same U.S. city and a couple of months before joining Herbalife she moved with her two children and husband to her parents' house. For Patricia, Herbalife was attractive not as a quasiextended family, but as business model that gives her flexibility to attend to family needs. This flexibility is prominent on both Amway and Herbalife sites. For instance, the Herbalife website asks: *¿Qué tal si quisiera ganar algún dinero extra, ser su propio jefe, disfrutar de horarios flexibles o viajar por el mundo?* ('How about earning some extra money, being your own boss, enjoying flexible hours, and traveling the world?'; <http://www.herbalife.com>). Likewise, Amway's website promises that if you are a distributor, *tú decides cuándo comenzar a trabajar. No necesitas el permiso de nadie para asistir al partido de fútbol de tu hijo.* ('you decide when you want to start work. You don't need permission from anyone to attend your son's football game.').

In Patricia's case, all of her close family members drank the teas, and her father was also a supervisor in Herbalife. In this way, Herbalife makes porous the line that divides family and work life. With Herbalife, Patricia worked from home, at the tea club—where she took her children—and distributed Herbalife materials at local malls. This gave her a new professional identity with a strong sense of autonomy she had not experienced with any other job, and which is more common to professional positions to which she aspires.

Furthermore, MLM discourses not only promote a strong sense of community (and thus a sentiment of family-like relationships), but also stress the importance of bringing one's family in the business. Most Amway and Herbalife success stories showcase married couples who work together happily and productively. For example, Pam Shoffler, in an Amway testimony, explains how "our AMWAY business has helped us develop a solid marriage and has blessed our kids and a lot of other people" (Achieve Magazine, 2012). Following the evangelical Christian corporate model (Nadesan, 1999), MLM businesses promote the notion that collective family investment results in a *blessed*, stronger, and happier family.

Yet, while MLM texts promote themselves as a means to family stability and security, these same materials encourage people to begin by selling to their parents and family members. For instance, Herbalife magazine showcases successful leaders such as *Juan Carlos..... [quien] haciendo clientes entre sus amigos y familiares, logró generar mensualmente el dinero que tanto buscaba* ('Juan Carlos...[who] making as clients his friends and relatives, he was able to monthly generate the money he was so much looking for'; Herbalife Today en Español, 2009, p. 29). There is of course an unmentioned contradiction here: that one can build strong families and communities while simultaneously making money off of those same individuals.

For this reason, 'helping others' is rhetorically complex. Rather than stressing the need to recruit others to enrich oneself (the central mechanism of all pyramid schemes), the focus is on recruiting others to help them to be successful too. For instance during an

MDE Latino training session (November, 2010), the wife of the presenter, Julia, highlighted the help they are offering to other people:

Cada día ayudamos a la gente a conseguir su libertad, de no depender de un empleo porque un empleo está bien pero únicamente para ayudar para las necesidades básicas. Pero cuando una persona tiene deseos más grandes necesita de ingresos adicionales. y normalmente cuando la gente piensa en un ingreso adicional piensa en el part-time y nosotros enseñamos a la gente que no es otro empleo sino es tener un negocio!

‘Each day we help people achieve liberty, to not depend on a job because a job is good but only for the basic necessities. But when a person has bigger desires one needs additional incomes. and normally when people think of additional income they think of working part time and we teach people that it’s not another job but it’s having a business!’

MDE Latino promotes the idea that they help others achieve ‘liberty’—a word which invokes both residency rights and equal opportunity. Within this discourse, *help* starts with educating others. As Julia states, “we *teach* people that it’s not another job [what they need] but it’s having a business.” Through this ‘education’, MDE Latino posits that it can *transform* (Spanish-speaking) people into liberated business owners. A central aspect of this process, according to MDE Latino leaders (and subsequently, Noberto), is leaving behind the Latino mentality of an impoverished wage earner (see Excerpt 3).

*Excerpt 24: Noberto, June, 2010.*

Original	
01	Gemma ...pero en la comunidad latina de Minnesota, cuál crees que son los problemas que
02	más comúnmente viven?
03	Noberto Yo diría que el problema de la gente hispana, porque ellos des de su país traen una
04	mentalidad de pobreza, llegan aquí y se salvan porque la educación es gratis pero
05	después de la high school se quedan atascados. En primer lugar están de acuerdo con
06	un empleo y con el resultado con un empleo y lo que hacen con sus
07	hijos:“lo siento hijo pero tienes que trabajar.” Segunda generación que va a hacer,
08	trabajar; tercera generación trabajar; cuarta generación trabajar trabajar trabajar y así
09	se mantiene mi cultura hispana. Y así este papel ((folleto de MDE Latino)) dice
10	creando una nueva cultura; estamos dando luz en el camino del hispano. Hoy en día
11	viven en oscuridad no saben dónde ir y con la economía de hoy en día no

12	saben qué hacer. Algunos ya se van a sus países, es como estar en un cuarto oscuro y
13	nosotros estamos dando luz. Hay un camino que recorrer, un camino que agarrar. Este es
14	el problema de los hispanos que vienen de una mentalidad de pobreza y se lo creen. Yo
15	también vengo de una comunidad de pobreza pero decidí romper esa mentalidad. romperla
16	porque eso no me va a ayudar. La dejo a un lado y agarro otra mentalidad.
English Translation	
01	Gemma ...but in the Latino community of Minnesota, what do you think are the problems that
02	they most commonly live?
03	Noberto I would say that the problem of the Hispanic people, because from their country they bring
04	a mentality of poverty, they arrive here and they get saved because education is free but
05	after high school they get stuck. In the first place they agree with
06	an employment and with the consequences of an employment and what they do with their
07	kids: “I am sorry son but you have to work.” Second generation what will they do,
08	work; third generation work; fourth generation work work work and this way
09	the same Spanish culture continues. And this paper ((pamphlet of MDE Latino)) says
10	creating a new culture; we are giving light in the path of the Hispanos. Nowadays
11	they live in the darkness they don’t know where to go and with today’s economy they don’t
12	know what do to. Some are living to their countries, it’s like staying in a dark room and
13	we are giving light. There is a path to cover, a path to take this is
14	the problem of the Hispanos that come with a mentality of poverty and they believe it. I
15	also come from a community of poverty but I decided to break such mentality. to break it
16	because this won’t help me. I leave it aside and I take another mentality.

Noberto *authors* MDE Latino discourses that aim to educate and liberate the Latino community (lines 9–10) and uses these MLM discourses to make sense of his own life and his own mission. Here, Noberto includes himself as an educator, using first-person plural ‘we’ (line 10). Further, Noberto uses his own experience of coming from a poor community to support MDE Latino’s claims that (a) there are options (e.g., poverty, darkness and dependency vs. light and liberty), and (b) that one has the capacity to choose one over the other (thus that Latinos have agency). By acquiring MDE Latino’s discourses, Noberto gained a sense of agency, of power; and a means to evaluate good and bad practices and thus to judge those who follow or not follow the teachings of MDE Latino.

Within Herbalife, ‘helping others’ is also central message; however, the emphasis is on *ayudar a las personas a llevar una vida activa y más saludable* (‘helping people

live healthier, active lives’). Patricia embraces this aspect of the business, and recounted many specific instances in which Herbalife products had helped others around her (e.g., cured her husband of sleep apnea, her daughter of the flu, her mother of headaches), thus avoiding expensive professional medical care.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

MLM involvement was a powerful experience and undeniably gave them the information, relationships, and the tools necessary to create positive changes in these participants’ lives. For instance, Noberto became highly literate in Spanish, believed in his capacity to become an orator and a priest, developed close relationships with the youth group of a church, and returned to school to complete his GED as a result of his Amway-related church involvement. Patricia developed a stronger relationship with his father (also a member of Herbalife), started eating healthily and to exercise regularly. These shifts were the direct result of participation in MLM networks, and via those interactions, MLM organizations were more effective than traditional education or medical interventions in providing meaningful discourses and tools to facilitate new lifestyles and behaviors.

Of even greater significance is that both Patricia and Noberto reported feeling markedly more motivated, valued, and optimistic about their futures as a result of their MLM involvement. This is in part because MLM schemes promote personal agency and independence under the guise of ‘entrepreneurship’. As a result, within these organizations, both Patricia and Noberto felt respected as capable individuals and up-and-coming professionals. For instance, Patricia was deeply impressed by the dinner offered at one

monthly meeting, raving about the elegant tablecloths, water glasses and table service, noting she had never been to such an event in her life. Noberto, in turn, feels highly valued as an entrepreneur when he is able to teach aspects of the business to new recruits and when he travels to out-of-state Amway conventions. Involvement in MLM companies provided them with resources that allowed them both, for the first time, to feel confident in their business skills and in control of their lives.

Yet these positive changes do not alter the fact that the hierarchical structure of all MLM schemes demands ongoing recruitment of individuals ‘downstream’ in order to make money and to move up. And despite Amway’s claims that one earns what one deserves, the average monthly income for distributors such as Noberto is \$115 (Amway, 2011). Further, although MLM schemes promise autonomy and independence, distributors in fact are tightly controlled “via a particular organizational identity and ideology” (Groß, 2010, p.61). As Whitsell summarized, “the primary product is opportunity. The strongest, most powerful motivational force today is false hope” (O’Donnell, 2011).

Thus, despite the MLM text’s stated intentions of ‘helping’ the U.S. Latino community, the primary goal of all leaders is to recruit more ‘downline’ distributors. MLM discourses of agency and advancement are powerful mechanisms to that end. Noberto, for instance, fully embraced expectations of hard work, Christian commitment, and self-improvement for more than three years. In June of 2010, he optimistically stated: “Now I am earning just a bit, but by the end of this year [2010] my goal is to start earning \$4,000 per month.” However, by the start of 2013 Noberto was thinking to leave the MLM company to focus on his potential career as a pastor and orator within the teachings of the

church. Noberto was still very short on cash, still working in a fast food restaurant, and sometimes painting houses with a friend. Similarly, when Patricia started in July 2011, she stated “I can earn a lot of money in the business....I have just started but there are people who have been there for one year and they are already making \$1,000 per month.” By January 2012, after seven months with Herbalife, she took a third job to pay the bills and to invest more in Herbalife products. She worried that this extra job meant even less time with her children—a concern that contrasts sharply with MLM claims about greater family time. By Spring 2012, she stopped selling teas and trying to recruit new members.

As illustrated here, MLM discourse communities are powerful and they can be particularly persuasive for undocumented Latinos. MLM discourses are highly effective in part because they are in Spanish (Koslow et al., 1994; Luna & Peracchio, 2001), but also because they recognize participants’ life experiences, which often include hardship and sacrifice. The central threads of MLM discourse—i.e., that hard work results in success (independent of one’s background), that MLM schemes provide access to education, training and self-improvement while also allowing for family and community advancement and service to others—resonate with Latino participants. As demonstrated above, participants *author* these discourses as they are socialized into MLM culture and modify them to fit their personal experience and life narrative. For individuals with extremely limited educational and professional opportunities, MLM schemes provide the discourse of a means to financial, educational, and social advancement. These schemes—in conjunction with the dysfunctional U.S. immigration system—form a ‘perfect storm’ for undocumented Latino youths.

Ultimately, MLM discourses, like all discourses, are about power and reflect inequalities in the distribution of social capital. At the most basic level, these discourses serve to attract and entice recruits into the scheme, and in the process convert them to the MLM Christian-free market worldview. Poignantly, this pro-free market ideology and ethic of hard work is often embraced by precisely those who are excluded from legal employment and mainstream economic advancement. MLM discourses assert equal opportunities and success for all; yet the foundation of all MLMs is structural inequity that promotes extreme financial disparities. Hypocritically, the MLM leaders who espouse these meritocratic values are, in fact, promoting a system designed to enrich themselves.

Perhaps most troubling is the not-so-subtle rhetoric of personal failure for unsuccessful recruits given that more than half of all MLM distributors quit within their first year (Fitzpatrick & Reynolds, 1997). Indeed, the personal, financial and social costs of MLM investment (and failure) can be high as participation entails changing one's belief systems, aggressively selling to family and friends, thus putting those relationships at risk. For undocumented young adults, dense and supportive social networks can be one of their mostly powerful resources in negotiating the myriad demands of life in the U.S. One can only hope that MLM involvement will not do lasting damage to this most valuable resource.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

This study discloses some of the experiences and perceptions that the six participants and I shared. We spent hours talking, visiting friends and family, discussing and comparing views on immigration and other topics— many of which have been omitted in the interest of spacing. Selecting what to write meant selecting what memories and discourses to leave out. The research questions were key in helping me keep the study focused and tight while also allowing me to represent these young adults' voices and perspectives. This study brings these voices out, voices that have been mostly silenced in the mainstream society and that do not disclose despair and desolation but rather resourcefulness, everyday learning, and hope.

In this conclusion, I first summarize the findings of the three research questions. Next, I focus on the implications and limitations of this study. Finally, I make suggestions for future research and explain how this study contributes— in theory and in practice— to the field of educational research and Latino studies.

In this exploratory study, I drew on critical ethnography and sociocultural theory to understand the lived experiences of six undocumented Latino young adults. By taking the participants as units of analysis (Orellana, 2007), I was able to follow them as they entered into academic settings, professional environments, communities, and family units. It is in these environments and with the influence of the media that these participants become part of multiple discourses that many times are in tension with each other.

It is in these discourse communities that these youths construct themselves and develop perspectives on academic achievement and illegality that are continuously evolving together with their daily experiences. Through participant observation and conversational interviews the following research questions were addressed.

1. How do undocumented young adults experience the U.S. educational system and make sense of the role that education plays in their lives? How do youths' school/work experiences influence their understanding of education?

The findings are explained below and also summarized in the following bullets:

- Age of arrival in the U.S. largely shapes their outlook on education and their perceptions on their own possibilities to graduate from high school.
- First-generation young adults have high motivation to be in school (since they give an instrumental and symbolic value to education). The 1.5 generation has less incentive to invest in formal education (they do not hold an instrumental value), and only when they are able to focus on the prestige and status given by education their academic identities are positively transformed.
- All participants show fluidity in their academic identities. Further, they show a great diversity of experiences rather than homogeneity.
- The academic identities of the first-generation young adults are affected by their work experiences; and the academic identities of the 1.5 generation by their legal status and symbolic interest in school.

- While the first-generation young adults perceive their lack of academic credentials as a limitation to their professional opportunities, their 1.5 cohort see their professional opportunities affected by their legal status.
- All participants believe that by *echándole ganas* they can graduate from high school, and often blame themselves for their lack of academic accomplishments.

This study illustrates how the legal status of the participants does not make their academic experiences homogenous, and how the meaning of education is neither steady nor monolithic. Legal status is a key factor in explaining their educational experiences, and age of arrival in the United States becomes more relevant in explaining their divergent experiences and perspectives on education. While most studies that focus on undocumented students stress the negative influence of an undocumented status to their school engagement (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010; 2011; Perez, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011), this study reveals how some undocumented students, particularly the first-generation ones, claim to be highly motivated students who believe in educational attainment for occupational opportunities.

For those undocumented students who came to the United States before age 14, the meaning of education became devalued once they were aware of their professional limitations and further, when conflicting messages (erroneously) state that they cannot go to college (as Antonio reveals in his discourse). The two 1.5-generation young adults illustrate how graduating from high school is possible in as much as they are able to make sense of education. While their awareness of their professional limitations made them

unable to give an instrumental value to education, once they perceived educational outcomes from a status and prestige standpoint, they were able to find the necessary motivation to graduate from high school. This revealed fluidity in their academic identities since both participants moved from school disengagement to academic engagement in the last year(s) of high school.

Unlike the 1.5-generation youths, the first-generation students believe in the instrumental role of education. They claim that by obtaining a high school degree they will be able to improve their occupational opportunities. They still give status and prestige to education, but they also expected to get better opportunities once they graduated from high school. This occupational expectation reveals how the first-generation young adults lack some understanding of the implications of their immigration status. This lack of legal awareness together with youths' stated beliefs that by *echándole ganas* they can accomplish their dreams, make them feel *responsible* for their academic outcomes—an attitude common to each of the 1.5- and first-generation participants. While all participants recognize that their legal status is an obstacle in their life experiences in the United States, they believe that if they are strong and work hard they will do well in school and graduate. In fact, three out of four first-generation participants dropped out from high school. While one of them was unable to find meaning in traditional education once he was involved in Amway, the other two participants dropped out due to, in their own words, their laziness and a lack of perseverance and strength. This self-blame behavior was common among all participants when analyzing their academic disengagement or low grades, a behavior that actually reflects and reinforces the mainstream discourse that

portrays them as lazy and unintelligent. In reality, they all had economic and legal limitations and the first-generation students had few years to accommodate to the U.S. school culture, learn academic English, and graduate before turning 22 years old; limitations they thought they could overcome through their *echándole ganas* efforts.

In addition, the first-generation participants came to the United States with the expectation to support themselves financially. Consequently, working was their main priority. While all first-generation participants also wanted to attend school and graduate from high school, when the academic schedule did not match their work schedule, they became fatigued and stressed. This tiredness coupled with their low-level English academic skills and adaptation to the U.S. schools culture, pushed them to drop out. The only first-generation participant to graduate from high school, Diego, was economically supported by his parents, who did not want him to work but to focus on school. While all of the parents were supportive of their children's school attendance, the economic difficulties of the family gave explicit and/or implicit messages regarding the need for the participants to support themselves financially. Moreover, the parents of Ricardo and Norberto expected them to support their respective families financially. However, the same first-generation young adults did not want to be a burden for their families. Their cultural models inspired their sense of responsibility and family support.

The 1.5 generation attended school as children and moved to high school without much thought, as it was the 'normal' step to take after middle school. They were part of a U.S. school culture with peers and mainstream discourses that promote school attendance and high school graduation. In contrast, the first-generation youths had to reflect on the

purpose of their migration and decide whether school was a viable option. Once the first-generation youths found jobs that were acceptable for them, their interest in school decreased. In fact, they all claimed to attend school for professional reasons, and therefore, an acceptable job condition (in their eyes, this usually meant a work climate of respect, steady work, and a salary above \$10 an hour with potential for advancement) negatively affected their academic identities. The same was true when they were unsatisfied with their work. Situations of physical or emotional abuse led the first-generation participants to consider going back to school, but due to their age and work conditions, they joined General Educational Development (GED) programs<sup>31</sup>. Clearly, the academic identities of the first-generation young adults were highly affected by their work. When they found stable work their academic identities suffered, and when their work conditions were difficult, they showed interest in performing new academic identities. Nevertheless, their lack of English academic skills made their school experiences continuously difficult and frustrating.

Finally, while the first-generation participants saw their lack of occupational opportunities due to their lack of academic credentials, the 1.5 generation saw it as a reflection of their legal status. None of them stressed the potential negative consequences that their race and ethnicity played in their occupational world. The different layers of discrimination became uncovered as they little by little discovered how academic achieve-

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<sup>31</sup> Passing a GED test does not hold the same status as holding a high school diploma. But the GED is the nation's largest dropout recovery or second chance program (Fry, 2010). The PEW Hispanic Center revealed that 67% of the Hispanic population who passed the GED test in 2008 were employed compared to the 74% of those with a high school diploma. However, the salaries were not different, and in fact, foreign-born Latinos with a GED had higher salaries than those with a high school diploma. A potential reason might be that perhaps, some foreign-born immigrants had a high school diploma from their country of origin and employers may value the GED tests more than a diploma from a foreign country (Fry, 2010).

ment is insufficient for work (as Diego did); and for those who had documents (like Victor, Antonio's friend), how having a high school degree and a documented status was still insufficient in providing the same opportunities as non-Hispanic whites.

2. How do undocumented young adults understand the role that (il)legality plays in their lives? How do the meanings of illegality evolve in relation to their lived experiences during the course of two years?

The findings are explained below and summarized in the following bullets:

- They accommodate to their undocumented status and sought happiness in their everyday lives.
- They performed a documented or undocumented self depending on the discourse communities they were in, and the trust they had of others.
- Most of them performed invisibility for fear of deportation and discrimination, even though they claimed not to feel fear.
- The pervasiveness of their legal status invaded all domains of their lives, including their private love lives.
- Higher education brought a more critical understanding of their legal status.
- The meaning given to their legal status is fluid and affected by their daily experiences, which is clear during the two-year study. Good experiences led to dismissal of their legal status, and difficult everyday experiences led to stress the limitations of their legal self.

In this study we see how (il)legality is part of their everyday lives, and the pervasiveness of their legal status infiltrates all domains of their lives. Their romantic lives are affected even as they unsuccessfully try to keep their legal identity separated from their personal lives. Still, regardless of the pervasiveness of their legal status to all domains of their lives, they still claim not to think about their (il)legality most of the time. As participants stated, they adapted to their undocumented condition and learned to live a life similar to the lives of most documented young adults; a life that involved working, studying, and spending time with friends and family. However, these lives are different from those of the legal residents since undocumented young adults must learn to live in illegality (Gonzales, 2011). This means that they learned to perform a documented self at work and around untrusted people for fear of being discriminated or potentially deported. While Antonio did not recognize feeling fear, he acted on his fear by not driving and not disclosing his documented status to coworkers and school personnel. Patricia admitted that fear of deportation led her to buy an expensive car to avoid appearing on the radar of police officers that practice racial profiling. Sarita, however, claimed that her avoidance of being noticed, and thus, of being exposed as an undocumented woman, was not based on having fear of deportation but on being an ethical person. She thought that as an undocumented person she is guilty of being in the United States, and therefore she aimed to at least respect the U.S. rules and live a discreet life.

These experiences reveal how the meaning of illegality is not the same for the participants and how this meaning is not rigid. The meaning of (il)legality changed during their transition to adulthood and that was evident during the two years of research.

Their lived experiences gave fluidity to their understanding of (il)legality. Moments of academic and professional stress emphasized their frustrations as undocumented people. In moments of routine and work satisfaction they did not talk about their legal status, and as Ricardo shared, he actually did not even care about his legal status. Yet, while their legal status affects their mobility and their occupational and academic lives, they put attention to some aspects of their legal limitations over others at different times. When Ricardo (as well as Patricia, Diego, and Noberto) had interest in visiting a family member in his country of origin, he reported feeling stuck in the U.S. and gave to his legal status a meaning of immobility. When Ricardo and Noberto felt that their work conditions were favorable and good, they considered their legal status irrelevant. Therefore, at that particular time, they focused on the occupational aspect of their legal status. However, when President Obama announced the implementation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012, all participants (except for Sarita who knew she would not qualify) began regularizing their immigration status with a meaning of opportunity and happiness; a meaning that dissipated and led to frustration as they learned they could not qualify.

Further, Antonio reveals how higher education brings an extra layer of awareness and critical thinking on the meaning of (il)legality. This, as in his case, can lead to positive self-awareness but also to the incorporation of social and political mistrust. Through research in issues related to immigration, he learned to question media discourses that affected his own self-perception, examining his legal condition, and reconstruct his legal identity. Further, by using information gathered in his psychology class, Antonio indicat-

ed learning to avoid focusing on the negative consequences of his legal status in order to feel happier.

The participants' fluid and heterogeneous perceptions of their legal status brings into question previous research that focuses on homogenizing the 'learning to be illegal' process (Gonzales, 2011), or that categorizes sentiments based on generational cohort (Abrego, 2011). This study reveals that it is not generational cohort or simply age that explains their understanding of (il)legality, but their own everyday experiences, family circumstances, college attendance, and discourses they have access to. Finally, while analyzing how these youths learn to live with illegality, they also disclosed their agentic selves, an aspect that is described in the next research question.

3. How do they show agency in their discourse and in constructing opportunities within the limited opportunity window given by their legal status?

The findings are explained below and summarized in the following bullets:

- Participants' agency is revealed in their discourses, in their *echándole ganas* stance, in their academic and legal identity shifts, and in many of their everyday practices.
- Participants show how within the limitations of their legal status, and the influence of their cultural upbringing, they make decisions in reference to academic attendance and attainment.
- They reveal how they assess when/where/ and to whom to disclose their legal status.

- They show agency in their strategies to avoid deportation and discrimination.
- In the discourses of the participants, they tend to focus on their role as agents rather than as undergoers.
- They show agency when they decide to follow new professional venues such as an MLM business. These MLM companies transmit discourses of agency that are interpreted and included in the everyday discourses of the two participants involved in Herbalife and Amway.

Contrary to many academic articles that portray undocumented immigrants as agentless (e.g., Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Menjívar 2011), or as politically resistant and as activists (Gonzales & Chaves, 2012; Seif, 2004; 2011), this study reveals how regular undocumented young adults are agentic individuals in their everyday lives, even when not involved in political movements.

In this study, I don't define agency as 'free will' but as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 118). Nevertheless, these youths often claimed to believe that they had free will to academically accomplish their goals. Their *echándole ganas* stance revealed their perception of having a powerful individual agency that explained their academic outcomes. This perspective delegitimizes their legal status and shows naïveté in understanding the role of policies and structural conditions in affecting their academic lives. There was tension in the way they understood the world and themselves. They stated how their legal status affected their academic lives (especially for the 1.5 generation), and they reflected and promoted the media, the meritocratic views, and

their cultural upbringing in framing their school experiences as dependent on their own personal decisions, strength, and intelligence.

In reference to their legal status consciousness, while aware that their legal status affected their professional opportunities (i.e. in instances of abusive work conditions they felt disempowered and vulnerable), in moments of work satisfaction they focused on their agency as individuals who have the capacity to work; a capacity that, as Ricardo stated, ‘papers’ lack. Therefore, in their discourses they reveal their positioning in the world in which they can portray themselves as undergoers or as active agents. When Ricardo stated that he has the capacity to work, a capacity that papers don’t have, he clearly positioned himself as an agent. When Noberto stated that he can be a millionaire regardless of his legal status, he also portrayed himself as an agent with the capacity to overcome obstacles. However, not all participants had such a strong sense of agency. Sarita tended to disclose resignation and acceptance, and a sense of guilt for being ‘illegal’. She aimed to live a life in the shadows out of respect to the ‘rules’ of the United States. While Sarita positioned herself under the political structures of the U.S. society, such an approach gave her contentment. She did not have high expectations and believed that it was not her agentic self but her *destino* (‘fate’) that led her life. In other words, while she avoided driving and ‘being noticed’ she also claimed that her future was not in her hands.

In reference to their everyday practices, the participants showed agency in their decision to disclose or not disclose their legal status to coworkers and/or school personnel. Most of the time this decision was based on fear and the unknown consequences of ‘coming out’ as undocumented. Patricia also showed agency when she decided to buy an

expensive car (\$10,000) after she had been deported while driving. By driving an expensive car she believed that she could be protected from the eyes of racist police officers, and thus, from deportation. Other strategies from these youths included buying ‘valid’ social security numbers, and investing in alternative business ventures.

Participants’ agency while involved in MLM businesses was conflicted: Their agency was pushed by the discourses of MLM schemes (e.g. hard work and ambition), but at the same time, their agency was ideologically tightly constrained and controlled by the same organizations. Nevertheless, they showed agency in making the decision to invest in and be part of these discourse communities, as well as in interpreting and *authoring* the discourses of these companies. These MLM schemes develop discourses that frame their business community as a group of hard workers and agentic individuals who can achieve their goals and make a difference in their families and within the Latino community—*if* they follow the teachings of Herbalife and Amway. Patricia and Noberto felt valued, motivated, and optimistic about their futures, and under the supervision and guidance of MLM leaders, developed strategies that sought economic success and an entrepreneurial identity. Patricia strengthened her relationship with her father, and started to eat healthy and exercise regularly. Noberto became highly literate in Spanish, believed in his capacity to become an orator and priest, developed close relationships with the youth group of a church, and returned to school to complete his GED. Their involvement in MLM companies provided them with resources that allowed them to feel both confident in their business skills and in control of their lives.

However, although MLM schemes promise autonomy and independence, Patricia and Noberto were tightly controlled “via a particular organizational identity and ideology” (Groß, 2010, p.61). Further, despite the fact that Noberto and Patricia gained self-esteem and developed positive changes from their involvement in these discourse communities, these MLM organizations are founded in structural inequity and promote extreme financial disparities. In fact, the MLM leaders promote a system designed to enrich themselves. This reality becomes apparent once distributors (like Patricia and Norberto) get tired of investing time and financial resources without making enough money in return. Patricia quit after less than a year in the company, and Noberto, little by little, reduced his involvement with the company such that by the beginning of 2013, he was mostly focused on his path to becoming a religious orator, rather than on any sort of involvement with Amway.

Thus, while these participants showed agency in interpreting the discourses of MLM schemes and in developing new identities and relationships, they were also dominated by a hierarchical, authoritarian, and deceiving discourse community.

### **Implications**

This study has implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, it illustrates the importance of taking into consideration the legal status of students as well as their age of arrival when analyzing the academic experiences of youths. Further, academic research needs to understand that students’ academic identities are variable and highly affected by their life experiences and contexts. Therefore, categorizing students as low or high

achievers dismisses their contextual lives and their agency in developing their academic selves. In addition, research must consider the impact that mainstream and meritocratic discourses have on undocumented students who internalize them, and blame themselves for unsatisfactory academic outcomes.

Research on the field of Latino studies must incorporate the fluid view that undocumented young adults have with respect to their own legal status. Most studies focus on the political structures and policies, or on the ‘sad, fearful lives’ that undocumented immigrants are forced to live. These approaches ignore the resourcefulness of the immigrants who learn how to make sense of their lives as undocumented immigrants. This study looks at their agentic lives and discovers how they have a voice in making decisions about school, work, and everyday practices, as well as in performing their legal selves. This empowering approach needs to be incorporated in undocumented Latino studies. Focusing on the agentic lives of this community could devalue the stereotypical mainstream view that depicts Latinos as lazy and unengaged. The same field needs to start changing how we portray undocumented immigrants if we want the mainstream society to do so. By picturing the vitality and resourcefulness of this community we do not dismiss that they are marginalized and affected by their deportability status. In other words, we do not jeopardize our claims for comprehensive immigration reform. Rather, we make these claims from a stance of youths’ strength and creativity; not from youths’ misery and despair.

In practice, this study asks teachers and school personnel to understand students as complex beings whose lives are changing, and are affected by their experiences and

relationships. Teachers must develop close relationships with undocumented students in order to discover who these students are beyond school, and in order to positively influence their academic lives by building trust and care (Gonzales, 2010). In addition, while caring about the undocumented students is important, teachers and school personnel must gather information on immigration and educational policies, private scholarships and other resources, so that they may learn how they can support these students in their academic journeys. Current research states that college administrators still do not know how to handle undocumented students (Aleixo et al., 2011), therefore, it's necessary that teachers and school personnel receive and search for information. Certainly, if teachers prepare themselves to support undocumented students, these students will be more likely to feel comfortable disclosing their legal selves to them. If Antonio's high school teachers had shown interest in developing close relationships with him, perhaps Antonio would not have thought that disclosing his legal status was futile, and would have had information to question the belief that he could not go to college from the start.

Further, recognizing that undocumented young adults have agency, means that teachers need to talk to these students as empowered individuals who can make choices and construct their lives within their limitations. To focus on their oppressive lives would negatively affect their sense of agency and their interest in performing academically. Therefore, teachers must believe in these youths' capacity to act by giving them resources, information, and by stressing that knowledge and awareness will give them the ability to be critical and construct their own path.

## **Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First of all, while the participants made evident that the 1.5 generation has a different perspective on education as well as academic experiences than first-generation young adults, I did not have the same number of first generation participants than 1.5 young adults. This made the comparison unequal and based on just two 1.5 undocumented young adults. However, as the research questions indicate, this study did not aim to compare these two generational groups, and therefore, this is not a methodological error but a finding generated from the data that needs to be taken into consideration for future research.

In addition, this study was not able to get into the classroom and observe the interactions that the participants had with the teachers and peers. I observed students in academic environments, such as in the cafeteria and other outside the classroom spaces while interacting with their friends. I also talked to two of the teachers that two of the participants had, but did not observe classroom dynamics. This limitation was based on school policies and my IRB. While it would have been important to observe them in the classroom, as Orellana (2007) stated, individuals carry their experiences with them in different discourse communities and I was able to obtain their perspectives and reflections from their school and work. I was also not able to observe all the participants at work. I was able to see them working in fast food restaurants, in a coffee shop, and at Herbalife and Amway, but not in the factories where there was no space for non-workers.

I was not able to follow the participants everywhere all the time. Following six participants meant to select who, when, and where to observe them; and I had to make

decisions based on my time and where I was allowed to go. Further, this study aimed to understand the perspectives and experiences of the participants as they narrated them. I was not trying to simply use my eyes to interpret their lives. My main goal was to get to know them, instill trust, listen to them, and create dialogue with them to better understand their perspectives. The dialogue is where I used my observations and past discussions to go in-depth in our talks. While I could imagine what it meant to be working in a factory based on their explanations and my own past brief experience, it was difficult to understand how Amway and Herbalife functioned. For me, it was in these foreign spaces that I was particularly interested in becoming partially involved in order to observe how relationships were formed. While I was not allowed to observe all the MLM meetings (there were some meetings just for members), I was able to discover a unique form of relationships and expectations that were not present in other work spaces. Understanding ‘foreign’ spaces better was my main objective while deciding where to observe. This explains why I spent large amounts of time at MLM settings and at the evangelistic youth group where Noberto belonged.

### **Suggestions and Contribution of this Study**

Future educational research must include first-generation undocumented young adults. This is one of the first ethnographic studies to include this group of students. Most studies that focus on the education of immigrant youths aim to investigate those who arrived in the United States as children (Suárez et al., 2008; Gonzales, 2011) and those studies that investigated the educational experiences of undocumented students claim that

the 1.5 generation deserve a path to citizenship (Gonzales, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Perez, 2009). All these educational studies omitted the lives of the first-generation young adults, a group of students that is also present in our schools and who also need support, attention, and a path to citizenship.

This omission is not just present among educational researchers but also in the field of Latino studies. Most research in Latino studies separated the experiences of 1.5-generation Latino youths from adult Latino immigrants while also ignoring the experiences of the first-generation young adults. This is clear in Abrego's (2011) study that compared the legal consciousness of 1.5 undocumented Latino youths from adult first-generation Latino immigrants. She claimed she was comparing two generations while she was comparing two different age groups. She ignored the fact that some first-generation immigrants can be young. Dismissing the experiences of first-generation young adults leads to ignorance and a lack of information on the experiences of this group, and further, it implies that only the 1.5-generation youths deserve the regulation of their immigration status.

In fact, researchers emphasize how the 1.5-generation youths had no voice in their migratory experiences to stress their unfair undocumented trajectories. Similarly, these first-generation youths had a very small voice (if any) in their migration experiences. Sarita and Diego asked to join their families when they ended up alone in their countries of origin. Ricardo did not want to migrate but had to support his mother, who had epilepsy and wanted to cross the border to reunite her husband and son. And Noberto, at age 16 was the head of the family, with no resources to support his mother and four younger sib-

lings. In short, these teenagers had the right to be with their families and support them as all the other 1.5 youths did. In other words, they also deserve to regularize their immigration status.

In addition, this study brought into light the essential role that the symbolic value of education has on undocumented 1.5 generation. More research needs to explore the role that prestige and status has on the education of high schoolers. While this study discovers the importance of these values among 1.5 undocumented young adults, we don't know the role that educational prestige and status have on other high schoolers. In addition, this study also contributed in the field of Latino studies by acknowledging that undocumented young adults are not just oppressed and disempowered individuals, but are agentic immigrants who look for resources to hold a positive sense of self and to improve their lives. Most research focus on the disempowerment and 'deportability' of undocumented immigrants and does not look at their everyday lives to recognize how they show agency in their practices and discourses. In fact, most studies that focus on immigrants' agency tend to focus on their political activism and resistance, thus ignoring the many nuanced forms that agency is present in their everyday practices and discourses.

Finally, this study brings a nuanced and in-depth analysis of the lives of undocumented young adults. It questions previous research that fell into categorizations and producing a monolithic understanding of undocumented immigrants' experiences. This past research ignored undocumented immigrants' complexities and uniqueness. Moreover, these youths also revoked prototypical mainstream discourses on undocumented immigrants (Rumbaut, 2009): All six participants reveal how undocumented young adults are

*not* uninterested in school, are *not* involved in gangs and violent crime, are *not* searching for prearranged marriages and anchor babies, and are *not* passive, but agentic individuals. Also, as revealed by all participants, undocumented young adults do *not* aim to remain in the United States, they aim to develop transnational selves that immigration policies prevent by immobilizing them in the United States.

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## Appendix A

### Transcription Conventions

<b>CAPS</b>	spoken with emphasis (minimum unit is morpheme)
<i>Italics</i>	English words used by the interviewee in a Spanish dominant conversation or vice versa
!	exclamation
?	asking a question
(.)	micro-pause
()	implicit information
[	overlapping speech
-	interruption (self or other)
...	not transcribed part of the conversation
“ ”	reported speech
(( ))	transcriber's comment