"I'm not good enough for anyone" : legal status and the dating lives of undocumented young adults

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“I’M NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR ANYONE”
LEGAL STATUS AND THE DATING LIVES OF
UNDOCUMENTED YOUNG ADULTS

by

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“I’m not good enough for anyone”:
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Abstract:

Legal status’ impact on romantic relationships has not yet been adequately explored in the literature. Based on video and phone interviews with twenty five undocumented activists from the ages of 18 to 28 years old, this research brings to light how legal status affects the romantic relationships of undocumented women and men. Gender roles are highly prevalent among young adults’ accounts and were consistent with stereotypical male and female roles in dating which often attribute more power and responsibility to men. As such, women experienced a slight advantage because traditional notions of courtship did not require them to provide resources, such as money or transportation, required for dating. Their issues centered on the difficulties of disclosing their legal status and depending on their partners for everyday activities.
INTRODUCTION

Brenda’s¹ skin is nut brown: not too dark, not too light. It is the skin color that women envy and covet. Long curly black hair frames her pretty oval face well. She is wearing a plain black shirt; her hair seems to meld with her shirt. Behind her, there is a window with a striped black, red, and white rug covering it. The room is all white with the exception of the rug so it is eye-catching. Nervous, she clears her voice: “This is the first time I am telling someone I don’t know about my situation.” As the interview goes on, she becomes more relaxed and calm. Her recent marriage to a U.S. citizen comes up. They have been dating for 6 years and lived together for five of those years. Her joy was brief; her anxiety emerges as she narrates her experiences. She recently went to an immigration lawyer who told her that she was ineligible to legalize her undocumented status through her marriage. While applying to college, Brenda had checked the “US citizen” line in her application. At the time she was afraid that if she selected any other status, additional documents proving her immigration status—documents that she did not have—would be requested. The lawyer explained that her act nearly 10 years ago was identity fraud, a federal offense. As a result, applying to change her status would immediately put her into deportation proceedings. Near to tears, she expresses how her legal status has been a continuous point of stress for her relationship: “I know things happen for a reason. It means that I’m not going to get to a certain point quickly. I didn’t expect it quickly but [having a legal status] meant that I was actually… that I’m a wife. That I wouldn’t have to constantly be a burden.”

¹ All names and identifiers have been changed to protect all interview participants.
As of 2010, there were an estimated 11 million undocumented individuals in the United States (Passel 2006; Passel and Cohn 2010). Of those 11 million, researchers estimate that 2.5 million were children who were brought to the U.S. before they were 10 years old (Batalova and McHugh 2010). Most of these immigrants like Brenda only know the American way of life since they left their countries of origin at a young age. The incorporation of this undocumented immigrant group has been understudied in the social sciences, particularly in their interactions with educational and governmental institutions. An emerging number of scholars have looked at the effects of legal status on undocumented young adults (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2011). For immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, legal status determines several aspects of their trajectories, perceptions, and day-to-day life.

Researchers have studied the importance of legal status and how it continually affects immigrant incorporation. An immigrant’s legal status is instrumental in determining their interaction with a society’s institutions, particularly in terms of the legislative laws (Menjívar 2006). Legal status determines access to a society’s resources, types of labor opportunities, and institutions. Those without the legal status are vulnerable to work exploitation, to higher unemployment, and to a lack of access to health insurance (Mehta et al 2002). As a result, legal status is intricately linked to lowered physical health and well-being (Finch and Vega 2003; Menjívar 2002), decreased mental health (Sullivan and Rehm 2005), increased poverty (Capps et al 2004), eroded identity (Rodriguez and Hagan 2004), decreased emotional well-being (Cavazos-Rehg et al 2007), lowered earnings and exploitative work experiences (Rivera-Batiz
1999; Simon and DeLey 1984). These effects are not isolated to only undocumented immigrants.

New research has provided evidence that legal status also affects the incorporation of children of immigrants. Yoshikawa (2011) argues that in immigrant groups with high proportions of undocumented status, the consequences of illegality are mechanisms that transmit the effects of parent’s undocumented status to their children’s development and learning even when the children are U.S. citizens. Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti (2013) suggest that there is a direct connection between legal status and mental and emotional health. These arguments propose that familial and other intimate relationships are important sites in which the effects of legal status are salient. The literature on immigrant incorporation of the immigrant young adults fails to address how legal status affects the romantic relationships that ultimately lead to family formation.

Family formation begins with the fulfillment of the transition to adulthood through dating and mate selection. Romantic relationships foster individual development and are considered one of the important milestones for early adulthood (Erikson 1963; Levinson 1978). In theory, if immigration law worked as they should, legal status should become irrelevant once marriage between two individuals occur. However due to the changes to immigration legislation in the past twenty years, legal status has become more important in understanding how young undocumented adults participate in their transition to adulthood through dating prior to family formation.

Despite rigorous research on how legal status affects immigrant incorporation, legal status’s impact on romantic relationships has not yet been adequately explored in
the literature. Based on video and phone interviews with twenty five undocumented activists from the ages of 18 to 28 years old, this research brings to light how legal status affects the romantic relationships for undocumented women and men. The findings reveal that:

1.) Legal status effects on romantic relationships are gendered
2.) Due to gender schemas of dating and courtship, men experience greater barriers to dating than women.
3.) Both groups interpret the trajectories of their relationship as stalled and abnormal because their legal status limits their employment and social mobility.

The first section of this paper will discuss how immigration policies determine immigrant incorporation. The second section will outline how gender affects immigrant incorporation and how these effects transmit to immigrant family formation and daily life. The third section will highlight the methods and findings of the current study while the last section will provide the discussion and conclusion.

IMMIGRATION POLICIES AND IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION

There is consensus in the literature that contemporary immigration policies in the United States has drastically changed the lives of immigrants regardless of their documentation status. In 1986, a weak economy and concerns about the growing Mexican population in the United States (Inda 2006; Golash-Boza 2012) led to the passage to the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Prior to IRCA’s passage, Mexican migration was traditionally composed of seasonal temporary workers whose families remained in Mexico (Massey, Durand, and Nolan 2003). The law dramatically shifted the resettlement patterns of Mexican migrants throughout the US as one of its many unintended consequences (Massey et al 2003). Because it was more difficult to
return to Mexico, many immigrants formed families on the other side of the US-MX border: in the United States (Massey et al 2003).

In 2011, almost 400,000 immigrants were deported—a record high for any U.S. administration (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2012). Today’s civil immigration laws are intertwined with criminal laws (Golash-Boza 2012; Inda 2006; Miller 2005; Ngai 2004) and the threat of deportation for all noncitizens, regardless of legal status, is real (De Genova 2010; Kanstroom 2010). Given the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and the politicization of immigrant enforcement (Stumpf 2006), the possibility of infinite detention and eventual deportation has made legal status an even more precarious subject to discuss. As a result, these communities have become “hyper-aware” of legal status (Menjívar 2011).

Effects on Immigrant Communities and Families

Studies have shown that the fear of deportability is tied to the potential separations from friends and family (Talavera, Núñez-Mchiri, and Heyman 2010). According to the 2012 National Survey of Latinos, 26% of Latinos knew someone who had been deported or detained within the last 12 months (Lopez and Gonzales-Barrera 2012). This speaks to the difficulty of separating communities between authorized and unauthorized immigrants since today’s immigrant families are often of mixed-status (Menjívar and Abrego 2009).

These deportations show the reality that deportation is not an isolated event affecting only undocumented migrants. Dreby (2012) highlights how U.S. born and unauthorized migrant children in immigrant Mexican households associated immigrant status with “illegality”. Arbona and colleagues (2010) found similar levels of deportation
fears for documented and undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants. The undocumented status adds immense levels of stress to the immigrant experience (Chavez 1991; Hagan, Rodriguez, Capps, and Kabiri 2003). Similarly, undocumented young adults harbor the additional fear of the prospect of returning to a country that they barely remember and they have little or no social ties to. This threat, as this study will reveal, pervades into decisions and attitudes during the initial stages of family formation.

Challenges for Undocumented Young Adults

The incorporation of the children of immigrants has been a topic of interest for immigration scholars for the past century. Traditional assimilation theorists argue that new immigrant groups need to disavow their previous cultural values, languages, and norms to assimilate successfully and to integrate into mainstream American society (Gordon 1964; Alba and Nee 1997). Portes and Zhou’s (1993) segmented assimilation theory argument is two-fold: first, children of distinct immigrant groups become incorporated into host society due to structural constraints and their “color” status. The second part to their theory is the varied impact of cultural values of different ethnic groups. While some ethnic groups may value “mainstream” traits such as prioritizing education, other ethnic group traits may not be helpful such as isolating a child away from non-co-ethnics. Portes and Zhou addressed that structural factors greatly affect the opportunities and integration of the children of immigrants. In the same realm, draconian immigration policies in the US have greatly affected lives of undocumented young adults.

For the undocumented young adults who grew up in the United States, the fear of being uprooted and deported plays a central role in their lives. Their precarious legal status makes them susceptible to detainment and deportation that are justified in the line
of national security and terrorism (Golash-Boza 2012). This immigrant group also faces the new challenge of an increasingly hostile political and economic climate, making comprehensive immigration reform highly unlikely in solving their undocumented status. In contrast, most immigrants who came before 1980 are now legal or permanent residents (Golash-Boza 2012; Massey and Nolan 2003).

For undocumented young adults’, social inequalities come to fruition after high school (Gonzales 2011). Under *Plyler vs. Doe*, immigrant children, regardless of their legal status, can obtain their K-12 education (Olivas 2005). Most do not realize that their lack of a legal status distinguishes them from their peers until the end of high school where their legal protections end (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2011). Because undocumented young adults typically have undocumented parents, their parents’ limited job prospects and legal limitations place the young adults in a de facto state of poverty (Chavez 1998). Undocumented immigrants encounter hardships in obtaining employment opportunities and higher education (Abrego and Gonzales 2010). They are much more likely to be in poverty and to face economic difficulties (Capps et al 2005). Racial segregation has historically concentrated poverty in immigrant and black communities, subjecting their communities to structural impacts of poverty (Waters 1999). Their psychological well-being are negatively impacted by their legal status and their acculturation stress is higher compared to documented students (Gonzales, Suárez-Orosco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013).

Young undocumented adults raised in the United States also face constraints in family formation. While for their parents’ generations, family ties may have occurred earlier, for these youth the family formation rites of passage are taking more time than
before (Furstenberg et. al. 2001). Due to contemporary demographic changes in the timing of marriage and parenthood, “traditional” rites of passage in the life course such as finishing college, obtaining a job, moving out of the parental home, getting married and forming a family are overall delayed. Young adults’ transition to adulthood has extended to what Arnett (2000:469) coins “emerging adulthood.” In particular, young people are devoting more time and effort into higher education, delaying their leave from their parents’ “nest”, decisions about childbearing and entering the workforce. Described as an in-between stage between adolescence and adulthood, Arnett describes emerging adulthood as an opportunity for “explor[ing] a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews” (Arnett 2000:469).

In emerging adulthood, explorations of love evolve from tentative and unclear intent to deeper levels of intimacy and life-long partnership. Arnett describes the process of exploration as “identity focused” and the implicit question is “Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?” (Arnett 2000:473). The extension of this transition has particular implications for undocumented young adults.

Unlike native-born and foreign-born young adults who have access to a plethora of life-choices, undocumented young adults face distinct and limited choices in terms of love and work. For the undocumented, their identity is strongly tied to their legal status. This paper argues that legal status negatively impacts the trajectories of intimacy and partnership through structural constraints and barriers, and that gender affects this process.
GENDER: IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION, FAMILY, AND DATING

Immigration is a major life change that pushes the need to acculturate to new cultural norms, practices, and beliefs. Along with this is the potential for increased stress to the immigrant family (Arbona et al. 2010; Sluzki 1979). Immigration changes the definitions of family roles, which in turn can destabilize family relations (Foner 1997; Shuval 1980; Suarez-Orozco 2001). "Traditional" family roles deteriorate to make room for new ones relating to child rearing values, parent-child relations, social attitudes, and gender relations. The empowerment of women outside the household and the change in power dynamics can contribute greatly to the higher levels of conflict within families (Debiaggi 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992). In an effort to regain their power, men can practice their patriarchal rights and revisit the traditional expectations of their partners (Kibria 1990; Mahdi 1999; Min 2001). In extreme cases, marital discord can be redirected to domestic violence (Bui and Morash 1999; Menjívar and Salcido 2002). Strained relationships can lead to the dissolution of the family. While the research has focused on the importance of gender in economic outcomes and family conflict, the beginnings of family formation—namely dating—has been largely ignored in the literature (with the exceptions of Enriquez forthcoming and Nesteruk and Gramescu 2012).

Gender roles are highly prevalent in dating, but in particular at the initial stages of dating since individuals rely on socially defined dating rules or "dating scripts" (Eaton and Rose 2012; Laner and Ventrone 2000; Lamont 2014). Gender is socially created through the ways cultures differentiate with norms such as assigning "male" and "female" tasks, activities, ideologies, and beliefs (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999). Failure to
adhere to these gender roles can result in the termination of a beginning relationship (Eaton and Rose 2012). Research supports the argument that the initial stages of dating are highly scripted along gender. Young adult’s descriptions of a hypothetical “typical” first date typically involve a proactive male role and a reactive female role (Rose and Frieze 1989; Laner and Vetrone 2000). Men are expected to plan and execute dates, drive, pay for date activities, and determine the pace of the date while women are expected to less self-directed behaviors such as waiting to be asked out on a date, to care more about their appearance, maintain the flow of conversation, and to reject advances. These roles were consistent in stereotypical male and female roles in dating and give more power to the men (Laner and Vetrone 2000). These expectations are salient in this paper’s findings.

The next section will discuss the research design. The target population, the interview structure, and the characteristics of the respondents are described.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

**Target Population and Interview Structure**

The respondents interviewed were self-identified undocumented young adults who are social activists and work with school organizations, student groups and immigrant rights organizations. The primary reason to focus on activists is that since they were self-identified, they in theory are more likely to openly discuss their legal status; however, as interviews showed, the topic is still touchy for many. To reach out to potential respondents, social media was primarily used (facebook, youtube, twitter, and tumblr). Activists use social media extensively to organize (Arriaga 2012). Snowball sampling among the networks of undocumented activists was utilized. With the
assistance of the advocacy groups and prominent undocumented activists, 10 women and 15 men between the ages of 18 and 28 years old at the end of the data collection were recruited and interviewed. Data collection occurred for three months from the end of May to the second week of September in 2012. After the self-identified young adults agreed to the interview, the consent form was emailed to the respondents. Due to the sensitivity of the research respondents, oral consent in lieu of written consent was obtained from the respondents. The institutional review board in the University at Albany, State University of New York approved all phases of the research.

Semi-structured questions guided the interview. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour. The respondents were given the option of conducting the interview through Skype or phone. Skype is a popular and free video-chatting and instant messaging software. At the start of each interview, respondents were asked if they had read the consent form and if they had any questions about it. Permission to record the audio of the interview was requested. No respondents declined to be recorded.

For the undocumented sample in the study, Skype allowed the respondents to observe that the interviewer was in the same age range and could be considered a peer. This assumption is based from Weisz’s (2007) study that purports peers are more likely to disclose romantic relationship problems to peers. A wealth of personal experience with immigration allowed for lengthy discussions with the respondents. I am an immigrant from the Philippines who moved to the United States at a young age, hails from a mixed-status household, and is a current noncitizen on an international student visa. Coupled with my minority status and gender, my personal history helped build rapport with the respondents despite the lack of face-to-face interview. Additionally,
Skype allowed for geographic variation and safety for the respondents. It also allowed access to interview the respondents who lived in different cities and towns in the US. More importantly, revealing one’s status is risky for undocumented young adults and this risk was a potential deterrent from access and to involve respondents. Non face-to-face interviews served as a place-based protection for the respondents. Due to the sensitive nature of the respondents’ legal status, it was imperative to gain their trust while simultaneously protecting their respondent rights. Using an online medium, where a user can be deleted and blocked, is helpful for encouraging interviews with undocumented young adults. No respondents at the time of this writing have blocked the author’s account.

**Interview Questions**

The interview consisted of open-ended questions related to their legal status and dating (See the Appendix, Section 2). The questions included experiences with the immigration system, past and present relationships, and how the immigration system has affected their relationships. Questions of how legal status permeated into their relationships such as dating challenges, disclosure of legal status, and issues of marriage at different phases of dating. If an interviewee was currently single, previous relationships are discussed; if the interviewee was in a relationship, both the past and the present relationships are explored. Since the interviewee’s sexual orientation and dating preferences are identified through their answers, respondents were not directly asked.

The interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed to identify salient themes. A theme was coded as salient when it appeared repeatedly in the interviews. The analysis revealed that particular themes varied as a result of gender schemas, such as dating
obligations, while other themes were consistent due to structural reasons regardless of gender.

**Characteristics of Respondents**

The respondents ranged from geography, nationality, age range, and educational attainment (see the Appendix, Section 1). The respondents’ originated from ten countries. Fourteen of the respondents were from Mexico, two from Ecuador, and another two from El Salvador. One immigrant from Argentina, Korea, Nicaragua, Panama, Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela were also interviewed. The average age of arrival for all respondents is 5.4 years (4.9 years for the females and 5.9 years for the males). This is consistent with the literature that most undocumented young adults come to the United States before the age of 10 (Batalova and McHugh 2010). The average age of the respondents at the time of the interview is 22.3 years of age. Half of the interviews were conducted through Skype and half were conducted through the phone. About half of the respondents identified as straight, two identified as lesbian, and four men identified as gay. The size of the lesbian and gay identified individuals in this paper are too small to yield any conclusive analysis. Half of the sample were in relationships and slightly less than half were single; two of the women are married. Half of the respondents are attending college while seven of the respondents are college graduates. Two have received their Master’s degree and four respondents were not pursuing their college degrees. Three-fourths of the respondents are under 25 years of age and the remaining one-quarter are over 25 years of age. Nearly half of the respondents are from California, three are from Florida, three from New York, and Texas, Maryland, Arizona, Virginia, and New Jersey each obtained one respondents. Nearly half of the respondents were
dating U.S. citizens, while one interviewer was dating another undocumented person, and another interviewee was dating an international student. The next section will first outline the dating experiences of the undocumented men.

**DATING CHALLENGES: MEN**

The gendered role expectations of men in courtship and dating serve as obstacles through all the stages of undocumented men’s relationships. In the beginning stages of courtship, men are expected to initiate the relationship, pay for his and his dates’ meals and activities, and to provide the transportation (Eaton and Rose 2012; Laner and Ventrone 2000; Lamont 2014). At the later stages of a relationship, men are expected to propose and to be the “breadwinner” of his new family. The men feel as though they are not fulfilling the expectations of their potential and current partners because of the structural barriers that they face. Additionally the men felt that their partners do not understand their involvement in activism surrounding immigration issues and their familial responsibilities to their unauthorized family members.

Men were more likely to describe considering a potential partner’s legal status than the women at the initiation stages of dating. This finding is supported by the current literature that men need to be more cautious because of increased risk of detention and deportation (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). It is logical that they will be more cautious with regards to whom they trust. The man’s supposed “responsibility” to initiate courtship falls in line with the gendered expectations of dating (Eaton and Rose 2012; Laner and Ventrone 2000; Rose and Frieze 1989). Through these expectations, the undocumented men are awarded the “choice” to choose their potential and current partner, a choice that is intimately tied to their legal status.
As such, men expressed a strong preference for dating legal status women. For the men, this is a strategic decision to avoid future issues concerning their legal status and dating. Jorge explains that dating another undocumented person is a moot point and that the relationship is doomed from the start: “If my partner is a resident or a temporary resident, that’s fine because you have something going for you. You have a legal status. If you’re illegal and you’re here with me, like if we tried to get our own place, we wouldn’t be able to get it.” Twenty-year old Marco agrees that it is a strange and paradoxical situation. Despite his personal view that personality is the most important factor when it comes to dating, Marco’s community pressures him to find a U.S. citizen wife. Even though Marco would like to date his fellow undocumented immigrants, he perceives that dating an undocumented person is not an option for him.

The men also cited having no steady source of income and no access to a car as deterrents to dating. They perceived that in order to date, they are the ones who need the money and the car—their partners’ lack of money or access to a car are not cited as dating limitations. This again falls under the assumption of gendered expectations of dating and courtship: the man is the one responsible to pay for the date, not their partners (Laner and Ventrone 2000). Mario, 26, who lives in Los Angeles reflects that even if he himself does not want to drive, he cannot ignore that having a car is convenient and opportune for dating. The inability to drive was a salient theme for the men that sometimes led to breakups. Twenty-one year old Nicolas was with his girlfriend for six months. He lives in Florida and used to take two-hour one-way bus rides to see his then-girlfriend. At the same time, Nicolas was working fulltime in a magic shop and going to school full-time. He cited a lack of a car as a reason for their break-up:
“I don’t live particularly close to [her school]. As I am undocumented, I can’t drive. And she couldn’t drive either because they didn’t let you take your car when you’re a freshman and she was a freshman when we were dating. So getting together was kind of hard…I couldn’t drive. It was really hard. We had to ride a bus and it’s really hard. So the reason we broke up is because we didn’t see each other enough. And she was like “Well, this isn’t really a relationship.”

Both Mario and Nicolas never cited that the reason that for the breakup was because of their partner’s inability to drive. They put the responsibility of driving on themselves; because they couldn’t drive, both saw their inability as a failure on their part in the relationship.

The expectation that men should pay for the dates also caused fights and breakups for the undocumented men. Twenty-four year old Gerard is a self-proclaimed “very late dater” who met his then-girlfriend at twenty. His girlfriend was not bothered with his legal status but was bothered with Gerard’s limited income. Gerard is ineligible for federal financial aid so his income went into his college tuition. As a result, they broke up. Even though Gerard’s girlfriend understood his legal status, the limited opportunities to earn enough money for dates caused tension in their relationship.

MAKING A COMMITMENT: MARRIAGE FOR UNDOCUMENTED MEN

Marriage comes up as a tenuous topic for the undocumented. It is a common misconception—the “green card myth”—that marriage to a U.S. citizen will solve their status problems. In reality, the situation is more complex and immigration policies have made the legalization of citizen-spouses almost impossible (Massey et al 2002; Kanstroom 2010). The gendered expectations on men proposing to their partners, and not the other way around, were salient in the interviews. While ten of the fifteen interviewed men received marriage proposals from friends or by past and current
partners, these proposals were not considered seriously as a potential pathway to fix their legal status. Surprisingly, it was their women friends, rather than their women partners, that offered the use of marriage for legalization. This suggests that it was not common for women partners to propose marriage to “help” their male counterparts.

There is an implicit understanding between partnerships that proposing marriage is the man’s role (Lamont 2014). Twenty-one year old Daniel disclosed that girls had proposed to him before but they “kind of expect me to say ‘no I can’t do it’, you know.” Carlos, 25, feels it is easier for women to marry than men because of these gendered expectations: “Especially [for girls], if they have an American-born boyfriend or citizen boyfriend, they kind of compel them to get married. Or like the guy will go ‘Let’s take that extra step and get married’”. Carlos points out that gender matters in proposing marriage. The men perceive that if the woman is the undocumented partner in the relationship, marriage is more likely to occur.

For the undocumented men, fear of deportation and detention are a primary concern. It is easy for the men to imagine a situation where they can be taken advantage of through marriage. Twenty-one year old Nicolas explains that marrying for citizenship is an option only at the risk of deportation and a last resort. Nicolas, like the other males, take into consideration that marriage can act as a safety net against deportation but is resistant to the idea of relying on a partner for such. This finding is consistent with how men are more likely to be deported and implies that men are more hyperaware of their legal status than women (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013).

Once the relationship became more serious, marriage and legalization evolved into a source of conflict and turmoil for couples. The structural difficulties that the men
face stall the progression of their relationships. Even when the men have found a compatible partner who is willing to share their lives and homes, the men are hesitant to marry and to start families. Male expectations of serving as the “breadwinner” in the family particularly play a role in these decisions. Cristian, 23, has been in a serious relationship with his live-in girlfriend for 1.5 years in Florida. His girlfriend, a nurse, has thought about moving out of their current state to attend graduate nursing programs. Cristian feels conflicted between following his girlfriend and staying in their current state to be with his family. He feels that his family relies on him due to their undocumented status: “They’re not able to exist on their own.” Since he does not have a car or a job, he relies heavily on his girlfriend for rides and a place to stay: “She’ll say, ‘Oh, what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine!’ But in reality I’m living at her place for free, as a responsible person and as the guy in the relationship it bothers me that I can’t support her or me.” Even though his partner understands his legal status and remains supportive, Cristian feels that his legal status holds him back from being an independent and equally contributing partner.

**DATING CHALLENGES: WOMEN**

Like the men, the undocumented women also experience the pull of gendered roles and expectations. What distinguishes women’s experiences from those of the men interviewed however is their gender allows them certain advantages in the realm of dating and courtship. The women do not perceive their lack of money or a car as deterrents to their dating life. The interviews suggest that both members in the relationship implicitly agree that it is the male’s responsibility to pay for their dates and activities (Eaton and Rose 2012; Laner and Ventrone 2000). In addition, the women have
the advantage that they are not expected to initiate a relationship nor did they feel pressure to propose to their partners (Lamont 2014). As women, they were more likely to receive marriage proposals from their partners and have their partners support their families.

This is not to say that the women did not encounter challenges during their dating. Their issues centered on the difficulties of disclosing their legal status and depending on their partners for everyday activities. Disclosing their legal status was a cause of great stress and anxiety; in many cases, the women broke up with their boyfriends due to the inability to disclose. A prominent theme in the women interviews was the fear that their partners would think that their relationship was to solely gain access to a legal status and that there was no sincerity in their romantic intentions. This was consistent particularly at the beginning stages of a relationship, making disclosure particularly stressful. Finally, the women strongly felt that their legal status unduly burdened their partners.

At the initial stages of dating, women discussed their fear of disclosing their legal status to their potential partners. Despite their roles as activists who proudly say they are “Undocumented and Unafraid”, the undocumented women’s legal status was a frightening topic to bring up in the dating realm. Adriana, 22, says that disclosing her legal status to potential romantic partners is not a casual comment: “How do you go in [a date], saying ‘oh by the way I’m an illegal’…” Before Clarissa met her boyfriend of four years, this fear affected her interactions with potential partners. This dread for disclosure negatively impacts the adult’s perceptions of who to trust with their legal status. Since Brenda was young, her mother cautioned her and her sister on trusting people about her
legal status; trusting the wrong people could lead to her family’s separation. As a result, it took Brenda two boyfriends and then meeting her now-husband to share her status:

“I felt obligated to tell [my husband] in the first month [we were dating] because I didn’t want him to sign up for something he didn’t want to. And that was the first time I actually shared with someone about where I stood and how it could be difficult being with me. There’s a lot of things you might want to do but I can’t do [any of them].”

Early in the relationship, Brenda wanted her future husband to know the limitations that they would face as a couple because of her legal status. Disclosure necessitated trust in a potential and prospective partner: this was a theme salient in the interviews. Tania, 19, points out how partners can use their precarious legal status as tools of revenge and retaliation. This is consistent with the literature that women are more vulnerable to exploitation than men (Raj and Silverman 2002; Salcido and Adelman 2004).

Because of their limitations and social mobility, the women perceive that their legal status hinders their partners’ from having a “normal” relationship. Many of the women respondents commented on how their partners longed to travel with them and how guilty they felt for not being able to do so. At the beginning of her relationship, Brenda discovered that it was dangerous for her to travel without an ID. Brenda was hurt “because if he had met an American girl, [my husband] wouldn’t have to deal with this crap.” In addition to barriers to travel, the undocumented women’s perceptions of their mobility were shaped by their legal status. Twenty-two year old Maria has been with her girlfriend for two years. While her partner can find work through normal routes, Maria has to find work “under-the-table” or do independent contracting. Because of this, Maria feels her partner is obligated to support her financially even though her partner has not
brought it up. She acknowledges that her legal status does not give her the same opportunities as her partner and views her mobility as stagnant and downward. This perception of mobility is important for both the undocumented person and their potential partners. Clarissa, 22, recounts her experience of working in a cookie store during and after high school while her peers moved on to career-oriented jobs. It was a struggle for her to come up with excuses of why she continued to work there. This disparity in opportunities can cause strain in a relationship. The undocumented women were more likely to point out this inequality than the men.

For others, the disparity leads to dependence on their partners in daily activities. Twenty-year old Julia explains that her relationship with her boyfriend of three years “is totally different because of her status. In this relationship, he has to step up a lot.” Upon receiving his driver’s license, Julia’s family became dependent on him. He drops off Julia’s mother to work, drives to grocery store, and shows his ID at stores and check points. Julia mentions that this reliance has caused tension in her relationship and that she and her boyfriend are currently on a “break.” She is aware that “[dating me] imposes responsibility on him and I feel bad for him.” She muses that if he was dating a citizen, their relationship would be less about dependency and more about helping each other out.

MAKING A COMMITMENT: MARRIAGE FOR UNDOCUMENTED WOMEN

The women faced pressures to marry a U.S. citizen and stirred fears of remaining a burden to their spouses. Many of the women cited how their friends and family urged them to marry to fix their legal status. Tania recounts how her grandmother told her to marry someone with papers. In her opinion, marriage is not that simple:

“I’ve never fallen in love with anybody who wasn’t from here or whose legal status was the same as mine, but I mean, I wouldn’t have an issue
with it. But [my grandma] would have an issue with it…I’ve told her before and tons of times, I want to get my situation fixed first. And then I’ll go ahead and marry whoever I want.”

Tania views fixing her legal status as a condition before she enters a marriage. Her sentiments echo what the women wanted in their future marriages: they want to marry for the right reasons and not out of necessity and desperation.

It was important for the women that their partners understood that their relationship was based on their sincerity. The undocumented women wanted to avoid their partners’ from thinking that marriage was merely a way to gain access to legalization. This is despite the reality of current immigration policies does not easily allow for this.

**DATING CHALLENGES: MEN AND WOMEN**

While gendered expectations of courtship and dating affected men and women differently, particular structural barriers impacted their dating lives. Both groups cited the lack of a government-issued ID as a structural barrier to dating. They interpreted their lack of a legal status as deterrents to early family formation and dating. The young adults worried that the structural barriers from their legal status would also burden their partners. The lives they envisioned for themselves are unattainable due to their legal status.

The young adult’s lack of legal status complicated dating activities—through their interactions with their social networks, businesses, and institutions, they are constantly reminded of their legal status. The lack of a government-issued ID made activities such as going out for drinks or going to different cities difficult. Twenty-three year old Herman noted how his girlfriend and him “need to look up where we go, like if we are
going out dancing, to a bar, to a club...That’s the hardest thing; to go out and be young and be an adult; go out and drink.” Some places accept his *matricula*, an ID card issued to Mexican foreign nationals in the United States: for both Herman and his girlfriend, it is embarrassing when they do not. Because of his precarious status, they need to be more vigilant about knowing which places they do or do not have access to. This echoes how legal status dictates interactions with institutions and communities (Menjívar 2006). This added vigilance made the respondents deem that their potential and current partners’ lives would be negatively affected as a result.

This perception differs for those who were single and those who were in relationships. For those who are single, their undocumented status made the prospect of dating daunting. Adriana, 22, feels that the hardships her legal status brings on her life—financially taking care of her family and her inability to go to school—has affected her ability to see herself as a viable dating partner:

“I can barely provide for myself. I have to provide to my family, to my parents. And here I am, trying to date. I start backing away, in a way. So that’s my relationship. And the guy, a lot of times, is not willing to know me enough to realize that ‘hey, the reason why I live this way is because, you know, because of the obstacles I’ve been faced with’.”

The undocumented young adults feel that a “normal” life is untenable: to reach a point where they can work without limits on their goals and dreams remain an illusion. This is especially salient with respondents who were in serious relationships. While Cristian’s partner has discussed how she would like to buy a house and to have children with him, he showed no confidence that her partner’s dreams of a normal life are tenable and a fantasy at best.
“I think I’ve come such a long way and I’ve overcome so many obstacles that I just can’t give it away just based on our relationship. I really do care and I’m invested in it and I do passionately care about her, but I can’t just forget everything and say, “Oh that’s it; we’re done and time to find a normal person job.”

Cristian feels conflicted between his duties as an immigrant rights activist and his partner’s dreams of wanting to start a family. His experiences as an undocumented person have played a large role in shaping who he is today and he is unlikely to stop working for immigrant rights. He fears that a normal life of marriage, kids, and a career that his partner envisions for him are out of his reach. Corazon echoed similar fears in the early and current stage of her marriage.

Twenty-seven year old Corazon met her boyfriend at a party while she was in college. After a few weeks of dating, her boyfriend said he wanted to travel to Paris with her. Her friends and family urged her to reveal her legal status, causing Corazon great anxiety and stress. She recalls her disclosure:

“My biggest fear was that he would think I was with him because of his citizenship, which is a very common scam in the papers. A year before we got married, I took him to Reno just to be with my parents at my house. Nevada summers are always hot, so one day we took a walk. I told him that I couldn’t travel outside of the U.S. and he was surprised and said, “What? Why?” Then I brought up the fact that I don’t have a license and he asked why again. And I told him that I came here when I was 9 and that I was undocumented. He was stunned and during all of this I’m sweaty and shaking because I was really scared. I didn’t tell that many people back then that I was undocumented outside of my family, this was the third time I had told someone.”

Corazon’s anxiety was so great that it physically manifested with her body sweating and shaking. This is resounding of how an undocumented legal status can transfer to physical manifestations of stress and somatization (Sullivan and Rehm 2005).
Luckily for Corazon, her partner’s parents were previously undocumented and recently legalized. He had rare insight on what being an undocumented immigrant in the United States meant. After eight months of dating, Corazon’s partner proposed to offer her protection from deportation. They married in March 2006. A month later, her father was deported and the rest of her family—her mother and younger siblings—left for Mexico. During the trip to Mexico, her younger brother passed away in an accident. Corazon has not seen her family since. In theory, she should be able to apply for a change of status since she is married to a U.S. citizen. But risking that route could result in a ten-year bar from the U.S. and her husband would have to move to Mexico with her.

Because of how the current immigration laws are structured and implemented, this fear of evading a “normal” life and remaining a burden pervades even after marriage to a U.S. citizen. Regardless of the motivations of undocumented partners and spouses, it is nearly impossible for them to live the life that they envision for themselves because of current immigration policies.

**DISCUSSION**

In sum, gendered expectations of courtship and dating serve as a framework to analyze the interviews. Traditional notions of dating and courtship behavior were prevalent in the interviews. These notions were also expected at the later stages of cohabitation and marriage. This is an interesting finding within itself since the respondents are activists and in theory, are more aware of gendered frameworks, norms, and practices. Legal status added additional barriers to the relationships of the men since they did not feel that they fulfilled their roles economically and socially. The women in this case experienced a slight advantage in terms of dating and courtship. Since they did
not feel obligated as strongly as the men to pay for dates or to provide transportation, their worries did not lie in their failed expectations as a partner. The women’s sources of anxiety were with disclosure and fear of retaliation from their partners. At the later stages of dating, the women were more likely to feel that they were burdens to their partners than the men.

I raise some potential concerns with my findings. Since my participants are from different countries, they may be subject to different dating norms as compared to native born adults. However I point out that my sample’s average age of arrival to the United States is 5.42 years old and their average length of stay in the United States is 16.9 years. I would argue that in addition to their integration in the K-12 education system, my participants also have spent most of their lives in the United States. My participants also did not mention instances where their families and relatives imposed their countries’ dating norms and interfered with their relationships. While my participants received pressure from their relatives to marry a “US citizen” to acquire a legal status, all declined to follow this advice. In addition, there may be some concerns with how dating is different depending on the stage of the life course: a young person will date differently when he or she is 22 compared to 28. My research shows a glimpse of how legal status can impact the dating trajectories of undocumented youth at the beginning of their dating lives (early in young adulthood) to when two people decide to marry (later in adulthood). Similar to Enriquez’s (forthcoming) findings, I found that gender expectations differ depending on the stages of family formation. This suggests that the impacts of legal status are salient at all stages of family formation and that undocumented young adults are experiencing a distinct phenomena compared to their undocumented parents.
This paper contains key limitations with its findings. The small sample size does not allow for generalizations to all undocumented young adults and activists who at the early stages of family formation. The size of the lesbian and gay self-identified members in the analysis is also too small for a separate analysis. Since the gendered scripts of same-sex dating may vary from heterosexual dating scripts, this is a gap that needs to be addressed. Recent legislation has also changed the trajectories for undocumented immigrants. With the defeat of the Defense of Marriage Act in June 2013, same-sex couples are increasingly obtaining the same legal and political rights as heterosexual couples. Whether these policies will extend to undocumented spouses is still unclear. The Obama administration’s passage of deferred action (commonly known as “DACA”) has allowed undocumented young adults to avoid deportation and the right, albeit temporary, to work and to obtain driver’s license. State-by-state variations may provide distinct structural barriers. State-by-state policy differences have explained differences in educational attainment for undocumented Latino students (Flores 2010). Comparative research on state-based differences (i.e. a state that allows undocumented immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses versus a state that does not) could provide insight on how policies affect the early stages of family formation.

Future directions for research call to the study of romantic relationships of other undocumented ethnic groups. Mexican migrants are a key player in US immigration since an approximate 57% of all foreign-born residents from Latin America hail from Mexico (Bean and Lowell 2007:70). Research on undocumented immigrants is highly concentrated on Mexican immigrants, partly for functional and practical reasons and partly because of the racialization of Hispanic in contemporary politics (Chavez 2008).
This group also consistently dominates both the documented and undocumented immigration in the U.S. From a practical point of view, it is easier to study Mexican undocumented migrants because due to their sheer size, they are more likely to be included in these large data sources. Bean and Lowell (2007) estimate that the composition of the undocumented is Asian-origin individuals (9%), African and “other” (4%), and Europeans and Canadians (6%). This focus however has left other ethnic groups that are a part of the undocumented, for the most part, to be ignored. This can lead scholars and the public to equate illegality solely to Latino immigrant groups. Framing the undocumented issue as solely a “Latino” issue is detrimental to the overall well-being of all undocumented immigrants.

This study provides a glimpse of how detention and deportation policies are affecting the beginning stages of family formation. Dating and courtship at first glance seem to be outside of immigration policies grasp. This research shows the contrary and that legal status is a decisive factor in romantic relationships. This is quite troublesome that in a country that prides itself of freedom and rights, individual choices about who to fall in love with are dictated by policies that ignore the reality that noncitizens and citizens interact on a daily basis.
APPENDIX
SECTION 1: TABLES

TABLE 1. COUNTRY OF ORIGIN OF PARTICIPANTS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
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</tr>
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<td>El Salvador</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad and Tobego</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
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TABLE 1.2 INTERVIEW STYLE OF PARTICIPANTS

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TABLE 1.3 SELF-IDENTIFIED SEXUAL ORIENTATION OF PARTICIPANTS

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TABLE 1.4 RELATIONSHIP STATUS OF PARTICIPANTS

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<tr>
<td>In a Relationship</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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TABLE 1.5 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

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<tr>
<td>Pursuing BA</td>
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<td>Not Attending School</td>
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TABLE 1.6 AGE CATEGORIES OF PARTICIPANTS

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TABLE 1.7 STATE-LOCATION OF PARTICIPANTS

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<td>Texas</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Virginia</td>
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<td>Arizona</td>
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TABLE 1.8 LEGAL STATUS OF PARTICIPANTS RELATIONSHIPS

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<tr>
<th>Legal Status of Previous and Current Partners</th>
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# TABLE 1.9 DESCRIPTIVES

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<td>Average age of Interviewees (At the time of the interview)</td>
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<td>22.4</td>
<td>22.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of stay in US</td>
<td>16.26</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>16.88</td>
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SECTION 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background Info
- Tell me about your family.
  - Where were your parents born? Where did they grow up? Did they grow up in a rural, suburb or urban setting?
  - Do you have any siblings? How many sisters/brothers, if any? Are you the eldest, youngest, middle child?
  - Do you have relatives in the US? Do you have relatives nearby or in the same city as you?
- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - How old are you?
  - What are your hobbies?
  - What types of foods do you like?
  - What languages can you speak?
  - Does your family tend to move around a lot or have you stayed in your current place for awhile?
  - Tell me about where you live? What are things you like and what are things you don’t like?
  - Do you go to school? Where do you go to school? What year?
  - What is your major? What are your favorite/most hated classes? Do you have any favorite professors in your school?

Legality
- When did your parents come to the US?
- When did you come to the US? Did you come with them?
- When did you find out about your legal status?
- What did you think about when you found out?
- When did you decide to tell people about your status? Why did you decide to?
- What made you decide to become a social activist?
- How many people know about your legal status? Give me an estimate.
- Did people change how they treated you when you told them?
Relationship Status

- Are you single or in a relationship? Is it casual, open, exclusive or serious?
- Can you provide an overview of your dating history? How many people have you dated? How long did those relationships last? What’s the longest relationship you’ve been in?
- What do you look for in a relationship?
- What qualities must your potential partner/partner have?
- What things do you find attractive about someone? What do you see as “turn offs”?
- Where do you go to find dates?
- Tell me what a date with you would look like.
- What are memorable dates you’ve been on? Give me a few examples.
- Do you have any funny dating stories under your belt? Give me an example.

Legality and Dating

- When do you decide to tell someone you’re dating about your legal status?
- Can you describe some dating challenges you have? Give me some examples.
- Does your partner’s legal status matter to you? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been proposed to fix your legal status? If someone did, what did you say and do? What did they discuss?
- Have your experiences as a DREAMer affected your ability to trust your potential partner/partner?
- With Obama’s announcement, how would your dating experiences change?
References

Abrego, Leisy J. 2006. “‘I can’t go to college because I don’t have papers’: Incarceration Patterns of Latino Undocumented Young adults.” *Latino Studies* 4(3): 212-231.


