

## **‘Dreamers’, (un)deserving immigrants and generational interdependence**

### **Abstract**

Undocumented young people known as the ‘Dreamers’ have become the embodiment of the ‘deserving immigrant’ in US public debates on immigration. Through exploring the narratives of undocumented young organisers in California, this article examines how they came to be framed in this way and the limitations of this as a pathway to social justice. It explores their accounts of organising in the undocumented youth movement to examine how their relationships with their families have influenced their engagement with the Dreamer narrative and its contestation. It was found that the figure of the deserving Dreamer represented an overly individualised account of migrant youth experiences and trajectories. Drawing on a relational understanding of migration and life course pathways, it is argued that undocumented youth are embedded in interdependent intergenerational relationships which affect their experiences and outcomes and therefore need to be recognised in any pathway to social justice.

### **Introduction**

On 5 September 2017, the then Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, announced that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme, introduced by the Obama administration in the US, would be rescinded (Sessions, 2017). Through DACA approximately 800, 000 undocumented young people nation-wide had been granted a two-year renewable stay of deportation and a social security number, enabling them to attend college, pursue their careers and have some relief from the threat of immigration enforcement (Abrego, 2018). Following this announcement there was extensive media coverage of the plight of these young people, sympathetically termed ‘the Dreamers’, and expressions of concern from politicians across party lines that something needed to be done to secure these young people’s status and future in the US; even Trump has expressed hope that a legislative solution would be found to resolve their immigration and citizenship status so that they could remain in the US (Gambino, 2018). Meanwhile, not for the first time, undocumented youth took to the streets to protest (Ellis, 2017).

Restrictive immigration and citizenship policies across the Global North mean that many young people, like those in the US, who migrated there since the 1990s have grown up into adulthood in nation-states where they are remain ‘non-citizens and from where they face potential deportation. In the 2000s, immigrant rights organisations and newly emerging

undocumented youth organisations began campaigning for the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act (Abrego, 2018). If passed, the bill would have ended this limbo for some of the 2.2 million undocumented young people who arrived in the US as minors by providing them with a pathway to citizenship (Terriquez, 2015). Despite attending school alongside citizen peers, their pathways diverged after high school when undocumented young people faced barriers in moving on to college education or into employment because they could not regularise their immigration status or attain a social security number (Negrón-Gonzales, 2014). Meanwhile, alongside their families, they continued to live under the threat of detention and deportation.

Anti-immigrant sentiments dominate public discourse in the US and much of the global North, yet distinctions are made between immigrants who are considered more and less ‘deserving’ (Anderson, 2013; Nicholls, 2013). As undocumented young organisers campaigned for a pathway to citizenship, they became known as the ‘Dreamers’ and framed through the ‘deserving’ immigrant narrative in US public debates (Perez-Huber, 2015). Children and young people have often been identified as exemplar groups of deserving immigrants and are frequently the face of migrant and refugee rights campaigns (Sirriyeh, 2018a; Patler & Gonzalez, 2015). However, as argued elsewhere, the classed, raced and gendered terms of these youthful frames of deservingness and inclusion mean that they are not extended to *all* migrant children and young people (Sirriyeh, 2018a; Sirriyeh, 2018b). Meanwhile, the discursive distinctions between deserving and undeserving immigrants facilitate the (conditional) inclusion of those deemed to be deserving but are also mobilised in asserting restrictive policies against those deemed to be ‘undeserving’ (Sirriyeh, 2018a). In the US context, innocent young Dreamers ‘brought’ to the US as children by their parents have been compared favourably with supposedly less deserving groups within the undocumented population, including their own parents (Nicholls, 2013; Sacchetti, 2017). This article focuses on how intergenerational dynamics are engaged with in such framings of immigrant deservingness and understandings of young people’s lifecourse trajectories.

Drawing on qualitative research with undocumented young organisers in California and through an interdisciplinary lens, this article explores their accounts of their involvement in the undocumented youth movement to examine how their relationships with their families impacted on their engagement with the Dreamer narrative and its contestation. It is argued that the figure of the deserving ‘Dreamer’ and its use in reinforcing the good/bad immigrant dichotomy represents a highly individualised articulation of migrant trajectories, transitions

to adulthood, and narratives of deservingness and belonging. This does not reflect the complexity and nuance of young organisers' lived experiences of migration, family life, and organising since they are embedded in interdependent intergenerational relationships and networks of care, which impact on their experiences and outcomes (Abrego, 2018; Silvey, 2004). Undocumented young organisers have struggled with the Dreamer framing because audiences have been invited to listen to and respond to Dreamers idealised sole protagonists rather than as more complex, and socially-embedded selves. In this sense, while these young people have had a platform to tell their stories (unlike many other undocumented populations), there has been a 'denial of voice and of narratable selves' because they have been heard differently from how they want to be (Bassel, 2017, p.8). In this article it is argued that concerns for family featured centrally in young people's organising from the outset, but some of these concerns and experiences were squeezed out in the crafting of early Dreamer narratives.

This article begins by examining the history of undocumented immigration in the US and immigration enforcement against this population and how despite this, *some* undocumented young people came to be positioned as 'deserving immigrants'. Literature on transitions to adulthood and relational approaches to understanding both life course and migration pathways and experiences is then reviewed to identify some of the limitations of the highly individualised characterisation of the 'deserving immigrant'. Following an overview of the California study, the remainder of the article examines the struggles undocumented young organisers have faced in developing narratable selves as their struggle for recognition.

### **Constructing the desirable young immigrant**

Undocumented immigration was a central issue in Trump's 2016 election campaign in which he characterised Mexican immigrants through derogatory racialised and criminalising terms; vowed to 'build a wall' to prevent more migrants crossing the Mexico-US border; and claimed that he would deport the approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants currently residing in the US (Sirriyeh, 2018a). However, the notion of 'undesirable immigrants' is not a new issue in US politics and race has always been at the forefront of this debate. As Vickers and Isaac (2012, p.105) observe, in settler societies such as US, the story of nation building is 'a story of recruiting *suitable* immigrants and settling them on lands from which indigenous peoples have been dispossessed' [italics added]. In this context, the US was conceived of as a nation of *white* immigrants (Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin, 2014).

Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Acts in the 1880s, the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the introduction of restrictionist immigration legislation and policies targeted at the supposed problem of the ‘undesirable immigrant’, always a racialised figure who was presented as a cultural, social and, in some cases, economic threat. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a legal regime of immigration restriction was introduced which established the differential treatment of European and non-European migrants, created new categories of racial difference and emphasised the protection and guarding of the national borders (Ngai, 2004). While the Immigration and Nationality Act 1965 officially ended this link between race and immigration legislation and policy by prohibiting ‘preferences or discrimination in the issuance of immigrant visas based on “race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence” (Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin, 2014:120), in practice the two have remained entwined. Since the 1980s this has become framed through the question of ‘illegality’ and the assertion that it is not immigrants’ race or nationality which makes them undesirable, but rather their behaviour when they enter or remain in the US ‘illegally’. However, these assertions do not take account of the ways in which certain migrant populations, particularly Mexicans and other Central Americans, have been scapegoated and made ‘illegal’ through the creation of laws and the way in which these are enforced (Cacho, 2012; Ioanide, 2015). Although the undocumented immigrant population in the US is diverse in terms of nationality, approximately half of the population is Mexican (Golash-Boza, 2012). There is a long history of Mexican migrants filling labour shortages in the US, particularly in agriculture. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the number of visas issued to Mexican workers did not match the need for their labour and undocumented immigration from Mexico increased (Golash-Boza, 2012). The Immigration Reform and Control Act 1986 granted an amnesty to 2.7 million undocumented immigrants residing but was also accompanied by heightened border enforcement measures (ironically leading many migrants to stay put in the US) and the introduction of sanctions for employers found to be employing undocumented workers (Golash-Boza, 2012). In the 1990s, the Immigration and Nationality Act 1990 expanded the grounds for deportation while the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act 1996 eliminated judicial review of some deportation orders and introduced mandatory detention for many non-citizens (Golash-Boza, 2012; Nicholls, 2013). These Acts paved the way for the rapid rise in the number of deportations during the 1990s and 2000s (Golash-Boza, 2012). In this context, debates on undocumented immigration have largely centred on Mexican, and more broadly Central American immigrants, and have been framed through concerns about ‘illegality’ and criminality; the frequent use of the term

‘illegals’ in public debates, as seen in the 2016 election, has dehumanised this population by criminalising not only their behaviour, but also their very personhood (Cacho, 2012). Given that Latino/as are also the fastest-growing ethnic population in the US, a narrative of ‘invasion’ has developed in which these immigrants, portrayed as invading criminals, also pose a threat to the cultural identity of the US (Chavez, 2013).

While this hostile environment has developed for undocumented immigrants, this population is heterogenous and their experiences vary (Abrego, 2018). During the 1990s and 2000s debate ensued about the need for comprehensive immigration reform, yet it was evident that not all undocumented immigrants were regarded as a threat or viewed with the same degree of hostility (Nicholls, 2013). It was in this context, that ‘niche openings’ (Nicholls, 2013:10) appeared for some undocumented immigrants, including some undocumented young people. In the US, ‘competing claims about deservingness and merit feature prominently’ in debates about undocumented immigrants, where different categories of immigrants are measured up against each other based on ‘various indicators of worthiness’ (Nagel and Ehrkamp, 2016, 1041). Worthiness or ‘deservingness’ is ‘a method of discipline that is based in a politics of respectability’ and serves to ‘further re-entrench borders both literal and figurative’ (Negrón-Gonzales et al 2015, .8). Reflecting the transformation of citizenship from a rights-based model to an active and productive model, a person’s deservingness is commonly recognised on grounds of their economic or social contributions (Anderson, 2013; Nagel and Erhkamp, 2016). Immigrant rights campaigns often highlight how immigrants meet thresholds of deservingness (Anderson and Ruhs, 2010; Nagel and Erhkamp, 2016). For example, as part of the Day Without Immigrants protests in the US in 2006, immigrants boycotted shops and stayed away from work and school to highlight the contributions that immigrants make to the US economy, while over a million people took to the streets in demonstrations across the US (Zepeda-Millan, 2017). In these approaches, demands for rights and entitlements are based on seeking recognition for existing practices of belonging through articulating a narrative of the ‘deserving’ immigrant who ‘contributes’, feels a sense of belonging, is morally upstanding; and does not pose a threat to others (Patler and Gonzales, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, migrant children and young people have often been identified as exemplar groups within the deserving immigrant discursive framework and are frequently the face of migrant and refugee rights campaigns (Sirriyeh, 2018a; Patler and Gonzalez, 2015). During the debates about immigration reform, some politicians and immigrant rights organisations saw an opportunity to advocate for a pathway to citizenship for some

undocumented young people who had access to the resources to enact the conditionalities of ‘deservingness’ as framed above. These educated, law-abiding young people who had lived most of their lives in the US, were presented as innocent, non-threatening, assimilated and as making a valued contribution to US society. To be eligible for citizenship via the proposed Dream Act, applicants had to have arrived in the US when they were under the age of 16, lived there for at least 5 years, and graduated from a US high school. They had to demonstrate ‘good moral character’ and have no criminal record (Nicholls, 2013). Young people who would be eligible for citizenship through the Act were presented as the epitome of the ‘American Dream’ and exceptional young people who fitted this profile were recruited to be the face of the campaign and to tell their stories to lobby politicians and the media (Nicholls, 2013).

Despite being introduced in various forms over the next decade, the federal Dream Act did not pass into legislation. However, in 2011 the California Dream Act was passed allowing undocumented students in the state to apply for state-funded student financial aid and non-state funded college scholarships (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012). In the aftermath of the failure of the 2010 federal Dream Act attempt, undocumented young organisers campaigned for administrative relief; in 2012 President Obama issued the administrative order known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) detailed earlier. The Dream Act campaigns of the 2000s also led to the emergence of the undocumented youth movement which has evolved over time to become more autonomous and youth-led (Nicholls, 2013). In 2017, undocumented youth returned to the spotlight once more, as discussed earlier.

The campaign for the Dream Act emerged in response to challenges faced by undocumented young people as they attempted to negotiate ‘life course landmarks’ (Hall et al, 2009, 555) that mark the rite of passage into adulthood but were blocked from do so because of their immigration status. Research on youth transitions has identified life course landmarks, including leaving the parental home, completing formal education, and entering the workplace, as signifying a transition from a state of dependent childhood into adulthood which is characterized by independence and competence (Henderson et al, 2007; Van Blerk, 2008; Wood, 2017). While traditionally underpinned by an understanding that young people follow a linear path from childhood into adulthood during which they pass through this series of interconnected landmarks (Wood, 2017), the notion of a linear trajectory into adulthood is now widely critiqued in the literature for universalizing and painting an unrealistic model of youth transitions, particularly in the context of significant socio-economic shifts in recent

decades (Robertson et al, 2017). Changes in employment and housing landscapes means this model increasingly does not reflect many youth transitions today (Wood, 2017). Young people now often experience extended transitions into adulthood through staying on in education and residing in the parental home for longer periods of time. In this context, marginalised young people can experience ‘early’, ‘accelerated’ or indeed ‘blocked’ transitions when they lack the material and social resources that enable their peers to negotiate the socio-economic conditions around extended transitions (Sirriyeh, 2013; Van Blerk, 2008; Worth, 2009). Some migrant and refugee young people face similar socio-economic barriers to other marginalised young people, but these are also exacerbated by their unsettled immigration status; as they approach their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday they can face the loss of rights attached to their status as children and uncertainty about their right to remain in the nation-state in which they reside (Allsop and Chase, 2017). Often these young people are effectively being held in a state of ‘waithood’ as they are prevented from completing significant transition landmarks (Honwana, 2012; Sirriyeh and Ni Raghalleigh, 2018); the campaign for undocumented young people in the US was presented in such terms because these were young people who were unable to move on in their education or careers because of the limitations placed on them by their immigration status.

Migration scholars have highlighted the central role of families in shaping migration decision-making and settlement experiences (Cook and Waite 2015; Ní Laoire, 2011). Research on migrant young people’s experiences of blocked transitions and ‘waithood’ needs to incorporate a relational understanding of youth transitions with attention to mutuality in intergenerational relationships (Robertson et al. 2017). The term ‘linked lives’ has been used to refer to the embeddedness of individuals within interdependent social relationships and the need to recognise the role of others in shaping an individual’s life course trajectory and transitions (Elder, 1994). Meanwhile, a linked lives approach also enables us to consider how ‘coordinating multiple lives in a family context’ impacts on how decisions about migration are made (Bailey 2009, 409). This approach can extend to examining how migration transitions are managed, and how consequences of migration are dealt with, including how people respond to barriers and exclusions faced in this context (Kōu et al, 2017). Research on migrant families has shown how intergenerational relationships are reconstituted in the context of migration, leading to ‘new forms of independence, dependence and identities’ (Cook and Waite, 2016, 1390). The remainder of this article focuses on undocumented young people’s narratives of their negotiation of these family dynamics in their lifecourse

trajectories and political activism and explores how they came to contest linear and individualist narratives of their transitions to incorporate a relational understanding.

### **The study**

This article draws on findings from qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2017 in California which examined undocumented young people's pathways through activism in the undocumented youth movement in California. This project explored how their engagement in political activism shaped and was shaped by their understandings and experiences of 'citizenship'. California has the largest undocumented populations in the US and is a key locale for organising in the undocumented youth movement (Nicholls, 2013). I spent two months in Los Angeles and Orange County, followed by two months in the Bay Area. I conducted biographical narrative interviews with 24 undocumented young organisers<sup>1</sup> accessed through approaching undocumented youth organisations. The young organisers were 18-30-years-old and born in Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. Seven were from college-based organisations and 17 were from community-based organisations. Two others were members of both. Some community-based organisers had previously been in college organisations. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed through narrative analysis. Fieldwork began two months after Trump's inauguration. I arrived in the Bay Area just after it had been announced that DACA was to be rescinded, and a nationwide campaign was underway for the passage of a 'clean' Dream Act which would protect undocumented youth but not at the expense of the further criminalisation of the wider undocumented community. I was a child migrant and I am the daughter of a refugee, but I am also a citizen of the country in which I reside, do not live in the US and am not of the same ethnicity as any research participants. Therefore, while we had points of connection, I was not an insider researcher. In the findings I have not elected to quote from across all 24 interviews; the quotations and examples used in this article are illustrative of themes that emerged in these interviews. This is for the sake of clarity while due to the chronological structure of the story; focusing on a smaller number of young people also enables me to show in some greater depth how their engagement with activism developed over time.

### **The deserving Dreamer**

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<sup>1</sup> First names and pseudonyms are used to credit the intellectual work and acknowledge the voice of organisers but protect anonymity where needed (Schwartz 2016; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif 2014).



On leaving high school young people faced barriers in accessing college and employment because of their immigration status. Most described how obstacles they faced at this point led them into undocumented rights organising. As James explained, organising ‘starts off like you know just trying to navigate life’. These were ‘critical moments’ (Henderson et al, 2007) when their circumstances prevented them from engaging in expected rites of transitions into adulthood and they were impelled to make significant decisions about their future pathways. At these moments the contradiction between their legal identity as undocumented immigrants and their subjective identities as US raised young people came to the fore and was a catalyst for their entry into political organising (Negrón-Gonzales, 2014). Finding themselves in this condition of ‘waithood’ (Honwana, 2012) as they struggled to negotiate these critical moments propelled young people to become involved in political activism which offered a means of counteracting the immobility in other aspects of their lives.

Most young people became aware of their undocumented status as children or teenagers, although not all were explicitly told by their parents. However, as children they had the same right to attend school as their citizen peers. Therefore, while experiencing anxiety about their families’ status, their undocumented experiences diverged from those of their parents as they were not yet forced into confronting their immigration status as a direct obstacle to moving forward in their own day-to-day life.

Young people who applied to college prior to the 2011 California Dream Act had not been entitled to student loans and scholarships available to citizen peers. Meanwhile, until the introduction of DACA in 2012, they were unable to obtain a social security number and access most legal employment. Set had lived in the US since the age of 12; graduating high school before the introduction of the California Dream Act and DACA, they faced difficulties in accessing college or work:

I didn’t qualify for scholarships and I couldn’t work, and my parents’ salary was not enough to put me through college [...] I was planning my life like, okay, I guess I’m not going to go to college [...] Because everything really depends on having a social security number. So, I guess my life is really going to stop now.

Finding herself in a similar position, Karen explained how the injustice she felt propelled her into activism:

That was just a pivot point in my life. I had worked so hard and I got accepted to UCLA and I got accepted to Berkeley, but I couldn't attend [...] So, I thought wow something needs to happen here. I'm as capable as they are so why can't I attend?

While those who applied for college after the introduction of the California Dream Act and DACA faced fewer obstacles, graduating high school was still a significant moment in the development of their undocumented identity. April was unaware of her immigration status until she began applying for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and her mother revealed to her that she was undocumented and would need to apply for the California Dream Act instead. She recalled, 'It was like my heart kind of dropped in that sense and I kind of felt like an empty can'. Although, unlike April, Amy was already aware of her status, the college application process forced her to 'come out' as undocumented. She explained, 'I wasn't forced to confront it at least until high school when I was in the process of applying to college, and then I had to come out to my high school teachers about my immigration status'.

As outlined earlier, students fitting the 'Dreamer' profile became the faces of the Dream Act and DACA campaigns (Nicholls, 2013; Sirriyeh, 2018b). In these narratives young people like Karen, Set, Amy and April, appeared to embody the qualities of the ideal neoliberal subject - hard-working, responsible and aspirational (Anderson, 2013) - attributes which are also 'indexed to whiteness' (Cisneros, 2015, 36). The Dream Act and DACA campaigns highlighted individual stories of success in the most challenging of circumstances. It was asserted that despite their academic success and hard work, and through no fault of their own, these young people were struggling; this was therefore an injustice against these most deserving of immigrants who could be productive US citizens (Nicholls, 2013). Although many young organisers no longer identify as 'Dreamers', the power and durability of this label and narrative has been seen in expressions of support given to the new Dream Act campaign in 2017 when once again stories appeared in the media about high-achieving and aspirational Dreamers facing uncertainty (New York Times, 2017).

Storytelling is a key practice in the movement that developed during the Dream Act and DACA campaigns when young people learned and practiced telling their life stories in a compelling way that would be understood and responded to positively by US audiences (Nicholls, 2013; Swerts, 2016). Young people made use of the discourse of young childhood innocence by emphasizing retrospectively the very young age at which they had been

'brought' to the US by their parents (Nicholls, 2013). While the innocence of 'youth' is more contested, their emphasis on their assimilated 'All American' qualities elided any potential fears about deviant 'alien' youth, and invited audiences to imagine how they would feel if these were their own children struggling to achieve their dreams. 'Dreamers' highlighted that they were law-abiding and hard-working and projected forward to anticipate their future productivity, which aligned with the story of the aspirational hardworking immigrant of the American Dream narrative. Worth (2009) has utilised the concept of 'futuraity' to examine how young people's experiences of the present are anchored and made meaningful not only by their past experiences but also by their anticipated *future*. The anticipated future productive capacities of young migrants and refugees are often highlighted to secure rights and protections for young people. For example, in anti-deportation campaigns, young people's excellent academic grades are often mentioned alongside their professional career ambitions and hopes of future economic and social contributions they can make in the state in which they reside (Patler and Gonzalez, 2015).

Young organisers differed in terms of their history and relationship to the Dreamer narrative. Some did not fit the Dreamer image, others did but had rejected the label early on, while some had engaged with it strategically before later rejecting this label. A small minority still identified as Dreamers or used tropes from the Dreamer narrative (such as an emphasis on academic achievement and aspiration, innocence, and love of the US) to describe their trajectories and activism. However, what they had in common was that their stories were not simple narratives of individual aspiration. Their journeys so far and future aspirations were linked into and part of their family's journeys and aspirations; they spoke of the way families had played key roles in their endeavours and in their motivations for pursuing their goals; while their aspirations were also *for* family. Bassel (2017) asserts that the 'denial of voice, and of narratable selves' does not just occur when people are prevented from speaking or denied a platform, but also when they do speak and are heard differently from how they want to be. Many young organisers were unhappy with how the Dreamer narrative had overlooked their linked lives in dividing their stories from those of their families and communities, reinforcing the exclusion of these other undocumented people in this process. It was argued that the mobility of the Dreamers had been predicated on 'throwing others under the bus' (a phrase used by several of the organisers).

Raised in undocumented or mixed-status families, most young people had grown up aware of at least some of the struggles faced by undocumented family members (Abrego, 2018).

Young people were fearful about the prospect of family members being deported, the harsh working conditions they faced, and the impacts that being undocumented had on their family members' physical and mental health. Sofia, who had DACA status, explained how these fears had grown since the election of Trump. She said, 'I have my mom on Find My Friends like on iPhone [...] A lot of my friends now have their parents on Find My Friends because they're so scared'. The individual focus on Dreamers overlooked these wider concerns young people had for their families, but also the ways in which their lives and outcomes were linked and the role that family members had in supporting young people to achieve the successes celebrated in the Dreamer narrative. Young organisers explained that although the decision to migrate was taken by their parents, a key motivation and concern had been their children's welfare (Silvey, 2004; Van Blerk, 2008). Parents had decided to migrate with the immediate welfare of the family in mind, but also with a view to the future and the hope that their children would have more opportunities as they grew up than they had had. Melody explained her parents 'wanted to come here for a better future. They wanted us to get a better education [...] They didn't want us to struggle like they did'. While lacking socio-economic resources that other parents might have to invest in their children's welfare and futures, these parents had the possibility of migration, albeit through irregular routes or becoming undocumented in the process. Meanwhile, young people explained the exceptional academic success of many so-called Dreamers in the US was due to their hard work, capabilities and determination, but family members who did not have the resources to pursue these pathways themselves often also played crucial roles in facilitating these pathways for the Dreamers. Most of the young people spoke about their parents' jobs, the low pay and exploitative conditions and how hard their parents worked to help support them through school and college. These exertions and sacrifices took a toll on parents' mental and physical health. Ale described the impact pre and post-migration hardships on her father who raised her. She was motivated to go to college and do well so that she could 'give back' to her father:

He was always attendant on me even if he had been drunk, even if we were walking the streets. He was just there, and I really do appreciate and admire him because he never gave up on me. Now that I'm older I'm trying to get him everything that we never had before. [...] I'm going to do it because he gave me everything when I was small.

Despite differing positions on the desired tactics and goals of the undocumented youth movement and identification with the Dreamer narrative, all the young organisers ultimately sought to secure the well-being and protection of their undocumented families which was

frequently raised as a key consideration in their activism. Here there was a sense that they needed to fulfil their part of the intergenerational migrant ‘contract’ or ‘bargain’ by repaying their parents and supporting them through their struggles (Pratt, 2003).

The Dreamer narrative primarily addressed young people’s identities in terms of their individual relationship to the state as eligible citizens-in-waiting hoping to be granted status. However, these young people were embedded in interdependent intergenerational relationships and networks of care, which were not addressed in the Dream Act and DACA demands. The Dreamer narrative has been critiqued for its exclusionary framing of the ‘deserving’ immigrant which focuses on college bound young people with no criminal records (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif, 2014). Engaging with such critiques, in recent years there has been a re-articulation of campaign messaging, tactics and goals so that they are more inclusive and address the needs and experiences of the wider undocumented population (Schwiertz, 2016).

### **A pathway to each other’s experience**

A key division sown through the Dreamer narrative was the construction of the innocent and deserving young person through the implicit criminalising of the parent. If they had been ‘brought’ as children without a say in the matter, then it was their parents who had ‘brought’ them. Young organisers sought to secure the welfare and protection of their families and increasingly foregrounded these objectives in campaign narratives, but in the interviews they also highlighted some common areas of tensions that arose in their relationships with family. While rejecting the way some politicians drew on the Dreamer narrative to criminalise their parents, some organisers also acknowledged that they had felt some ambivalence about the decisions their parents had made. Karen prided herself on ‘doing the right thing’. Her outstanding academic achievements and her sense of civic responsibility (ideal Dreamer characteristics) were central themes in her story, yet she had struggled to reconcile this with the knowledge that she had crossed the border with her parents in ‘the wrong way’.

Young organisers and their parents did not always see eye-to-eye about revealing their undocumented status in public and the forms of activism they were willing to engage with. Sofia was open about her immigration status, but her mother cautioned her against this: ‘My mom was like what if, one day, one of your friends gets mad at you and, like, they call immigration on you [...] They’re [undocumented parents] very paranoid about things’. Young people reflected that there was a greater level of fear among their parents’ generation

than in their own and speculated that this was because while young people had been in the relatively protected space of school, their parents struggled daily with the fear of being apprehended in their workplace or as they moved about in public. Meanwhile, young organisers also described themselves as having gone through a journey in their political education that had enabled them to come to talk about their undocumented status, discuss and confront their fears. While three organisers had parents or other close family members who were also involved in migrant activism, most were the first in their family to become organisers and some families had expressed concerns about their involvement.

Reflecting on their journey through the movement and their efforts to make it more inclusive of their undocumented parents and families, young organisers spoke about the ways in which they had negotiated these tensions. Bassel (2017, 8) has highlighted the important role of listening as well as speaking in political action and has posited that engaging in political listening involves creating 'a path, a passage to another's experience' through which 'I try to experience the world as you construct it for me' because I cannot experience it as you do. The following examples explore how a politics of listening was engaged with by young people and their parents to establish and navigate a pathway to each other's experiences, and how in doing so they were able to elicit and develop their understanding of one another.

Jose and his mother became involved in undocumented rights activism at the same time. Their relationship and attention to one another's needs had influenced their journeys into and through activism. Jose's mother's concerns about Jose prompted her to seek a solution to his immigration status and consequently, they had both joined a youth organisation that was campaigning for the Dream Act. Having gained this organising experience, Jose went on to pursue a career in trade unionism. He explained that learning about his mother's story through activist storytelling and seeing and hearing first-hand the working conditions faced by undocumented workers like his parents had brought home to him the relative privilege of DACAmented young people like himself who had other career opportunities. This had made him determined to fight for the rights of undocumented parents.

Since their inception, organisations involved in the undocumented youth movement have established spaces in which young people can come together with others who are in similar circumstances to themselves and provide mutual support. It was in these spaces that many young people first publicly declared that they were undocumented. Through these groups they could talk about the challenges they faced with others who shared similar experiences. As mentioned earlier, storytelling is a key practice in the movement. Young people described

the central role of storytelling in developing their understanding of one another, the formation of group bonds, and helping them to address feelings of shame, stigma and fear (Swerts, 2015). Storytelling was described as an intensely emotional experience in which they could address others who were in similar circumstances and receive a validating response, as Ale explained, ‘it was so powerful because we were like now I understand where you are coming from and I know, but also you know where I am coming from as well’.

There is a sociality in pain since we seek witnesses to our pain to recognise it and grant it the status of an event, bringing it into being as a known event (Ahmed, 2014). Storytelling enabled young people to bear witness to each other, but through the crafting of stories into public narratives (Swerts, 2015) in the Dream Act and DACA campaigns some young people found that important elements of their identities and stories were marginalised or silenced, while the stories of undocumented people such as their parents who did not fit the Dreamer profile were silenced (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif, 2014). Meanwhile, most undocumented parents were not involved in organising and did not have opportunities to tell their stories in this context. As young organisers became used to telling their stories, they also began speaking with their parents about being undocumented and seeking out their stories.

As mentioned earlier, Karen had felt conflicted in her claim to be law-abiding because her family had crossed the border irregularly. As she became active in the movement she wondered more about her parents’ story. She recalled a conversation she began with her mother:

I remember saying tell me about our story. How did we get here? How did this happen? I also questioned her why did we do this illegally? And you know she brought up really good points. There were no resources in Mexico that could help them. they were escaping poverty. They didn’t have room for us to live. They were trying to provide a better future for us. For me it’s such an amazing thing to leave behind everything for the future.

To raise awareness of their cause some organisers made films about their undocumented experiences. Set observed that these films were often about students. Parents or others who did not fit the Dreamer narrative were less visible. Set made a film about their own family to provide them with an opportunity and platform to talk about being undocumented. Set explained that this was:

the first time they were talking about being undocumented and it was a really healing process in a way because it was the first time I had heard about what it means for my mum to be undocumented or even an immigrant and my siblings.

Just as Set's family spoke with him about their undocumented experiences, in turn Set spoke with their family about activism and took them to events. Following these family conversations, Set's family began to engage in organising. Set's mother, who had been concerned about Set's activism now began to get involved herself by delivering workshops for other undocumented parents. She even tried attending a protest rally but decided this was not a mode of activism she felt comfortable with. The family discussions and the family's divergent pathways through organising influenced Set's decisions about their own pathway through the movement and their perspectives about the undocumented population and political organising. Set explained:

It is important that we are not just talking about the experiences of the youth and that the youth are not speaking on behalf of their parents, but really allowing parents to feel empowered to organise in their own terms and when they are ready. Not like this 'come out, because it's like the greatest thing!' I feel like fear is a valid experience.

Often times we invalidate fear and say, "you must come out!" [...] really discrediting that fear is an emotional experience and I think for our parents those traumas are left unspoken of and I think we need to realise that if people get involved it should be in their own terms and at their own pace.

'Coming out' as undocumented has been validated and embedded as a key framework for activist practice in the youth movement (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif, 2014). While young organisers had found this healing and beneficial in helping them move forwards in their lives, coming out may not be experienced in this way by everyone and can present different challenges for different people. Set's acknowledgement of this in their dialogue with their family is an example of what Dobson (2014, 173) describes as 'apophatic listening'; this involves suspending one's own expectations, values and frames of understanding 'with a view (a) to listening to what is 'actually being said', and (b) to listening out for the unexpected and surprising. Rather than a 'unidirectional intergenerational transmission of political attitudes and orientations, from parent to child', political socialisation was 'bi-directional' in Set's family as the parent and child socialised each other into a political awareness of the conditions, experiences and possibilities facing different generations in the undocumented population (Wong and Tseng, 2008, 151).



Dissatisfaction with the individualistic and exclusionary frame of the Dreamer narrative and its limited reflection of the full complexity of their lives, led many young organisers to reject the Dreamer identity and narrative and to broaden or shift their organising goals and strategies to focus on issues affecting their wider community, such as detention, gentrification, health and working conditions (Schwiertz, 2016). However, some disappointment was expressed (although not always unsympathetically) about other organisers who left the movement following the introduction of DACA in 2012 with an implication that DACA contained the potential for intergenerational betrayal if young people left before the rights of all affected had been secured. Jose's comments were indicative of these reflections. He said, 'and then DACA came along [...] They now could get a job on their own [...] but our parents still don't have anything'. Some organisers also expressed frustration that some younger organisers who joined the movement since DACA focused their mobilisation primarily within the traditional Dreamer territory of education. Many more undocumented young people are attending college since the California Dream Act and DACA were introduced (Abrego, 2018). Some of these younger student activists focussed on identifying and seeking resolutions to exclusions on campus or barriers they faced in accessing campus services and in progressing in their programmes.

It was apparent from interviews with student organisers and those who had taken a break from organising that contrary to suggestions of selfishness, their motivations often included consideration of other family members. Some students were comfortable participating in actions on what was perceived as the semi-private and protected space of the college campus but were hesitant to participate in activities off campus. While organisers expressed fears for their own safety, they also identified the risks they posed to their families by coming out and talking about being undocumented. Amy was open about being undocumented but acknowledged she had felt some misgivings 'not necessarily because of my own comfortability, but because of my family's'.

Some organisers also explained their disengagement from organising stemmed from a need to focus on their education and career. This was explained as a consideration of their responsibility in ensuring their family's welfare and in consideration of their parents' migration goals. Melody felt that she should be more involved in organising, but at this time was more focused on her education and pursuing her future career in nursing. She said,

I want to be successful, knowing that my parents came here for my education [...] to get a better future for me so I can help out my parents. Because one day I want them to have their own social security numbers and feel secure because right now they don't feel secure.

These concerns had intensified and become more urgent in the context of the rising visibility of deportations under the Trump administration and the announcement in September 2017 that DACA is to be rescinded.

## **Conclusion**

Political activism offered undocumented young organisers a way of countering the immobility that they experienced in other areas of their life because of their immigration status. Since emerging on to the political scene in the 2000s, the undocumented youth movement has had significant success in expanding the rights and entitlements of many young people in the US. Although there is still no pathway to citizenship, access to higher education in California has expanded for undocumented young people raised in the state. Meanwhile, becoming DACAmented has enabled young people to work legally and so pursue career ambitions and provide for themselves and their families. In addition, although a temporary status, DACAmented young people have a deferral of deportation. However, their undocumented status still risks detention and deportation. This article has explored young organisers' accounts of their involvement in the undocumented youth movement to examine how their relationships with their families have impacted on their engagement with the Dreamer narrative and its contestation. It has been argued that the dominant discursive frame of the debate on the 'Dreamers' simultaneously created a platform for undocumented young people to speak while often still denying them the space to be heard. Drawing on an individualistic framing of migration and life course transitions, the Dreamer narrative presented undocumented young people as baggage brought along in their parents' migration journeys, while young people's educational achievements and future career prospects were entirely of their own making. However, the actions of both parents and children were motivated by a desire to improve not only their own, but also each other's prospects; their journeys, experiences and aspirations are linked. A relational understanding of migration and life course pathways and experiences illuminates how undocumented youth are embedded in interdependent intergenerational relationships and networks of care, which affect their experiences and outcomes and therefore need to be recognised in any long-term pathway to social justice. The

Dreamer narrative did not reflect the complexity and nuance of young organisers' lived experiences of migration, family life, and activism which were shaped through their linked lives. Having succeeded in gaining a platform to advocate for their rights and entitlements, young people were using this platform to fight for their parents' rights too. This had always been a long-term objective, but through engaging in a process of political listening in dialogue with their families they became more reflexive about their activist tactics and goals and opened up spaces for parents to be heard in ways that sometimes challenged some of established discursive frames in the undocumented youth movement.

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