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Qualitative Methodological Considerations for Studying Undocumented Students in the United States

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Summary

The study of undocumented students in the United States is critical and growing. As scholars increasingly employ qualitative methodologies and methods in studying undocumented students, it is important to consider the specific challenges, nuances, and benefits of doing so. Undocumented students have a right to a public elementary and secondary education regardless of immigration status, per the 1982 court case *Plyler v. Doe*. While the stress that undocumented students face during their K-12 years are real and consequential, this stress becomes particularly acute in their postsecondary lives when education is neither guaranteed nor readily accessible. Qualitative research gives insight into the complex obstacles undocumented students face and advocates for the institutional and social change necessary to best support them. Existing qualitative research on undocumented students employs various methodologies and methods including but not limited to narrative inquiry, testimonio, phenomenology, case studies, ethnography, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. Among the salient issues that scholars must take into account when engaging in such research are the ethical, logistical, and relational problems that arise when working with undocumented people; the politicization of researching undocumented students; and the power and privilege that researchers possess in the researcher-participant relationship. Within every stage of the research process, researchers need to take special care when working with undocumented students to ensure their anonymity, respect their lived experiences, and advocate for their human rights. Undocumented research participants are in need of extra protection due to their undocumented status, and this need should not be conflated with weakness. Often, undocumented participants are framed as illegal, powerless, vulnerable, fearful, and in the shadows. While it is true that undocumented people face intense, life-altering, and consequential struggles relative to their undocumented status, it is also true that their intelligence, resilience, and persistence are equally intense. Researchers have an obligation to bring undocumented students' authentic experiences to the fore in ways that acknowledge their undocumented status and the related struggles while affirming their agency and resistance. How they employ methodological practices is central to this goal.

Keywords: U.S. undocumented students, qualitative methodology, ethics

Subjects: Educational Politics and Policy, Globalization, Economics, and Education, Education and Society

Context of Undocumented Students in Education

Access to Education

In 1982, *Plyler v. Doe* ruled that all children have a right to a public elementary and secondary education regardless of immigration status. This ruling guaranteed a basic education for undocumented children, but it did not address access to higher education (Corrunker, 2012). Access to college enrollment, state aid, or in-state tuition varies by state. Undocumented students are a distinct population to study because of the unique dynamics and paradoxes their stories present, especially in the field of education. These social burdens of undocumented status become evident early on in primary schooling, and, because of them, many undocumented parents experience challenges developing relationships with teachers and administrators and report feeling unwelcome at their children's schools (Hill & Torres, 2010). While these experiences are more intense for undocumented children—they face more structural barriers due to immigration status—U.S.-born children of undocumented parents have similar experiences (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Undocumented students often report that their undocumented status becomes the most pressing and precarious in high school. Many do not realize they are undocumented until their teen years when they try to get a job or a driver's license and are unable to do so because of their lack of documentation (Corrunker, 2012; Gonzales, 2011). High school is also the time when students start applying to colleges, which involves scholarships and financial aid. Undocumented students face severe obstacles here: they are ineligible for federal (and, in most cases, state) financial aid including Pell grants, work-study programs, and student loans and unable to apply for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA; Teranishi et al., 2015). Already coming from strenuous financial circumstances, not qualifying for financial aid can severely limit or completely impede the opportunity for undocumented students to reach higher education.

The Stress of Being Undocumented

Financial difficulties are only one of the many obstacles undocumented students face while navigating educational institutions. Many resources required to navigate high school and then college call for forms of social, cultural, and familial capital that undocumented students may not have access to because of undocumented status and/or because they are most often first-generation students (Enriquez, 2011). It is estimated that only approximately 10% of undocumented immigrants aged 16 to 24 enroll in college, compared to 25% to 30% of their documented peers within the same age range (Teranishi et al., 2015). One of the factors that contributes to such a low enrollment rate is the lack of support and resources available at high schools (Del Razo, 2012; Enriquez, 2011). Many high school teachers and counselors lack the knowledge to help undocumented students, which means these students must seek out information on their own.

The stressors associated with undocumented status pose a detriment to mental health. More than a quarter of undocumented male students and more than a third of undocumented female students report feeling moderately or severely anxious (Teranishi et al., 2015). Anxiety triggers include fear of deportation for themselves and/or their families, pressures to succeed academically, financial constraints, and feelings of isolation, especially on their college campuses. Despite having higher rates of mental illnesses, undocumented students remain ineligible for government-subsidized health coverage such as the Affordable Care Act. As a consequence, many undocumented immigrants remain uninsured, placing their mental and physical health at risk (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014).

Understanding the DREAM Act and DACA

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was introduced in 2001 to provide access to higher education, employment, and a pathway to legal residency for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as minors, given they meet a set of strict eligibility requirements and possess no criminal record. The bill was reintroduced in 2010 and passed in the House of Representatives but failed to pass in the Senate by five votes (Immigration Policy Center, 2013). Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was an executive order created by the Obama administration in 2012 to provide intermediate relief in response to the failed DREAM Act. Under DACA, beneficiaries are protected from deportation and allowed to obtain work permits for two years at a time (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2015). As an executive order, DACA came with many limitations including the fact it does not provide a pathway to legal residency. With the emergent Trump administration, DACA came under constant threat. On September 5, 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced DACA would be rescinded gradually starting on March 5, 2018. Since then, federal judges have blocked the rescinding of DACA and ordered the USCIS to accept renewal applications again.

The constant limbo of their immigration status and the real implications policy changes have on people's lives place a heavy burden on undocumented students as they strive to succeed for themselves and for their families. Research on and with undocumented students is vital in creating supportive and healthy environments that allow them to thrive, succeed, and achieve upward mobility. Because education is such a prevalent aspect of the lives of undocumented students, research in education should keep up with the new and continued dynamics of undocumented students and their stories.

Existing Types of Qualitative Research With Undocumented Students

Conducting qualitative research on undocumented students involves varied complexities. As Gonzales (2011) states, "researching hard-to-reach populations adds layers of difficulty, time, and cost to any study" (p. 606). Undocumented students are an especially marginalized population; they are hard to reach and challenging to establish rapport with as "today's anti-immigrant climate and localized immigration enforcement present challenges to finding respondents" (p. 606), therefore limiting access to the entire population's characteristics and experiences. However, this does not make this population any less worthy of being researched. Thus, qualitative research involving undocumented students cannot be deemed representative in the majority of cases. In the past 20 years, an increasing amount of

qualitative research studies has focused on undocumented students. Here we provide a summary of themes of such studies focusing on narrative inquiry, testimonio, phenomenology, case studies, ethnography, and discourse analysis.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a person-centered approach that provides data from the participant's point of view. Data may be textual, oral, or visual and allows participants to construct meaning from their own stories (Trahar, 2009). Narrative inquiry collects stories, validates their subjectivity, and "embraces narrative as both the method and the phenomena of study" (Pinnegar & Danes, 2007, p. 4). Narrative inquiry is a valuable approach in the field of education because it allows for participants to be fully immersed in and in control of the research process. "In narrative inquiry, the relationships between research and participant remains open and agnostic" (Trahar, 2009, n.p.); this approach gives undocumented students a greater sense of ownership over the data they provide.

Undocumented Students and Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry with undocumented students usually involves an open-ended interview approach, with minimal interruption from the researchers. From the first-hand narratives of undocumented students, researchers are able to draw themes using their participants' own words (Shi et al., 2018; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014). Shi, Jimenez-Arista, Cruz, McTier, and Koro-Ljungberg (2018) also asked participants to provide visual representations that represented their experiences as undocumented students. Their study focused on how undocumented students described their own experiences in higher education. Narrative inquiry can also manifest into counternarratives, or counter-storytelling (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010), which challenges mainstream approaches in qualitative research and makes space for new voices and populations that are typically excluded from academic research.

Testimonio

Testimonios are narratives or forms of narrative inquiry used to promote social justice. Growing out of political turmoil in Latin America in the 1960s, testimonios are often referred to as first-person eye-witness accounts, narrated by those who lack social and political power, about repression, exploitation, and marginalization (Beverley, 2005). Beverley frames testimonio as an "affirmation of authority of personal experience" (p. 266). However, testimonios have stretched the bounds of traditional narratives through their intentionality and urgency around trauma and injustice (Chang, 2018). Testimonios have become particularly poignant for and shaped by Chicana and Black feminists as a tool for reflexivity, decolonization, healing, and collective change.

Testimonios have an overtly political intent and, therefore, often compel others to take some form of action. Furthermore, for women of color in the academy, testimonios can provide a space for self-reflection of the internalized ways that one can embody and live out the very oppressions we desire to challenge, change, and decolonize. Collectively, there is an urgency to heal fragmented lives and to illuminate complicity in dominant thinking (hooks, 2010).

Elenes (2000) contends that the testimonio is a “map of consciousness” (p. 115) and, thus, can be used to look deeply within to change the inner, colonized self while bringing about collective change—transformations that Chicana and black feminisms capture.

Pérez Huber (2009) explains that testimonio is both method in that it is a way to collect data but also a methodology. As Howell (2013) notes, a methodology is the rationale and strategy for the research approach and the lens through which the analysis occurs. Pérez Huber (2009) describes testimonio as “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (p. 644). She also notes that it has progressed in important ways from moving beyond the field of Latin American studies into other fields as well as expanding from an expression of individual testimony to the relaying of a significant collective experience.

Undocumented Students and Testimonio

Testimonios have been used as both a method and methodology in the study of undocumented students. Scholars have used testimonio to study undocumented students’ experiences in several areas: the development of conceptual frameworks and methodology (Chang, 2018; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Federico, 2013; Pérez Huber, 2009, 2017); the impact of pedagogy and schooling on students (Aguilar-Valdez, 2013; Alemán, 2012; Chomsky, 2017; DeNicolo & Gónzalez, 2015; Nájera, 2016; Ochoa, 2016; Saavedra, 2011); English dominance as a manifestation of hegemony (Huber, 2011); the formation of students’ political consciousness, activism, and resistance (del Carmen Salazar, Martinez, & Ortega, 2016; Kleyn, Alulema, Khalifa, & Morales Romero, 2018; Muñoz, 2015; Negrón-Gonzales, 2009, 2016; Quakernack, 2018; Schwiertz, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016); the convergence of immigration policy and educational experiences (Fernández, 2016; Hudson, 2012); civic engagement (Figueroa, 2015; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2010); college student engagement (Muñoz & Escalante, 2015; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Pasell, 2013; Romo, 2012); college choice (Romo, Allen, & Martinez, 2018); and identity development (Chang, 2017a, 2017b; Chang, Torrez, Ferguson, & Sagar, 2017).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology refers to both a framework and a qualitative research method that describes how people experience a particular phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997, 2012). A phenomenological study attempts to set aside or “bracket” biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a particular situation. It aims to delve deeply into the perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of those who have lived the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research is typically conducted through the use of multipart interviews of participants.

A phenomenological research study is typically comprised of four phases (Hycner, 1985): (a) bracketing—the process of identifying and maintaining awareness of any preconceived beliefs, opinions, or notions about the phenomenon being researched; (b) intuition—the researcher’s ability to understand and remain open to the meaning of the phenomenon as described by those that experienced it; (c) analysis—the process of analyzing data involving processes such

as coding and categorizing to organize the data with the goal of theme development; and (d) description—the researcher’s in-depth definition of the phenomenon based on the participants’ experiences of it.

Undocumented Students and Phenomenology

Phenomenology has been used to study undocumented students both to arrive at broader theoretical constructs and to better understand specific phenomena relative to undocumented students’ experiences. For example, one study theorized around the notion of a critical phenomenological approach to the study of migrant “illegality” (Willen, 2007). Another focused on undocumented students’ experiences with microaggressions during their college choice process (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2016). Still others explored the meaning and paths of advocacy for undocumented students’ access to education and experiences in public schools (Crawford & Arnold, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2013). To date, phenomenological studies relative to undocumented students are scarce.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis refers to many different approaches of investigation of written and spoken texts. With respect to educational research, discourse analysis generally refers to the analysis of the ways in which texts of varying kinds and the use of language reproduce power and inequalities in society (see Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Some key concerns of discourse analysis, particularly critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001, 2010), may include analytical approaches where linguistic and critical social research merge.

Undocumented Students and Discourse Analysis

Scholars who study undocumented students have utilized discourse analysis in various types of contexts. From macro contexts such as policy discourse analysis (Gildersleeve & Hernandez, 2012), framings of notions of illegality (King & Punti, 2012; Perez Huber, 2009), racist nativism (Perez Huber, 2009), to more micro contexts such as a discourse analysis of practicing social workers’ attitudes toward immigration and immigrants (Park & Bhuyan, 2012) and discourses on the intersections of undocumented and queer identities (Seif, 2014), there are few studies that focus specifically on the methodological tool of discourse analysis relative to the study of undocumented students.

Ethnography

Ethnographic research steps away from traditional models of qualitative research because it “rejects the dominance of theory” (Smith, 2005) to emphasize and validate the importance of people’s real lived experiences. Smith does not argue that theory should be completely disregarded in ethnography but claims that it should be used as a foundation in qualitative research and not as a strict set of guidelines. When theory is allowed to rule qualitative research, it undermines the uniqueness and richness of individual experience. Smith adds that

ethnography forces the researcher to undergo a change in perspective when considering what “data collection” means, since ethnographic research requires researchers to be fully and personally immersed in the worlds of their participants.

Ethnographies are useful in identifying macro-level themes through micro-level research. A feature unique of ethnography that is often missed with larger qualitative methods is that it provides rich textual detail while discussing/describing individuals and their everyday lives. Dreby (2015), for example, spends three pages in a chapter titled “Nervios” thoroughly describing the apartment that two of her subjects, Inés and Adrián, live in and the daily interactions and activities she has with them to set the scene. Her descriptions include furniture placement, the show that is playing on the television, decorations, and dialogue. While such details may seem mundane, they are valuable in reminding both researcher and reader of the subjectivity of qualitative research—and that undocumented immigrants should be regarded as human beings first before they are treated merely as research subjects.

Ethnography and Undocumented Students

Research with undocumented students calls for a less traditional and unconventional model, which is why ethnography has been a useful method for researchers in this field (Corrunker, 2012; Dreby, 2015; Gonzales, 2011). These ethnographic studies are able to examine in detail specific events, locations, and lifestyles. Corrunker, for example, used an ethnographic approach to study undocumented student activism during the DREAM Act and DACA movements. She attended “Coming Out of the Shadows” events to gain a better understanding of her participants’ motivations and strategies for outing themselves in such a public setting as a form of resistance. In turn, she learned about the various themes and dynamics on what it means to be a young undocumented immigrant in contemporary society. Corrunker rejects the negative connotation that the metaphor “living in the shadows” carries, because the stories of undocumented youth who are not yet “out” still carry tremendous value and meaning.

Case Studies

Case study as a methodology is defined as an empirical inquiry focus on investigating a contemporary case and its context (Yin, 2014). Case study research holistically examines multifaceted phenomena, such as programs or contemporary issues (Mertens, 2015), and provides an in-depth description and analysis of the case under investigation (Merriam, 1998). Scholars have inconsistent definitions of case study and do not always agree that it is a methodology (Jones et al., 2012). For Merriam (1998), a case study is defined as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries;” moreover, the case should be clearly bounded and can be a person, a program, a group, or a specific policy (p. 27). Stake (1995) defines case study as a unit of analysis that is complex and specific and not as a methodology. A case study must “catch the complexity of a single case” and must reflect the interaction of the unit and its setting (Stake, 1995, p. xi). For Yin, case study research is a methodological approach that should be used to explain causal relations of real-world problems, to describe an intervention and its context, to illuminate contemporary issues, or to explain the purpose of an intervention. In this article, we consider case study a methodology.

Based on the purpose of an investigation, case study research is usually classified in three ways: (a) explanatory, (b) descriptive, or (c) exploratory (Yin, 2014). In explanatory case studies, also known as heuristic, researchers focus on explaining the causes of a problem or on evaluating a particular case (Merriam, 1998). Descriptive case studies provide thick descriptions of a phenomenon and bring to light the intricacies of a specific situation (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). In exploratory case studies, also known as interpretive, researchers focus on “what” type of questions to “develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry” (Yin, 2014, p. 10) or to generate theory (Merriam, 1998). Regardless of the type of case, there are two common characteristics across case studies: (a) holistic and (b) in-depth investigation. First, case study research takes a holistic approach to investigations and seeks to examine a complex issue and its context (Creswell, 2013). The case is a bounded system that integrates the unit of analysis and its setting (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014); thus, the case must be investigated and understood holistically (Stake, 1995). Second, case study research provides an in-depth understanding of a case, which is typically conveyed by providing thick descriptions of the phenomenon. This understanding is gained through the use of multiple sources of evidence including documents, interview data, and observations (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Undocumented Students and Case Studies

Case study has been employed vastly to conduct higher education research and to investigate the experiences of undocumented college students. Case study investigations have examined the factors that impact the college persistence of undocumented students (e.g., Contreras, 2009; Hallett, 2013; Muñoz, 2013), how students navigate the college access and choice process (e.g., Crawford & Arnold, 2016; Nienhusser, 2014), how they engage in acts of resistance (e.g., Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Muñoz, Espino, & Antrop-González, 2014), and how they experience higher education environments (e.g., Jauregui, Brown, & Slate, 2008; Morales, Herrera, & Murry, 2011). These investigations have used a range of case study designs including multiple case studies (e.g., Jauregui, Brown, & Slate, 2008; Nienhusser, 2014), single case studies (e.g., Muñoz et al., 2014; Perry, 2006), and ethnographic case studies (e.g., Hallett, 2013; Morales et al., 2011). Across these research projects, researchers have used multiple sources of data including individual interviews (e.g., Muñoz, 2013), observations (e.g., Crawford & Arnold, 2016), and document analysis (e.g., Hallett, 2013). In all studies, the unit of analysis and its context are easily identified, and researchers provide thick descriptions of the phenomenon they investigate.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a collaborative research methodology that requires the participation of communities impacted by the issue under investigation in all aspects of the research process (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Foote Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazas, 1991; Hacker, 2013). YPAR opens the role of researcher to students “as subjects and partners” in conducting research (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 108). Rather than research being done on young people, YPAR students are positioned as the experts of their community cultural wealth, their experiences, and their schooling processes. Unlike traditional research approaches, YPAR students participate in every aspect of the

investigation. Through this experience, YPAR students learn new research skills, develop academic language, and begin to experiment with and initiate theory. They study issues that are relevant and meaningful to them and then apply those research findings to collectively take action and work toward social justice (McIntyre, 2000; Scott, Pyne, & Means, 2014). YPAR students are agents and producers of knowledge. YPAR is a powerful foundation for yielding knowledge that is authentically caring because it demonstrates the deepest regard for students' intellect and lived experiences.

Scholars in the social sciences, education, and public health fields have discussed and established the principles of YPAR throughout the years. While each field has developed some of the tenets of YPAR differently, three common principles should be at the center of YPAR projects: (a) participatory nature, (b) transformative orientation, and (c) local context (Balcazar et al., 2004; Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Hacker, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015). First, YPAR investigations require a strong commitment to collaborations and equitable partnerships throughout the research process (Hacker, 2013; Reason, 1994; Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). Partnerships between the academic researchers and student researchers must involve trust and respect; more important, they should involve power sharing (Hacker, 2013; Reason, 1994; Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Taylor et al., 2004). The students must become co-researchers in the study; they should be involved from the time the research questions are identified to the time the findings are distributed (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Second, the participatory nature of YPAR challenges the dominant notions of scholarly research and makes it a unique methodology that leads to social change (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). In YPAR, transformation not only occurs through actions implemented based on the findings of a study but also happens through the reflection and knowledge acquisition process (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007). Third, YPAR attempts to investigate and find resolutions to issues located within a community of interest (Walter, 1993). YPAR requires a commitment to research and learning that addresses the real-life needs of student researchers and does not seek to generalize the findings of a study (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). By studying issues that are relevant and meaningful to them as students, and then by applying those research findings to collectively take action and work toward social justice, the students' knowledge and lived experiences are validated (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009).

Undocumented Students and YPAR

Very limited research has used action research methodologies to study undocumented immigrants and other immigrant communities across disciplines. This may be as a result of the complexities associated with action research and/or due to the ethical conflicts researchers may face when collaborating with undocumented communities, such as ensuring confidentiality. A few examples of action research with undocumented communities include a study by Sudhinaraset, Ling, My To, Melo, and Quach (2017) that investigated the health and psychosocial needs of undocumented Asian and Pacific Islander young adults in northern California. Through action research, a community advisory board of eight members who were part of different community organizations working with undocumented youth and three undocumented community members participated in all aspects of the research process, including the design of the study, the development of data collection tools, and data analysis (Sudhinaraset et al., 2017). Similarly, Mohan Sahay, Thatcher, Núñez, and Lightfoot (2016) employed an action research approach to study how being undocumented, Latino/a, and a DACA recipient impacted the higher education aspirations of high school students in North

Carolina. In this study, academic researchers partnered with five undocumented high school students to identify issues that troubled them. Through facilitated group dialogues, student and academic researchers selected and investigated their research questions, which focused on the challenges of DACA, higher education access barriers, and feelings of marginalization (Mohan Sahay et al., 2016).

The Challenges of Conducting Undocumented Student Research

Ethical obligations of a researcher are of paramount importance. The basics of obtaining proper human subject approval and consent to participate are minimal requirements; however, our responsibilities as researchers go well beyond that extending to issues of morality, trust, safety, dignity, and integrity. Researchers are in a position to “create, silence, or reify the various subjectivities [*sic*] of the object of inquiry” (Mahalingam & Rabelo, 2013, p. 26) therefore, acknowledgment and understanding of the power dynamics between researcher and participant are of critical significance. Undocumented research participants are in need of extra protection due to their undocumented status, and this need should not be conflated with weakness. Often, undocumented participants are framed as illegal, powerless, vulnerable, fearful, and in the shadows. While it is true that undocumented people face intense, life-altering, and consequential struggles relative to their undocumented status, it is also true that their intelligence, resilience, and persistence are equally intense. Lahman, Mendoza, Rodriguez, and Schwartz (2011) stress that undocumented participants are capable, competent, yet vulnerable simultaneously. Characterizing these participants as wholly vulnerable is a form of “*Otherization*” (p. 304). Mahalingam and Rabelo (2013) state that “research on immigrant communities has often been reductionist, stereotypical, and simplistic, and even the most well-intentioned researchers are susceptible to using cultural deficit models” (p. 25). In an effort to frame our experiences (both privileged and oppressive) as researchers, we present brief positionality statements as researchers.

Aurora Chang’s Positionality Statement

I am a once undocumented immigrant from Guatemala raised in Richmond, California, in a family of eight, who is now a hyperdocumented (Chang, 2011) professor, teaching coursework on multicultural education, social justice in higher education, critical social theories, undocumented students, Chicana feminist epistemology, and curriculum in higher education. My research focuses on the intersection of education, identity, and agency within traditionally marginalized communities. Currently, I focus on undocumented students’ paths of educational survival, resistance and persistence, how these experiences affect the “American” sociopolitical landscape, and what educators can do to support them.

My personal experience as a once undocumented Guatemalan immigrant student foregrounds all of my research pursuits. My study of undocumented students directly relates to my own identity formation and the agency I employed to survive and thrive within higher education and to advocate for the human rights of all undocumented people. For me, the personal is political. I employ Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 1998) to the educational research I undertake. I ground my life experiences and those of my research participants in analyzing how their lives are being interpreted, documented, and reported. I embrace and

rely upon the concept of cultural intuition “to name the complex process that acknowledges the unique viewpoints that many Chicana scholars bring to the research process” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 555).

Júlia Mendes’s Positionality Statement

My immigrant identity is profoundly salient in my life and has significantly impacted my journey as a scholar. I am a current graduate student, passionate about my work with undocumented students. My research focuses on the narratives of undocumented youth and their stories of trauma and survival. Through my work, I challenge conventional research methods to emphasize the importance of lived experiences; that is, my approach prioritizes participants over methodological conventions.

My identities biases my work as a researcher in that I favor narrative approaches in qualitative work, and this bias significantly intensifies with every undocumented student I work with and every story I hear. Like many of the students I work with, I was also a first-generation college student, and this experience has made me resistant and skeptical to the traditional culture that surrounds academia. Academia has often made me feel isolated and unimportant, and I know that I am not alone in that experience. To resist that experience myself, and to advocate for others who feel the same way, I push against the academic norms that uphold the isolation and marginalization of underrepresented groups.

Cinthya Salazar’s Positionality Statement

One of the most salient social identities I hold is being an immigrant, more specifically, an immigrant who was formerly undocumented. I was undocumented while pursuing my undergraduate education in Florida, and my immigration status significantly impacted the way I navigated the higher education system. From the time I started taking ESL classes at a community college to when I transferred to and graduated from a four-year public Hispanic-serving institution, my lack of authorized immigration documentation presented significant barriers to my success. However, as the older sister of two undocumented siblings and as the daughter of parents who did not go to college, I felt a sense of responsibility to address any challenges presented throughout my education journey and persist until I obtained my college degree. While this was my experience, as a scholar researching undocumented students, I should not assume that all students have similar circumstances. Through my work, I must remain aware of how the intersectional social identities of undocumented students, as well as their family structures and dynamics, affect the way they navigate higher education and pursue their educational goals.

The assumptions I bring to my scholarship about how undocumented students navigate higher education to pursue their educational goals also come from the direct work I have conducted with and for undocumented students on college campuses. As a former higher education administrator, I witnessed many students remain silent about their immigration status and many others speak openly about their backgrounds. I worked with undocumented students who engaged in public forms of activism and unapologetically advocated for systemic changes and others who did not challenge their institutions to change exclusionary policies and practices affecting them. Both my personal and professional experiences have demonstrated that there is not just one way to experience higher education as an undocumented college

student. Through ongoing individual and collective reflexivity, memoing, and peer-debriefing techniques, I aim to interrupt the assumptions and biases I bring to my studies (Glesne, 2016; Mertens, 2015).

Qualitative Methodological Themes

In this section, we introduce three themes that emerged after reviewing the extant literature based on qualitative studies about undocumented students. We first consider ethical, logistical, and relational considerations at large, focusing on the ethical principles published by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects. Then we focus on the development and expansion of culturally responsive relational reflexive ethics (CRRRE). Next, we discuss the power and privilege of researchers and their impact on the qualitative research process. Finally, we ask researchers to consider the role of love in our research—specifically through a *borderland love ethic* (Chang, 2015) that embraces ambiguity, rejects binary positions, and humbly acknowledges our constant state of arriving, both as researchers and participants.

Ethical, Logistical, and Relational Considerations

All research endeavors are laden with considerations specific to their respective foci. While research with human participants has and continues to make tremendous contributions to improving people's lives, unethical research practices and abuses of human participants in research have forced researchers to think much more intentionally about how they approach research. In response to reports of human participant abuses in the early 1970s, the U.S. government established the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research. In 1978, the Commission published the Belmont Report, which outlined three ethical principles that are meant to guide research conducted with humans.

1. Respect for persons—individuals should be treated as independent agents, and individuals with diminished independence are entitled to special protections.
2. Beneficence—individuals should not be exposed to harm or unnecessary risk, and any benefits should be maximized.
3. Justice—individuals should be exposed to fair and equitable procedures and fair distribution of costs and benefits.

Each of these principles when translated within the research setting places certain obligations on the researcher. The principle of respect for persons requires voluntary informed consent be obtained from potential participants. The principle of beneficence requires the maximization of potential benefits and minimization of potential harms associated with participating in research. Finally, the principle of justice focuses on the selection of research participants ensuring that some classes of people (e.g., persons on welfare, persons belonging to particular racial and ethnic minority groups, or persons confined to institutions) are not being systematically selected simply because of their easy availability, their compromised position, or their manipulability, rather than for reasons directly related to the problem being studied.

(See Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Behavioral Projects Involving Human Participants by High School Students <<https://www.apa.org/science/leadership/research/ethical-conduct-humans>>.)

Ethical, logistical, and relational considerations are especially present within every stage of the research process, and specifically for research involving undocumented persons. Per the three ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report, several questions emerge with regard to research of, for, and by undocumented people: How do we ensure respect for undocumented persons while balancing their right to be treated as independent agents with special protections? How do we avoid unnecessary harm or risk when working with undocumented students? How do we expose undocumented persons to fair and equitable procedures and fair distribution of costs and benefits? What is considered fair? Furthermore, what is the line between an undocumented participant's agency and the researcher's obligation to protect him or her? To begin to address these questions, we look to CRRRE.

Culturally Responsive Relational Reflexive Ethics

Several scholars have suggested effective ways to go about the undertaking of studying undocumented people. Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, & DeRoche, (2011) advance ethical and methodological considerations and possible strategies in the areas of CRRRE (Lahman et al. 2011). CRRRE is based on the following tenets:

- Gain sociocultural consciousness;
- Develop affirming attitude toward research participants from culturally diverse backgrounds;
- Acquire the commitment and skills to act as agents of change through research;
- Learn about participants and their communities;
- Employ reflexivity throughout the research process;
- Commit to seek the good through research.
- Integrate all tenets to cultivate CRRRE research practices

These tenets are inspired by Villegas and Lucas's (2002a, 2002b) writings about the primary aspects of culturally responsive research. Others have followed in these footsteps through the exploration of culturally competent research (Ojeda, Flores, Meza, & Morales, 2011) that values *personalismo* or interpersonal connections in Latinx communities and *Kaupapa Maori* or the Maori way, which refers to research that is by, for, and with Maori (Cram, 2009).

Additionally, Mahalingam and Rabelo (2013) make specific recommendations for researchers investigating immigrant communities. They advocate the following: "(a) grounding of intersectional frameworks; (b) reliance on a risk and resilience framework; (c) phenomenological understanding of immigrants' everyday lives; (d) inclusion of immigrant participants' voices; and (e) cultivation of negative capability" (p. 25). They first recommend that researchers embrace the intersectional marginalization of their participants, understanding that social identities such as race, class, sexuality, religion, and gender all operate simultaneously, dynamically, and sociohistorically to affect a person's lived experience. Second, they suggest the use of resilience research that

needs to be sensitive to culturally embedded notions of positive development where resilience is viewed as a person's ability to overcome adversity in relation to the capacity of his or her environment to provide health-enhancing resources to *culturally relevant ways*.

(Ungar et al., 2007, p. 288)

Third, Mahalingam and Rabelo stress the importance of a phenomenological understanding of immigrants' lives where complex dimensions of racialized immigrant identities and the resulting adversities impact on their well-being. Next, researchers must make sure every effort is made to represent previously "unheard" experiences by utilizing methods that are best suited to authentically do so given the context. Finally, cultivating what Mahalingam and Rabelo call "negative capability"—the capacity to remain open-minded and patient in the midst of ambiguity—gives researchers "the ability to tolerate frustration and anxiety" when working with immigrant communities. In short, it is "a sublime form of extreme empathy" where mindfulness and presence is centered in every aspect of the research process.

Power and Privilege of Researchers

When conducting research with and on undocumented students, we must recognize and acknowledge that as researchers, no matter what methods we employ, we will always hold power and privilege over our research participants. Therefore, researchers need to be transparent in their motivations and purpose in conducting such sensitive research. One strategy is to treat research participants as co-researchers (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012) so that they are included in the research process and given the opportunity to give input and make decisions as to how data is collected and analyzed. Data should be presented to participants before any publication or presentation occurs, to ensure that it accurately and humanely represents those who were studied. Before data collection even begins, however, researchers need to form a "respectful relationship" (Wilson, 2008, p. 22) with the subjects, ideas, culture, and people they will be studying. While the power and privilege still remain and are impossible to remove, this approach does have researchers step back from their status and prioritize the stories of their participants.

Toward a Borderland Love Ethic

We advance qualitative methodological considerations for studying undocumented students by asking how we as scholars, particularly those who also hold marginalized identities, enact love in our research amid our seemingly contradictory positions of oppression and privilege. Chang (2015) defines the theoretical framework—*borderland love ethic*—as follows:

Specifically, a borderland love ethic encompasses: (1) Anzaldúa's notion of borderlands and the mestiza consciousness required to claim all parts of one's identity within a provisional space constructed with one's own feminist architecture (Anzaldúa, 1987); (2) hooks' (2000) and Darder's (2003) reconceptualization of love as an "armed" love that is global in its vision, intimately engaged with the collective good, and oriented toward the continual process of self-actualization; and (3) Chavez's (2013) notion of interactionality that builds on the critical concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as "a form of rhetorical confrontation that begins critique from the roots of a problem or crisis and methodically reveals how systems of power and oppression interact with one another in ways that produce subjects, institutions, and ideologies and that enable and constrain political response" (p. 51). I suggest that a borderland love ethic melds Anzaldúa's definition of borderland and hooks' definition of a love ethic that leads to agentic action propelled by interactionality. (Chavez, 2013)

In sum, a borderland love ethic encourages us to make purposive public and private choices as researchers about how much we give, to whom we give, and why we give, all in a quest for an interconnected collective good with a clear understanding that rejects essentialist compartmentalization of identities and embraces the inherent tensions involved in the power dynamics of conducting research. A borderland love ethic must engage three tenets: (a) nurturing our space to love in spaces of contention, (b) tolerance of ambiguity as a revolutionary virtue, and (c) humbly beginning anew, again and again (see Chang, 2015).

Ethics in the Research Process From Start to Finish

In employing ethical practices, we outline ways to ensure that the research process maintains integrity from start to finish.

Participant Recruitment

In the recruitment stage, researchers must be careful to protect the confidentiality of undocumented students. While confidentiality is important in most research studies, extra care must be taken when working with undocumented students, given the risks associated with their immigration status. Some suggestions for ensuring confidentiality in recruitment are

1. Seek a waiver for written consent form so that undocumented participants are not traceable through a paper trail (this is also known as *witnessed consent*). The researcher can read the consent to the participant and the participant can verbally agree to participate. Keep all paper trails as minimal as possible.
2. Implement *process consent* (Lahman et al., 2011; Munhall, 1988; Usher & Arthur, 1998) and *process responsiveness* where "the researcher checks with participants through the entire study to see if participant remains comfortable being part of the inquiry" (Lahman et al., 2011, p. 316).
3. When possible and if appropriate for the study, employ methods, such as phone interviews, to help maintain privacy.
4. Use public campus locations for in-person meetings.

5. List additional welcoming contacts on advertisements such as faculty members, university offices, and the like, whom students will know it is “safe” to contact.
6. Establish rapport with someone who is already in the community to help recruit students if the researcher is not already part of the community.
7. Use the snowball sampling method to seek additional participants.

Data Collection

In the data collection phase, researchers must be mindful of the ways in which rapport is established, ensuring that there is a relationship of genuine trust and respect. Additionally, because there is so much room for excavating traumatic events, researchers need to not only be highly aware of this potential for triggering intense emotions but must also understand the significance of engaging with undocumented students in ways that emulate authentic caring and *cariño*. When students respond by revealing intensely personal information or share traumatic events with the researcher, it is incumbent upon that researcher to treat the participant with respect and care. This may involve simply listening without judgement and/or offering support services that extend beyond the researcher’s expertise.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process, if collaboratively done, must also be managed with sensitivity and care, as re-listening to one’s own voice articulate one’s experience and meta-analyzing one’s recounting of such experiences can be problematic as it relates to feelings of suffering, imposter syndrome, linguistic fluency, and general feelings of unworthiness. Including participants every step of the way, even though it is time-consuming, helps them take ownership of their own story and reduces the opportunity for the researcher to make assumptions that may be incorrect, problematic, or offensive.

Reporting of Data

One of the crucial aspects of engaging with participants in any form of research but especially in participatory action research is understanding the potentially delicate process of reporting one’s data with respect to authorship. If undocumented students are indeed part of the research process, it is critical to discuss the notion of authorship with the participants at the beginning of the research process and continue this discussion throughout the investigation. How do we, as researchers, talk about our research without outing them or, taken a different way, how do we respect student agency while protecting them as researchers? In other words, if undocumented students want to be listed as co-authors on the data reporting, what risks are run, and whose responsibility is it to make that ultimate decision?

Suggestions and Implications for Researchers

The major suggestion we would make to researchers studying and engaging in research with undocumented students is to be mindful in every step of the research process. It behooves us to pause and think before making decisions that may or may not impact the safety and well-being of undocumented students. If in doubt, be conservative in any potential risk-taking.

We must also be conscientious of our own intersectional privileges when we approach both the topic of and the population of undocumented students. We must continuously engage in self-checks, catching ourselves before becoming judgmental of undocumented students' experiences or giving into the temptation of acting as saviors, sponsors, and/or helpers. We should not assume that because people are undocumented they need our help and our protection or are unable to exercise their agency; when in doubt, engage in an open dialogue and ask them what is it that they need from you as a researcher.

We need to shift how we view and discuss "data," treating stories and people's lived experiences as more than just data and the reading of/listening of these stories as more than just data analysis. This will help us in avoiding their "othering." While this population can be considered "vulnerable" research subjects, their experiences illustrate how particularly resilient, intelligent, and fierce these students are and can be. How we treat their agency in the research process is critical in the ways in which power may manifest itself unequally. We must also remain cognizant of undocumented students' time commitments and how they might feel particularly obligated to participate in the research, given their undocumented status. Even when provided information to the contrary, undocumented students may feel particularly pressured to participate in an activity that involves an authority figure, such as a researcher/professor.

As researchers, we must be careful regarding the ways in which we engage in the study of undocumented students. In short, we must deeply examine how our own motivations for doing this work may impact undocumented students, regardless of our seemingly good intentions and understanding that our privileged positions invite the potential for both harm and good.

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