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## Keywords

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA), immigration, child immigrants, undocumented immigrants, immigration policy

An estimated 11.5 million unauthorized immigrants live in the United States (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2012). While the number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States has steadied, the median length of residence continues to grow, demonstrating that many undocumented immigrants consider their decision to migrate to the United States a long-term move (Passel, Cohn, Krogstad, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014). Undocumented legal status can have developmental, economic, health care, and psychological effects on immigrants (Benuto & Bennett, 2015; Benuto & Leany, 2018; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). The negative consequences of being undocumented permeates all aspects of an immigrant's well-being, including their educational experience. Undocumented youth are affected by their legal status in their ability and their decision to finish high school or to apply to college (McWhirter, Ramos, & Medina, 2013). All the potential disadvantages that can occur from being undocumented contribute to the risk of economic hardship and psychological distress, including chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and substance use (Gelatt, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011; Benuto & Leany, 2011).

Immigration policy in the United States has attempted to better assist immigrants in becoming U.S. citizens. In 2001, a legislative act was proposed, aiming to provide a pathway for undocumented immigrants to obtain permanent legal status (American Immigration Council, 2012). The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act proposed that undocumented individuals who attended and/or graduated from a college or university were under 30 years of age, lived in the United States for a specified number of years, had "good" moral character, and had not violated any immigration laws would be given the opportunity to become permanent legal citizens (LawLogix, 2013). Following the rejection of the DREAM Act, in 2012, former President Barack Obama signed an executive order known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). DACA provided 2-year administrative relief from deportation and eligibility for a work permit to undocumented immigrants who met restrictions, such as being below 31 years of age at the time of the DACA application and being below 16 years of age when they arrived in the United States, among other restrictions (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2016).

On September 5, 2017, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) issued a memorandum that rescinded the June 15, 2012, memorandum titled "Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion With Respect to Individuals

Who Came to the United States as Children,” which initially established DACA (DHS, 2017). This rescission was the culmination of the Supreme Court’s and the Fifth Circuit’s rulings in ongoing litigation, as well as the September 4, 2017, letter from the Attorney General (see DHS, 2017, for a comprehensive review). This decision was heavily disputed; as of February 14, 2018, after federal court orders (on January 9, 2018, and February 13, 2018), DACA is being operated on the terms in place before it was rescinded on September 5, 2017; although, the USCIS no longer accepts new requests from individuals for deferred action under DACA and only accepts renewal requests from existing DACA recipients (USCIS, 2018).

Those who currently hold DACA status may apply for employment authorization, receive a Social Security number, and receive in-state tuition at some institutions of higher education. DACA is purported to have assisted in counteracting some of the negative effects of having undocumented status, including helping individuals acquire a job, receive medical benefits, obtain an increase in wages, and pursue education (Anaya, del Rosario, Doyle, & Hayes-Bautista, 2014; Gonzales, Terriquez, & Rusczyk, 2014). Of all purported benefits, education appears to have the most impact on well-being, as pursuing an education can help a person to acquire a job, receive medical benefits, siæ

considered crucial to the acculturation process for immigrant youth (Pellebon, 2012; Paat & Pellebon, 2012). These youth find their sense of self by reconciling their parents' culture from their country of origin and the culture of their new home country (Song, 2010). Immigrant youth with a strong ethnic identity, who hold a positive sense of self, are better equipped to cope with stressful situations, are protected from negative environmental factors, and perform better in school and social situations than youth with weaker ethnic identity (Paat & Pellebon, 2012). Problematically, some researchers have found immigrant minority youth to hold a lower self-con-

The purpose of this study was to further explore the factors related to the experiences of child immigrants, both during the application process to acquire DACA, as well as following the approval.

## Method

### Materials

This was a qualitative study and the data presented in this article are data collected for efforts of a larger scale study. The first step was to create an interview protocol, which was constructed by examining relevant literature and deriving appropriate study research questions. Content validity was demonstrated by having three experts in the field analyze and provide improvements for the research questions. Feedback from the experts was considered and appropriate revisions were made. After revisions, the final interview protocol was comprised of 17 questions for which nine were analyzed for the current study.

### Procedure

This study received institutional review board (IRB) approval once the content of the interview protocol was finalized. The researchers then sought participants by distributing flyers on the University of Nevada–Reno campus and via email, making in-person announcements in undergraduate courses, and through the university’s research subject pool. Participants were able to complete the semi-structured interview in-person ( $n = 7$ ) or via telephone ( $n = 1$ ). Before participation in the study, participants were given a copy of the informed consent to read and verbally confirm that they met inclusion criteria and understood the terms. Participants were not asked to sign a hard copy of the consent forms as to protect their confidentiality, and were told they could withdraw their interview data at any time. The duration of the recruitment period for participants was open from September 2016 to May 2017.

### Participants

Inclusion criteria included (1) eligibility for DACA status or current DACA status and (2) current enrollment at an institution of higher education. During the 8-month recruitment period, there were cancelations ( $n = 2$ ), no shows ( $n = 6$ ), and potential participants who did not meet inclusion criteria ( $n = 3$ ). The final number of participants was eight. Participants were between the ages of

Table 1. Participant demographic data.

Participant	Age	Gender	Country of immigration	Age of immigration to the United States
1	19	Female	Mexico	3 years
2	22	Female	Mexico	2 years
3	24	Female	Mexico	7 months
4	20	Female	Mexico	3 years
5	27	Female	Mexico	11 years
6	20	Male	Mexico	1 year 2 months
7	19	Female	Mexico	7 years
8	21	Female	Mexico	8 years

19 and 27, immigrants from Mexico, and almost exclusively female (88%). It is important to note that, although all our participants were immigrants from Mexico, we had sought out participants who emigrated from other countries as well. For demographic data, see Table 1.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for common recurring themes by two independent coders. Intercoder consistency was 70%, demonstrating moderate interrater reliability. To resolve disagreements, codes were discussed to determine whether the code (1) belonged within an existing core category, (2) was salient enough as its own category, or (3) did not belong at all (Saldaña, 2015).

The analysis consisted of a two-phase coding cycle. In the first cycle, initial coding (see Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss, 1987) and concept coding (Mihas, 2014; Saldaña, 2015) were used. Initial coding was applied to micro-analyze for tentative codes (i.e., examining the interview transcript per line; Saldaña, 2015). Subsequently, concept coding was utilized to produce general, overarching themes from the codes generated during the initial coding.

Two methods were used during the second phase of coding: axial coding (Boeije, 2010; Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss, 1987) and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). Axial coding distinguished commonly reoccurring themes from nonessential ones. Focused coding categorized the most prominent codes or themes found (Saldaña, 2015).

## Results

Our findings indicated that as young children, participants did not have a sense of their legal status. When they became aware that they were undocumented, they were unable to make sense of the consequences of their legal status, as they were not old enough to experience any real repercussions related to being undocumented. As our participants grew up, they progressively experienced more situations where their undocumented status set them apart from youth who had citizenship; this created a sense of liminality. Participants described liminality (i.e., a sense of non-belonging) in situations of “rites of passage.” Some participants described how they had to make excuses for why they were not doing what was “typical” for others who were their age, while others described acting uninterested as a way to decrease suspicion. This sense of liminality was resolved when participants received DACA status or became “DACAmended.” Overall, DACA gave undocumented youth access to many opportunities that they were excluded from in their earlier years. However, once participants realized the limitations of their DACA status, they became what we conceptualized as DACALimited, as they were cycled back to a state of liminality. See Figure 1 for an illustration of this process.

The narratives shared by participants illustrated how being DACALimited was characterized by piecemeal access to opportunities. For instance, participants shared stories of being told that they can go to college, but not being extended ways to fund college, or being told that they can work, but only have 2-year periods of certainty in their ability to stay in the United States. While they maintained success in many ways, their narratives were riddled with barriers they had encountered and worries about what the future might hold, which truly illustrate the shortcomings of the DACA legislation. See Figure 2 for an illustration of the limitations that DACA recipients experienced.

### Becoming Aware of Legal Status

Being undocumented is a progressively problematic experience. Initially, as children, our participants described not realizing the difference between being documented and being undocumented. As our participants aged, they began to learn what being undocumented meant.

I had a project where I had to describe what makes you an American and I asked my mom “well, what makes us American?” She was like “well, we’re not. . .” and I was like “what do you mean we’re not? Were here!”. . . I mean I knew I was Mexican, but I didn’t know I wasn’t American. (Participant 1)

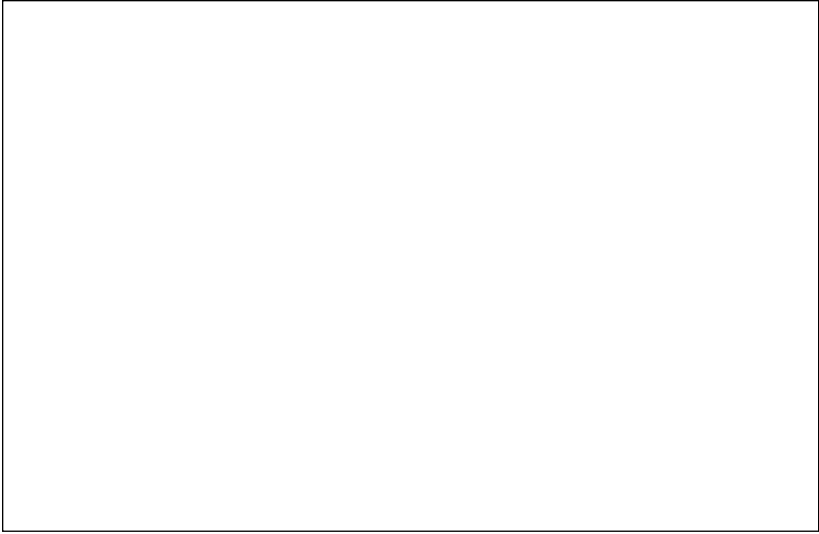


Figure 1. Venn diagram of immigration status.

Note. This figure illustrates the limitations of DACA. DACA = Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.

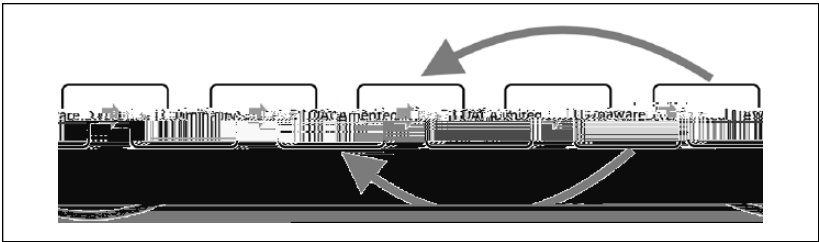


Figure 2. Being DACA-limited.

Note. This figure illustrates how being undocumented and being DACAmented are similar in terms of generating a sense of liminality. DACA = Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.

Our participants described not experiencing the ramifications of being undocumented until they reached traditional American “rites of passage” and reported feeling a sense of liminality, or non-belonging, when they realized they were excluded from these rites of passage: getting their driver’s license or planning for college.



The challenge was understanding the fact that I wasn't able to start work or even get a driver's license when I became of age for a permit. [It was] very sad, it made me cry. (Participant 4)

Youth with citizenship were set on a separate trajectory than our undocumented youth; U.S. citizens had the freedom to drive to school, to begin working and saving money, and to plan for their careers by applying to college, while our participants were excluded from these rites of passage because of their undocumented status and they struggled with aligning their aspirations to the realities of their status. For most of their educational career, our participants struggled with challenges and barriers related to their culture (i.e., language barrier, cultural vacillation, cultural brokering), but in their final high school years, participants' struggles became more status-oriented. This is a key in that challenges and barriers related to culture promoted motivation, strength, and perseverance, but challenges and barriers related to legal status were uncontrollable and frustrating. DACA became our participants' hope because it spoke to their professional and educational aspirations and it gave them a sense of control over their status.

## Liminality

Being undocumented produces liminality across a host of people, places, and situations. Our participants recalled experiences of liminality at home, in the community, and at school. Most of our participants immigrated to the United States with no memories of life in Mexico. As such, their experiences of non-belonging in the United States were especially difficult to process, as they did not see themselves as extensions of their families' cultures nor did they see themselves as foreign; all they knew was what life was like in the United States.

I felt like I wasn't in a foreign country, because this [the U.S.] is kind of all I knew. (Participant 6)

Despite their attempts to reconcile where they fit in, their difficulties with belonging were actualized through experiences of the language barrier and cultural vacillation (moving between mainstream culture and their culture of origin). In particular, the lack of resources available at school for our participants in these regards further signaled their exclusion. These experiences

most time (i.e., school) was not accommodating their needs, which further isolated and alienated our participants.

### Becoming DACAmended

This sense of liminality was temporarily resolved when participants received DACA status, or became DACAmended. Notably, not all undocumented child immigrants go on to apply for and receive DACA. Most of the participants in our sample expressed fear of “outing” themselves and their family’s status. Our participants described being attracted to DACA because of their potential to access employment and higher education, and they took the risk of applying for DACA in hopes of having a better future. In particular, participants recalled being able to obtain a driver’s license and obtain a social security number, both of which allowed them to gain employment and access higher education. Our participants were able to continue prioritizing their professional and educational aspirations because of DACA. They saw DACA as a way to secure a stable career, help provide for their families, and be better positioned than their parents. Another common theme among participants was the recollection of diminished aspirations before DACA, because they knew their undocumented status prevented them from progressing in terms of accessing higher education, getting a job with good pay, or being free from the fear of deportation. Our participants saw DACA as a way for them to finally engage in activities that their families cited as their reason for immigrating in the first place, and the majority recalled having full support of their families to take advantage of the opportunities that DACA gave them.

### DACAlimited

As it turned out, DACA had major shortcomings. Participants described the benefits of DACA to be overshadowed by their experiences of conflicting restrictions of these benefits. DACA was supposed to help provide security in their futures (i.e., to not be worried about deportation, to be able to find a job, and to be able to go to college), but this was not the case. The piecemeal access to opportunities through DACA (i.e., being DACAlimited) was reported to be frustrating and stressful by all participants. DACA did not create equal opportunities for its recipients as to youths with citizenship, and many participants described the same sobering feelings that they mentioned when they described what it meant to be undocumented, including liminality, isolation, and alienation. Once again, our participants experienced liminality because of their status, leaving them questioning where they fit in (see Figures 1 and 2).

For our participants, DACA was their only way to access employment or higher education, but they still reported experiencing major challenges and barriers in these areas, even with DACA. In particular, funding college was described to be especially challenging and had the potential to impact their experience in many ways as Participant 7 described,

I mean obviously, I wanted to apply to Ivy League schools and stuff like that but I never ended up doing it because I knew that even if I got scholarships, they probably weren't gonna be full scholarships, and so we weren't gonna have enough money to pay for them, and so I was like "Okay. . . I still want the college experience of like going away from home, and it is a pretty good school; still in-state tuition, and I can get the [redacted] scholarship which is not funded by the government, so I can use it. . ."

Another financial barrier that was reported was being unable to apply for Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or most scholarships. These financial aid packages have residency requirements that disqualify DACA recipients, and participants described having to work part- or full-time, asking family for financial help, and applying for private scholarships to pay for college.

I decided to apply to [redacted], but when I did, they told me I couldn't get any financial aid because I wasn't a citizen. So, I had to pay everything out of my pocket. (Participant 5)

The few scholarships that DACA recipients are qualified for were described by one participant as "highly competitive," as both citizens and non-citizens compete for the funding.

Overall, concerns about being DACA limited were reminiscent of concerns about being previously undocumented: the uncertainty of our participants' future and the future of their families. Participants knew they were only accepted here in 2-year increments. They believed this would affect their ability to acquire a stable, good paying job.

My dad is a carpenter so it's a little upsetting that he's not paying for his retirement and he's getting closer to old age. My worry is to finally get my BA and be able to get an income that is good enough to pay for them as well. (Participant 4)

Furthermore, although all our participants were enrolled in college, they expressed concern about being able to finish college, as their completion was

contingent on being able to secure funding. As described above, financial aid is scarce for students who cannot prove residency.

I was trying to seek out resources 'cause everybody was like "oh there's so many resources out there, like if you're from a low income, first generation [family], then you should have no trouble getting some resources," but I find that there's always like that extra barrier set in front of those that are DACA. (Participant 6)

Funding college is a significant source of stress and a warranted concern.

Finally, there was worry about the welfare of participants themselves and of their families. DACA does not provide protection to family members of recipients, nor is it a pathway for citizenship for recipients, creating a constant state of uncertainty. Participants were weary of the government having their information on file from their DACA application. The participants living in "mixed-status" families reported being worried about the possible deportation of family members who were still undocumented that they may have "outed" by applying.

Well the DACA process is pretty scary initially when you put in the legal papers because I guess as an immigrant you're off the grid in a way. . .so filling that out and having the government know your name and all that stuff and your parent's name is a little scary, especially if you're not aware of any of the laws or anything. (Participant 4)

Because DACA is a temporary legal status, our participants considered it a short-term privilege that isolated and rejected them from other American citizens all over again. Being DACAdmented meant being temporary and, with the 2016 election, our participants expressed worry that the future of DACA was temporary too. Participants were concerned with what would happen to them and their families if DACA was terminated, highlighting the uncertainty and fear surrounding the initiative.

## Discussion

Our results revealed that, early on, our participants were unaware of their legal status. Eventually they became aware of what it meant to be undocumented and, as such, experienced a sense of liminality. Obtaining DACA status (or becoming DACAdmented) resolved their sense of liminality and gave them hope, albeit temporarily. They later realized that they were what we conceptualized as DACAlimited; while there were benefits to DACA, there were also substantial limitations.





schools, administrators, and other students through exposure to diversity (Bozick & Miller, 2014; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Potochnick, 2014).

Providing in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants is a good start; however, reforms beyond providing in-state tuition are necessary. As suggested by Cervantes, Minero, and Brito (2015), there should be educational interventions early on that are aimed at preparing immigrant parents and children for the challenges of college. This is consistent with efforts in the field of clinical and counseling psychology (and other professions) in terms of the emphasis on providing interventions that are culturally specific (Benuto, 2017; Benuto & O'Donohue, 2015; Benuto & Leany, 2017). In addition, there should be faculty mentors, well-versed in immigration policy, with the purpose of helping to "minimize institutional barriers and facilitate connections to resources" (Cervantes et al., 2015, p. 236). While we did not assess for mental health consequences of the stress imposed by immigration status (i.e., depression, anxiety), intervention efforts should also include culturally relevant assessment (Benuto, 2013a, 2013b) so that those in need of behavioral health services can obtain them as adolescence represents a critical time in a person's life highlighting the needs for reforms for ethnic minorities (Benuto & Leany, 2011; O'Donohue, Benuto, & Tolle, 2013).

## Limitations and Future Directions

Overall, this study has limitations that should be noted. First, despite the importance of the results, the current study had a small sample size. This was in part due to cancellations, no shows, and prospective participants not meeting inclusion criteria. We hypothesize that the political climate at the time of recruitment may have contributed to our small sample size as well, as potential participants may have been fearful of disclosing their legal status in a direct-interview. Previous qualitative studies on the topic that recruited larger sample sizes (e.g., DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016; Martinez, 2014; Raymond-Flesh, Siemons, Pourat, Jacobs, & Brindis, 2014; Sudhinaraset, To, Ling, Melo, & Chavarin, 2017) were done prior to the 2016 election, whereas during our recruitment period, deportation policies were in the process of being revised. Despite a small sample size, data saturation still occurred.

Second, our study had limited demographic variance. The sample consisted entirely of Latino immigrants from Mexico and seven of the eight participants were women, thus our findings may not generalize to male DACA recipients, non-Latino DACA recipients, or Latino DACA recipients from countries other than Mexico. It is important to note that, in 2017, immigrants from Mexico comprised the largest portion of both accepted initial and renewal DACA applications, with over 648,000 active DACA recipients

from Mexico (compared with El Salvador, the second largest county source, with 25,900 active DACA recipients: USCIS, 2017); thus, the results from our study do generalize to a substantial subset of the U.S. immigration population.

Finally, the sample consisted entirely of individuals who were currently enrolled in college. Therefore, our findings may not generalize to DACA recipients who are not college-attendees. However, in Sudhinaraset, To, Ling, Melo, and Chavarin's (2017) study with a sample of Asian and Pacific Islander DACA recipients, and only 40.6% with a college degree, the researchers found similar results to ours (e.g., economic stability, educational opportunities, social and community contexts, and access to health care). This suggests that differences in outcomes between those pursuing higher education and those who are not are limited.

Despite these limitations, the current study supports past literature demonstrating that DACA has granted undocumented immigrants the opportunity to pursue higher education and sustainable careers. However, these benefits are short term, as DACAmented individuals have to frequently re-apply for DACA status and are never granted permanent citizenship status. DACAmented individuals have proven their commitment to lead positive lives and contribute to society, even during their limited time here; therefore, immigration policy needs to be revised to grant these individuals access to citizenship, thus eliminating the uncertainty associated with not being guaranteed additional time in the United States.

#### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research,



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