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Understanding the Undocumented College Student Experience: Proposing a Conceptual Model of Cognitive and Psychosocial Development

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The undocumented population continues to grow in the United States, with over 65,000 undocumented youth graduating from high school every year. The introduction of Plyler v. Doe has resulted in the mandatory inclusion of undocumented youth into the United State culture and public education system through their high school graduation. Upon high school graduation, undocumented students who strive to obtain a post-secondary degree often face a lack of financial resources or other forms of social support. It is imperative that student affairs professionals begin to critically reflect on the implications of social and financial barriers on undocumented college students' psychosocial and cognitive development. This article provides a conceptual model of identity development and also takes a closer look at how select psychosocial and cognitive theories relate to the current research on the undocumented college student experience. The conceptual model presented is intended to prompt additional studies and critical reflection while also offering a brief synthesis of the current literature.

Each year, around 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high schools across the United States (Barnhardt, Ramos, & Reyes, 2013). This is, in large part, possible due to a landmark federal case, *Plyler v. Doe*, which resulted in primary and secondary education being mandated for all students, regardless of immigration status (Johnson & Janosik, 2008). *Plyler v. Doe* was a positive step towards equality in education, but the cessation of federal support for undocumented youth after high school means that students who attempt to pursue a post-secondary education are met with bias, rejection, and legal ambiguity. The detrimental effect of withdrawal of federal support after high school is evident in the fact that, out of the 65,000 undocumented students who graduate high school each year, only 5-10% pursues a post-secondary education (Barnhardt, Ramos, & Reyes, 2013). Despite the growing number of undocumented students, little has been done to examine the unique developmental challenges the population faces as they move through the United States education system. Instead, undocumented student education and development is almost exclusively viewed as a legal issue, and support of those students who attempt to attend college generally comes from a select number of mentors or family members (Johnson & Janosik, 2008).

A growing number of undocumented high school graduates are facing the uncertain transitions to adulthood. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize the current literature on the undocumented student experience through a developmental lens to highlight the influence that citizenship and societal bias have on psychosocial and cognitive maturation. It is hoped that the theoretical concepts discussed in this paper will underline the precarious climate within which undocumented students must attempt to develop a sense of identity and lead to an increase of support for undocumented students on college campuses across the United States. For the purpose of this theoretical overview, a differentiation is made between undocumented students and illegal immigrants. Current research defines illegal immigrants as adults that have made a conscious choice to enter a country illegally. In contrast, the term *undocumented students* refers to the children of both immigrant workers and illegal migrators who were brought to the United States without conscious awareness or choice (Johnson & Janosik, 2008). Children born in the United States are granted citizenship upon birth regardless of their parent's legal status. However, undocumented students often find themselves in a state of legal limbo: they are unable to secure citizenship in the United States and demonstrate little or no tie to their country of origin (Gildersleeve & Ramero, 2010).

From the time of their initial migration, through the continuation of their educational journey, undocumented students must not only struggle with entering a foreign society, but also navigating the societal challenges of attending public school (Gildersleeve & Ramero, 2010). It was while examining undocumented students' struggle to develop an ethnic identity that it became equally apparent there was a shift in their locus of care occurring in conjunction with a maturing sense of ethnic identity. As a result of this observation, it was hypothesized that cognitive shifts may in fact be necessary to allow for more advanced phases of ethnic identity development to occur. Likewise, it became increasingly evident that undocumented students may demonstrate a unique correlation between ethnic and moral development as they attempt to pursue a post-secondary education. In order to better understand how such a relational form of development occurs, a unified model of cognitive and psychosocial development was conceptualized, using a synthesis of the current literature on the undocumented college student experience.

Proposing a Unified Model of Ethnic and Moral Development

Initial exploration into undocumented students' experiences occurred through the application of existing moral and ethnic developmental theories. Though external in nature, lack of United States citizenship can lead to internal feelings of isolation, rejection, and identity confusion (Coll & Marks, 2012). Ethnic development is a central component to the formation of a unique identity. Undocumented students must make this crucial developmental journey within a country that essentially labels them strangers (Evans et al., 2010). While the majority of undocumented students are of Mexican origin, education professionals would be remiss in ignoring the significant influence of populations from Asia, Central America, South America, The Caribbean, and the Middle East (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Due to the diversity of the undocumented student population, Jean Phinney's (1989) model of ethnic identity development was recognized

as readily applicable to the various undocumented populations, regardless of country of origin.

Though applicable to a wide range of ethnic populations, an evaluation of the current literature led to the conclusion that Phinney's (1989) model could not entirely outline the unique sequencing of ethnic development observed in current research on undocumented college student identity development (Coll & Marks, 2012). This was especially evident when analyzing the experiences of those students who attempted to move beyond secondary education, and faced the additional challenge of not only examining where they fit in on a college campus, but within the country they call home (Gildersleeve & Ramero, 2010). While examining the psychosocial development of undocumented students, it also became apparent that there were discernable patterns of care and morality that correlated with individual phases of ethnic development. This observation led to an application of Carol Gilligan's (1982/1993) Theory of Moral Development, to illuminate how care and responsibility could potentially play a role in undocumented students' identity development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Despite Gilligan's theory being commonly attributed to the female perspective, a synthesis of relevant research led to the conclusion that a locus of care, for self and community, heavily influenced both the cognitive and psychosocial development of the undocumented student regardless of gender.

As stated earlier, the intent of *Plyler v. Doe* was to offer equal educational opportunities to all children in the United States, regardless of their immigration status. What lawmakers have failed to examine is the affect that societal and educational integration could potentially have on students who will be, metaphorically, "left in the cold" upon the completion of high school (Barnhardt, Ramos, & Reyes, 2013). Beyond obtaining an education, school is a place of developing cultural and social competency, and particularly powerful in the process of identifying as a United States citizen (Gildersleeve & Ramero, 2010). While immigrant children are pushed hard to develop uniquely American identities, undocumented students must wrestle with constant questioning and bias regarding their immigration status and legality. Likewise, the pursuit of higher education presents additional barriers by an abrupt abandonment of federal support upon high school graduation (Johnson & Janosik, 2008). Due to this state of legal ambiguity, the impetus falls on student affairs practitioners to further their understanding of both the cognitive and psychosocial aspects of undocumented student development to implement practices that support such a vulnerable population in higher education.

Phase 1: Awakening and Self-Sacrifice

To concisely examine the theoretical phases identified, a unified model of undocumented student development [UMUSD] was conceptualized which addresses both the ethnic and moral development of the undocumented student, and illuminates the difficult journey playing out in educational intuitions across the United States. Introduction into U.S. society, whether occurring in kindergarten or high school, is the hallmark of the first phase of the UMUSD; *Ethnic Awakening and Self Sacrifice*, which includes the subcategory, *Ethnic Identity Stagnation*. From the standpoint of ethnic development, it is clear that there is a potential moment upon migration to the United

States when undocumented youth are forced to confront their sense of ethnic identity (Coll & Marks, 2012). Though varying in age range, depending on time entry into the United States education system, this first phase is characterized by uncertainty, fear, and confusion. Persons in this stage are acutely aware that their community, whether familial or inclusive of a larger group, is different than the majority. Individuals in this phase are often unaware of the legal implications of their undocumented status, but have observed its effects on societal bias. This stage also encompasses the basic realization that bias and difference exist, which then leads to dissonance and feelings of uncertainty regarding personal ethnic identity. Mirroring characteristics of those in Phinney's (1989) second phase, *foreclosure*, individuals in the first phase of the UMUSD exhibit very little in the way of ethnic exploration, but are becoming increasingly aware of ethnic diversity and bias.

While in the process of becoming aware of ethnic differences, individuals in the first phase are also notably devoted to their native community. Often, undocumented students are charged with significant family responsibilities and as such demonstrate a locus of care that focuses solely on the benefit of the whole rather than the individual (Gildersleeve & Ramero, 2010). Through these observations, it became clear that this distinct sense of care for others mirrors the second phase of Gilligan's (1993) model, *goodness as self-sacrifice*. In agreement with Gilligan's (1982/1993) research, individuals in the first phase of the UMUSD will also defer to group consensus and harmony rather than risk disconnect from the only stable social connection they have (as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Facing cultural shock and the pressure to become "Americanized," individuals in ethnic awakening and self-sacrifice have the potential to transition to *Ethnic Identity Stagnation*, a subcategory of the first phase. Ethnic identity stagnation is the direct result of an individual reacting to increased pressure to become more integrated in U.S. society, which then conflicts with their desire to maintain their native ethnic identity and sense of community. Individuals in stagnation will identify strongly with their native community and see straying from the familiar as both reprehensible and a direct attack on their way of life. While in stagnation, an individual will either actively or passively reject their host country by focusing their energies towards preserving their native values and traditions, often to the detriment of individual exploration. Those in ethnic identity stagnation may eventually progress to the second phase, *Ethnic Exploration and Egocentrism*, but it is also possible for individuals to remain in the first phase indefinitely.

Phase 2: Exploration and Ethnocentrism

By progressing to the second stage, *Ethnic Exploration and Ethnocentrism*, individuals will begin to explore new customs, languages, and experiences and reconcile these experiences to a growing inner sense of ethnic identity. Undocumented students in the second phase are striving to quiet earlier experiences of dissonance by exploring what role their native cultural should play in the development of a uniquely blended ethnic identity. This phase was conceptualized utilizing aspects of Phinney's (1989) third stage, *moratorium*, in which ethnic minorities attempt to answer questions regarding their ethnic views through active exploration. This phase may last for a significant amount of time,

and could lead to feelings of isolation. Individuals in ethnic exploration and ethnocentrism must focus their energies towards building inner-strength, thus resulting in a developmental shift from previously held constructs of self-sacrifice.

While Gilligan (1982/1993) outlined self-centeredness as a key characteristic of her most basic mode of moral development, *orientation to individual survival*, the UMUSD recognizes that undocumented students must first transition from their initial stance of self-sacrifice to allow necessary psychosocial and cognitive exploration to occur (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Due to the UMUSD's link between ethnic and moral development, ethnocentrism is perceived as a more mature phase of development in recognition of the self-care required to test moral constructs which may contradict those of one's native community. In short, individuals in the exploration phase must re-focus their sense of care inward, and place a greater emphasis on personal discovery. Again, age ranges for each phase are highly variable, based on the age of immigration, yet a review of the current literature led to the observation that progression to the second phase of the UMUSD is often the result of high school graduation, and the cessation of government support.

Undocumented college students, more than any other age group, are forced to confront campuses and learning environments that can often be cold or hostile to the undocumented immigrant population (Gildersleeve & Ramero, 2010). From a legal standpoint, undocumented students must also reconcile their ethnic identity and sense of care with a country that has, up until college, pressed for integration and assimilation yet abandons them upon reaching adulthood. By building the internal support necessary to explore individual constructs of morality and ethnicity, undocumented students will eventually achieve a sense of balance which then allows them to transition to a phase of balance and strength.

Phase 3: Fulfillment and Balance

Individuals in the third and final phase, *Identity Fulfillment and Balance of Care*, realize a dual sense of ethnic achievement and an equalization of the care for one's self and others. Reflecting aspects of Phinney's (1989) final stage, *ethnic identity achievement*, this phase of the UMUSD involves the development of a strong sense of personal ethnic identity and bicultural acceptance (Evans et al., 2010). Undocumented students who reach fulfillment are able to embrace their ethnic background, yet integrate it with personally developed constructs formed through the explorative and egocentric phase. Also, in agreement with Phinney's observations of individuals in the identity achievement stage, undocumented students in the identity fulfillment phase do not necessarily cease their ethnic exploration, but continue their search from a stabilized acceptance of their own ethnic identity and locus of care

Gilligan's (1982/1993) third phase, *morality of nonviolence*, was applied to examine how students are able to move beyond egocentrism and strike the delicate balance between responsibility to their native community and self-care (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Rather than caring for their community on a basic needs level such as food, shelter, money, and services, students in this phase are able to conceptualize higher levels of care that include advocating for change in society. By doing so, students in this final

phase of the unified model of undocumented student development are often recognizable for their work as advocates on college campuses (Gilroy, 2012). Again, this demonstrates the newly established balance of care in which the individual has switched from a self-centered viewpoint, to one that considers the betterment of society.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that the vulnerability of the undocumented student population necessitates recognition of the unique aspects of their cognitive and psychosocial development. While meant to serve as an outline for future study and policy implementation, the UMUSD highlights the stifling impact United States immigration policy has had in creating a climate of legal and developmental ambiguity. With that in mind, the essential purpose of conceptualizing the UMUSD was to recognize the unique voices of undocumented students, and offer a framework through which the migration experience could be understood in terms of developmental challenges and roadblocks. Likewise, UMUSD was developed to serve as a potential tool for student affairs practitioners so that they may act as advocates and sources of equitable support to the students on their campuses, regardless of legal standing or country of origin. Through further study of the unified model of undocumented student development, education professionals can begin to develop programs to promote undocumented student attendance and persistence, which in turn would lead to increased campus globalization and a true sense of inclusion and equity.

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