MARGINALIZED CITIZENSHIP: EXAMINING PUBLIC POLICY FROM THE BOTTOM

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degrees
Master of Public Administration
and
Master of Arts in Latin American Studies

by
Anne Elizabeth Holder
Summer 2015
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Anne Elizabeth Holder:

Marginalized Citizenship: Examining Public Policy from the Bottom

Shawn Flanigan, Chair
School of Public Affairs

Kristen Hill-Maher
Department of Political Science

Brian Adams
Department of Political Science

May 16, 2015
Approval Date
DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to everyone that lent their voices to this research, and to those that do have the opportunity to tell their stories. Throughout the many conversations that led to this project, I have been both humbled and inspired by the vibrancy and depth of your lives. It has been a privilege to work with each of you.
“The most common encounters citizens have with government are not in the voting booth, nor in contributing to and contacting legislators...people confront government in the hundreds of ways affecting their daily lives. The language and symbols contained in policy send messages about what kind of people count as important, whose interests are likely to be taken seriously and whose problems will probably be ignored. Policies are lessons in democracy.”

(Schneider & Ingram, 1997, p. 79)
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Marginalized Citizenship: Examining Public Policy from the Bottom
by
Anne Elizabeth Holder
Master of Public Administration and Master of Arts in Latin American Studies
San Diego State University, 2015

This thesis provides an analysis of how social constructions present within immigration policy have an impact the identity and membership of undocumented immigrant youth residing in the U.S. Through an exploration of the experience of applying for President Obama’s 2012 executive action Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the messages that undocumented youth learn about membership are examined in reflection of this temporary policy. By problematizing the ongoing relationship that undocumented youth have with policies that recognize them, but grant them limited means to gain permanent residency, this research provides insight into the ways that living in this halfway point is impacting undocumented youth as social citizens and residents in the United States.

The analysis relies on qualitative data gathered from interviews with 20 undocumented youth in California. The goal of this research is to describe the experience of membership of undocumented youth as they are framed within a space of liminal legality, the ways in which shifting social constructs of public policies work to define a new social construction of DACA applicants and what undocumented youth infer about the quality of the membership in the U.S. as a result of this policy. This thesis offers explanations about how within a context that simultaneously implies inclusion and exclusion, views held about personal identity and belonging within the undocumented immigrant youth population can be understood as reflections of their interactions with the state. This perspective offers policymakers a way to understand questions of membership and citizenship among target populations that are recipients of government decisions, but may not hold the formal political power to participate in or challenge those decisions.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delineations of Belonging</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liminal Legality</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom-Up Policy Perspectives</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undocumented Youth and Policy</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Design and Recruitment</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Characteristics</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement Instruments</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Researcher</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 ON THE THRESHOLD OF CITIZENSHIP</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Expectation of Uncertainty</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

PAGE

Figure 1: Participant’s Age of Arrival .................................................................26
Figure 2: Participant’s Age in Comparison to Residency in the U.S. .........................27
Figure 3: Education Level of Participants .............................................................28
Figure 4: Participant’s Country of Origin .............................................................28
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to explain how social constructs present in immigration policy impact the identity and membership of undocumented youth. I explore this by examining two interrelated research questions. First, how do public policies inform ideas about citizenship and identity held by the undocumented youth population? Second, how do undocumented youth understand their shifting relationship to the U.S. with the introduction of Obama’s 2012 executive order on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals?

Citizenship can be understood in terms of an individual’s legal relationship to the state or in terms of their social inclusion into the nation. The legal citizenship of an individual is defined by immigration policy. While in contrast, social citizenship is created and maintained through an individual’s behaviors and participation within the nation, regardless of their legal relationship to the state. As a result of these two dimensions of citizenship, it is possible for a conflict to arise between the social and legal aspects of membership within the same nation because individuals that are not legal members may behave in ways that grant them access social membership. Likewise, individuals that are legally part of a nation may not participate in the social behaviors that society expects from a “good citizen”.

Currently, there are 11 million individuals that are defined legally by the U.S. government as outsiders in the nation, though they are physically present within the borders. Undocumented immigrants in the U.S. provide a challenge to the American conception of citizenship because often their identity as an immigrant is only evident in the specific contexts where the individual interacts with the state. Citizenship is often defined by the legal binary of inclusion and exclusion, and as a result the social aspects of membership in a nation are often not taken into consideration. Many institutions and community
organizations do not require individuals identify their immigration status to belong, making unauthorized immigrants socially indistinguishable from citizens.

When questions of citizenship focus on a binary relationship to the state, individuals can only exist within a dichotomy of members of non-members of the country. However, for undocumented youth their legal membership comes into conflict with their social membership as they reach adulthood. As children, the Federal government provides migrants’ the legal right to remain in school, providing a context where their immigration status is not taken under consideration. Many undocumented immigrant youth have lived the majority of their lives in the U.S., attended K-12 education, speak English fluently and may not be aware of their undocumented immigration status. Once they reach adulthood and exit the educational system, the interactions that undocumented youth have with the state are regulated by their status as unauthorized immigrants. Public discourse and political debates often attempt to label undocumented immigrants as outsiders and criminals who have broken the law by entering the country without permission from the state, in order to promote restrictive immigration policies. The result is a contradiction between the experiences of undocumented youth who have lived a significant portion of their lives in the U.S., and the label of “outsiders” that they are often given by the media and society. In spite of social labels, scholarship has suggested that undocumented youth hold identities that are informed by their regular interactions with American institutions (Abrego, 2008; Boehm, 2012; Gonzales, 2011; Perez, 2009).

A social security number or a driver’s license become symbols of belonging and identity that are out of reach for undocumented youth, unless the state allows them access to member status. As an undocumented journalist explained, documents hold an important significance for undocumented immigrants beyond the physical documents themselves, “A driver’s license, for example, is not merely a driver’s license—it proves you exist, that you’re part of a community,” (Vargas, 2014). Without to permission to remain in the U.S., and with an inability to return to their country of birth, undocumented immigrants are in a state of limbo that they are dependent on the state to resolve.

As undocumented youth enter spaces in society where they are treated legally as adults, their immigration status transforms into the most prominent aspect of their identities. Immigration status becomes the dividing line between inclusion and exclusion, but also a line
that is invisible and easily hidden. As a result, undocumented youth can fluidly belong to society as long as their status remains hidden. From observing this contradiction between social and legal members, it becomes evident that a legal status is not the only way to define the boundaries of membership. The lines of membership are movable and can be shifted through the actions and beliefs of the individuals that are being delineated. Individuals who are legally outside of the binary of citizenship but are socially indistinguishable from citizens call into question the boundaries of membership.

The state of California is home to the largest undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. with an estimated 2.4 million undocumented people, or almost a quarter of the total undocumented population that resides in the country (Passel, 2005). Of this population, an estimated 408,000 individuals arrived in the U.S. as young children that accompanied their parents when they migrated (Passel, 2005). Since these youth were born abroad, they do not hold citizenship in the U.S., but have lived in the country for the majority of their lives, receiving their education and developing a level of connection to their communities that make it unlikely that they will return to their country of birth (Abrego, 2008). Without formal recognition by the U.S. government undocumented youth have limited options for higher education, health insurance and employment.

The contradiction between undocumented youth’s social and legal membership led to widespread protests and political activity in 2006 that created a social construction of these youth as “D.R.E.A.Mers.” This label, which intentionally plays upon national beliefs about the “American Dream”, is a reference to their membership in the population that would be impacted by the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act in 2010 (The American Immigration Council, 2013). This proposed law was designed to provide a six year permanent residency status for these youth, allowing them to work, attend school or join the military, and after the six year period make them eligible for citizenship (The American Immigration Council, 2013). However, Congress has not yet passed the D.R.E.A.M. Act.

In 2012, President Obama sought to address the issue of undocumented youth by creating an executive order, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which allowed individuals under the age of 31 to be granted temporary protection from deportation if they were brought to the U.S. before the age of 16 and had finished high school equivalency or
were honorably discharged from the U.S. military. In addition, individuals who are approved are given a social security number and the opportunity to legally seek employment. The policy itself falls short of being a formal law, does not provide a pathway to apply for any type of permanent residency for individuals or their families. In addition the status is temporary and must be renewed in two year increments (Batalova & Mittelstadt, 2012). The DACA policy creates a situation where the undocumented youth population does not have the formal rights and privileges of a citizen, but is offered temporary legal inclusion.

DACA provides a weak protection to these youth because, as an executive order it easily can be overturned by Congress or with the election of a new president. DACA as a policy also does not offer a timeline in which this in-between, liminal status might be resolved. President Obama has created a short-term patch to address the contradictions that the unauthorized youth population faces, but it is ultimately a temporary gesture because undocumented youth remain dependent on future legislative and executive decisions to provide them with a legal immigration status.

In examining the relationship that individuals have with the state it is possible to interrogate the ways in which target populations experience and understand policy. Because DACA provides a new temporary status to undocumented youth, it is possible to look at how individuals’ ongoing interactions with the state have shifted and changed over time and how their perceptions and experiences may reflect changes seen in public policy. This research will examine the experience of living in this space, at the threshold of American membership, by exploring how DACA as an immigration policy informs undocumented youth’s perspective of membership and belonging in the U.S. This thesis seeks to explain how social constructs present in immigration policy impact the identity and membership of undocumented youth.

**Research Questions**

As mentioned earlier, my specific research questions are:

- How do public policies inform ideas about citizenship and identity held by the undocumented youth population?
- How do undocumented youth understand their relationship to the U.S. in reflection of DACA?
**STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to analyze understandings of citizenship and identity among undocumented migrants in California as shaped through their interactions with the U.S. government. In order to investigate how personal interactions with the state shape conceptions of citizenship, I rely on interviews with undocumented young adults that have been awarded protection from deportation through DACA. Identity as members will generally be defined as the degree of self-perceived membership and inclusion in the U.S. The primary public policy under analysis will be DACA, which requires individuals to identify their lack of legal residency status in order to determine their eligibility and ultimately gain protection from deportation. This policy was chosen because it provides a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which individuals experience a sudden shift in their relationship to the state. Relying on individual interviews, the analysis will use the perspective of the individuals that are the target population of DACA to explain how public policy informs individuals' understanding of their place in society.

Social construction theory (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Soss, 2002) suggests that shifts may take place in undocumented youth’s perception of themselves as members of the U.S. as they start to realize that they are no longer limited to the assigned category of undocumented immigrant. Such a shift would permit undocumented youth to alter the ways that they understand themselves within society as well as what opportunities may be available to them in the future. The shifting policy landscape may inform their personal identity and their identity as “members,” allowing them to challenge the deviant social construction of an ‘illegal immigrant’ that the government has assigned them. Through DACA the state creates a new category of membership for undocumented youth that is temporary and unstable. By looking at the individual experiences of undocumented youth, it is possible to examine how the state plays a role in informing how they understand their simultaneous inclusion and exclusion in the U.S.

Public policy can create ambiguities that become apparent when viewed from the perspective of a minority or underrepresented population because the perspective of the target population reveals the impact of policy, which is ill-defined and less clear than the state often implies. In the face of constant instability and mixed messages from the government, social construction theory suggests that populations targeted by government
policy may internalize the implicit messages that policies carry about their relative worth or social position (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 1997; Soss, 2002). Understanding the impact of a public policy includes understanding the target population’s reaction to and resulting responses to the policy. With undocumented youth, it becomes possible to examine a population that is forced to negotiate their citizenship and identity in response to policies that recognize them, but do not include them into the polity.

Existing scholarship provides limited insight into the relationship that undocumented immigrants have with the state (Gonzales, 2011). The majority of this body scholarship focuses on portraying the daily lives of the undocumented population (Chavez, 1991, 1998), the ways that students have been politically active (Abrego, 2011; Gonzales, 2008) and the challenges that undocumented youth face in accessing to higher education (Abrego, 2008; Seif, 2004). Instead, this research will seek to understand the impact of a policy that creates a liminal space of membership for undocumented youth and how this relationship informs their identities and beliefs about citizenship. The nuance of this space of liminal legality is understudied in the fields of public policy, migration and citizenship. Marrying these ideas together will provide a clearer context of the processes that are a result of individual’s direct interactions with the state.

This thesis provides a bridge to understanding the way that DACA impacts how the undocumented youth population thinks about itself in relation to the landscape of American citizenship. First, it will address how the creation of DACA also created a new space at the threshold of belonging in the U.S. for undocumented immigrants. DACA formalizes a new category of membership within a liminal space that is defined by its permanently conditional and temporary nature. This liminal state of membership impacts DACA recipient’s sense of identity and structures their membership in the U.S. Second, it will explore how undocumented immigrant youth learn about the boundaries and expectations for their membership through the DACA application process. In this process, it is possible observe the ways in which undocumented youth who are eligible for DACA shift from members of a population socially constructed as deviants to a population that is socially constructed as dependent. DACA applicants not only recognize this shifting treatment, but begin to also view their own identities and citizenship differently as a result. The final chapter of analysis will address how undocumented youth begin to respond to their new social construction and
align themselves with the ideal of a good immigrant. This shift in perspective provides evidence that undocumented youth have begun to reflect the messages they have received from the state.

**CONCLUSION**

Rarely is the lens of examination reversed in order to understand outcomes of public policy from the perspective of the target population, and even less so when dealing with immigrants. Soss (1999) argues that, “Policy designs are more than just government outputs. They are political forces that have important effects on the beliefs and actions of citizens” (p. 376). From that departure point, this thesis will explore the ways in which public policy directed at undocumented youth population produces identity, citizenship, and their resulting relationship with the American government. This is done by problematizing the ongoing relationship that undocumented youth have with policies that recognize them, but grant them limited means to gain permanent residency or stabilize their immigration status. This thesis will provide insight into the ways that living within liminal legal status informs DACA beliefs about membership and belonging in the U.S.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining scholarship that touches on questions of public policy, immigration and citizenship it becomes evident that there is a need for more academic research on the experience of undocumented immigrants’ interactions with the state. This focus can provide insight into the ways in which the state sends messages to undocumented immigrants about the quality of their membership in the U.S. To understand the ways that DACA influences the relationship undocumented youth have with the U.S., it is necessary to explore literature that addresses questions of belonging, identity and citizenship. Various disciplines of academia have touched on the dilemma of a large presence of undocumented individuals in the U.S., and the reasons why this population exists and has been growing since the 1960s.

Scholars have taken a particular interest in what is termed the 1.5 generation of undocumented immigrants, who were born abroad but arrived to the U.S. before the age of 15, and examining how this generation of youth stands apart from the undocumented population in general. The primary issue that scholars address for this youth population is to what extent these youth have access to higher education and the differences that arise in terms of state policies that aim to grant or deny access to post-high school education. A related area of scholarship focuses on immigration policy and the undocumented population in order to examine the experience of living outside the traditional legal framework of a nation while simultaneously physically residing within its boundaries.

To connect these areas of scholarship, it is helpful look at the ways academics have argued that public policy plays a role in teaching individuals and groups about the place they hold in society. Those who are undocumented have a unique relationship with the policies that define their access to rights and services and their acceptance as members of the U.S. Examining questions of policy from the point of view of the powerless or silenced can provide perspectives that were previously unseen or unavailable to decision makers. This
process helps to shed light on how undocumented immigrants, who have limited access to formal political power and limited influence on the policies that directly affect them, create their own interpretation of membership within the U.S. Scholarship addressing the 1.5 undocumented population highlights how immigration status has affected the 1.5 generation’s transition to adulthood, and in what ways self-recognition of their undocumented immigration status plays a role in their life decisions. By combining the orientation of a bottom-up policy analysis and the qualitative perspectives of migration and citizenship scholars, this research will provide a new perspective and step away from the common focus on undocumented youth’s access to higher education. Instead, it shifts focus to the wider impacts of the American immigration system and the ways the system funnels or socializes groups into particular roles. Undocumented youth hold a temporary and contradictory position in society. Analyzing this position provides insight into the role of public policies in the development of identities of belonging, and how the definition of citizenship is continually reshaped and challenged.

The primary research questions that will be addressed through an exploration of existing scholarship are as follows:

- How do public policies inform ideas about citizenship and identity held by the undocumented youth population?
- How do undocumented youth understand their relationship to the U.S. in reflection of DACA?

First, this chapter will address the scholarship that explains how membership and citizenship for immigrants is defined both legally and socially in the U.S. Membership holds a particular significance for the 1.5 generation of immigrants because of the contradictions that are found in their treatment by society and the ways that the law defines their spaces of inclusion. Next, this review will consider the branch of scholarship that addresses liminal legality of membership, or the state of membership that is neither inclusive nor exclusive and may shift due to the social and legal circumstances that surround an individual. Next, I review literature on the way that public policy plays a role in shaping the condition of liminal legality and how policy design can teach individuals about the quality of their membership through the messages and lessons it communicates. This scholarship focuses on a reversal of the power structure to provide a better understanding of the experiences of marginalized populations. Finally, the current scholarship that directly addresses the undocumented
population will be explored to point to the need for a better understanding of the experience of undocumented immigrants and immigration policy in the U.S.

**Delineations of Belonging**

In the U.S., citizenship is primarily understood to be a legal relationship between the individual and the state that is constructed and regulated by immigration law. The relationship between the individual and the state is created the moment an individual is born or enters the country, and policy specifies what types of rights and participation in society that immigrants can claim. Immigration policies regulate both who may enter the country and what types of obligations an individual must fulfill in order to be considered a full and legal member of the U.S. (DeSipio & De la Garza, 1998). However, the incorporation of an individual into national society also is influenced by their level of social belonging.

The beginnings of contemporary U.S. immigration policies that regulate the passage of individuals into the country were developed in response to an influx of migrants in the 1880s. A more elaborated regulatory regime and restrictions on legal belonging were further developed in the early 1920s (DeSipio & De la Garza, 1998). The growth of perceived outsiders at the turn of the 20th century resulted in an outcry for government to define who could be American, and simultaneously regulate the ongoing U.S. demand for low wage labor (Ngai, 2014).

Important for this study is understanding how the category of “undocumented” or “unauthorized” came to exist within the national immigration system. With the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act every foreign nation was permitted a restricted number of immigrant entrants to the U.S., which is distributed equally across all sending nations. Thus the number of individuals that could be admitted to the U.S. through legal channels was limited. However, the U.S. has gone through periods of recruitment of seasonal foreign workers that over time built networks for increased migration. Simultaneously policy regulations tightened border controls, which encouraged the temporary seasonal workers to stay in the country year round (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). Because of limited options to gain legal residency and long wait times to attain residency status, ranging from six to twenty-five years depending on the sending country’s immigration levels, low-skill laborers had incentive to avoid formal immigration channels (Ngai, 2010).
Ngai’s work on the history of immigration looks at how the category of “illegal alien” came to exist through this evolution of policy. Her work argues that immigration status and the resulting demarcation of inclusion and exclusion is shifting and variable at different points in history, based on political motivations and nationalistic images of what it means to be an American (Ngai, 2010). The category of an “illegal immigrant” was created through contradictions in immigration policy, and creates an impossible situation, “individuals who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved” (Ngai, 2014, p. 4). These “illegal immigrants” enter the state without formal regulation, and the state offers no opportunity for these individuals to regularize their immigration status. In addition to creating this alternative category outside the dividing lines of the law, the state also shapes society by making this condition ‘normal and natural’ (Ngai, 2014). Social circles may include undocumented individuals as members, but the law’s definition of belonging keeps the same individuals outside of the legal boundaries of the nation. Thinking specifically of the temporary policies contained in the 2012 DACA, the question becomes what implications legal membership in the nation has for undocumented youth.

Since many of these youth arrived at a young age, many of them have strong ties to the U.S. Undocumented immigrants have access to K-12 education and are not asked to verify their immigration status while attending school. Further, many speak English fluently and as a result of their education in the U.S. have been socialized as Americans. Some of these youth even report not knowing that they were undocumented until they attempted to apply for jobs or driver’s licenses. This ability to blend into the mainstream American population is one of the tools that allows undocumented youth to reside in the U.S. undetected and keep their undocumented status hidden. In this regard, undocumented youth’s legal inclusion may change based on these new laws, but society’s perception and acceptance of them may remain stable as long as their status stays hidden.

Related to scholarship on the construction of the national image through immigration policy is a challenge to the model of an ideal citizen with what Rosaldo calls “cultural citizenship”. Cultural citizenship is a membership that may be inhibited by the way in which the majority views a minority group. Rosaldo argues that some groups are granted more power or legitimacy based on specific visible characteristics. As a result, citizenship is
divided into different classes of membership based on the way that groups are observed in public (Rosaldo, 1997).

Another way academics have talked about immigrants’ level of social belonging in a host country is in terms of processes of assimilation. An assimilationist approach measures the extent to which those who arrive to a host country become similar to the majority group in terms of beliefs, behaviors and language. This similarity then grants immigrants access to a higher degree of social inclusion and acceptance. However, the idea of assimilation as a direct pathway has been shown to be interrupted or inhibited by the structural circumstances that surround groups. This is particularly true for the generation of immigrants whose parents received low levels of education and have limited educational opportunities themselves, which lowers the likelihood of upward social and economic mobility for their children (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2005; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Taking this one step further, undocumented immigrants may face structural hurdles that inhibit their life outcomes due to the ways in which policies limit their options for education and exclude them from accessing social services.

For youth, their membership is not questioned because Federal policies have given any child under the age of 18 access to public education, regardless of their immigration status. Their age becomes the visual basis for their claim to inclusion into society and their membership is not questioned by the state in childhood because of their acceptance in the education system and role as students. However, once they reach the age of 18 or graduate from high school, the state now views them as adults, and are they are transformed into outsiders. Their right to belong may now be questioned based on their foreign-ness. The political and social context for undocumented youth shifts as they reach adulthood and collide with these restrictive policies, or through interactions with the state in which they confront their exclusion such as when seeking a driver’s license or through the deportation of family members.

Additional scholarly work has attempted to describe the experiences of undocumented immigrants in the San Diego community as they navigate work and life undetected by the law. Chavez (1998) points to this dilemma of belonging and incorporation in his ethnographic work in the 1980’s:
Undocumented settlers are tied to a society that continually questions their right to remain...these questions are far from settled, undocumented immigrants and their families encounter a barrage of confusing public policies that affect their lives.

(p. 187)

For the undocumented youth population in particular, their initial experience of acceptance as communicated through their incorporation into the educational system is interrupted when, in their adult lives, they receive contradictory messages during their interactions with the state through immigration policies.

This dynamic illustrates Ong et al.’s (1996) argument that policies have an impact on the ways that a particular group’s membership status stems from a process of socialization, based on widely held beliefs about that group. The undocumented are socialized as outsiders that must comply or behave in order to remain invisible, which in turn generates the idea that being hidden is the only way of being permitted to belong. In additional work by Chavez, he continues to question the availability of the process of assimilation to the undocumented population. He argues that in reality the undocumented have separated from their country of origin and have entered a transitional phase. They then remain in this transitional space indefinitely because, despite “obtaining the knowledge, behaviors, and experiences and completing the necessary rituals” (Chavez, 1991, p. 258), as a host society the U.S. offers them no opportunity to become incorporated as members. Fundamentally, as one scholar argues, "Without the ability to express themselves, excluded groups have no ability to ‘belong’ except on someone else's terms, that is, from the perspective of the dominant culture", (Flores, 2003, p. 89). To what degree immigrant youth are able follow a path of incorporation into the American mainstream is a question scholars echo.

Available theories about the identity and citizenship of the 1.5 generation of immigrant youth focus on educational experiences and interactions with institutions. Evidence suggests that most foreign born individuals will not identify one dimensionally as American, but rather with a national origin or pan-ethnic identity (Rumbaut, 1994; Stepick & Stepick, 2002). However, particularly with child migrants, there is evidence that their identity and connection to the U.S. develops differently as result of their young age when they arrive, their strong English language abilities, and their experiences with American education during their adolescence (Zhou, 1997). As a result of this experience of negotiating an identity somewhere between American and immigrant, "What is known about
their actual adaptation patterns is fragmentary. Even less is known about the subjective aspects of the children’s experience,” (Rumbaut, 1994, p. 752).

For the 1.5 generation of undocumented youth, the idea of becoming like the majority group is further complicated and seemingly contradictory due to the fact that much of the influence on their lives has come from the U.S. Many arrived at a young age and may not even know that they are not legal residents until they reach young adulthood. Because many parents do not inform children of their immigration status, it is possible that the individual does not realize that he/she falls outside of the state’s formal boundaries of belonging (Abrego, 2008). This makes undocumented youth socially indistinguishable from a legal citizen unless they come into direct contact with the policies that define their exclusion.

Further, the concept of assimilation is increasingly problematic because of the greater diversity of residents in the U.S. and shifts in the meaning of being American over time. How group membership or ‘being one of us’ is defined is constantly shifting, and conceptions of citizenship based on assimilation do not capture the complexity of the process. In effect, there is no ‘us’ or defined group to assimilate to, and the lines of inclusion and exclusion are constantly in flux (Flanagan, Martínez, & Cumsille, 2011). Talking about inclusion of the undocumented youth population is increasingly problematic and contradictory because both the social and legal markers of membership are changing over time, as well as the notion of the type of America into which they must assimilate.

**Liminal Legality**

Contemporary scholars of citizenship have provided an ongoing critique that one of the weaknesses of the state’s binary conception of citizenship is that it does not take into account multiple allegiances or variations in the way that individuals understand themselves. Stemming from the difficulty of drawing borders around membership, scholars have explored these boundaries by questioning how citizenship has moved away from a binary concept and become a series of flexible and movable dividing lines. Chavez (1991) argues that assimilation is unavailable to the undocumented population because they are held in a state of liminality that prevents formal incorporation, a critique that has been further conceptualized by other scholars.
Anne McNevin explains that because the delineation of inclusion is frequently redrawn, flexible boundaries are a more appropriate description of the processes of citizenship and belonging. She argues that:

Both the legal/formal and the social/informal systems of classification operate on a macro level and tend to be disseminated from the top down. However, the peoples whose social identities are shaped by these categories also have their own ways of classifying immigrants and drawing boundaries around belonging. (McNevin, 2011, p. 541)

The ways in which these boundaries and categories are defined is particularly important for groups that must navigate simultaneous inclusion and exclusion due to the conflict between their social and legal locations within society.

This malleability has led to an arm of scholarship that focuses on what is termed ‘liminal legality’. The liminality references how undocumented migrants can be conceptualized as standing at the threshold of American society because they are not formally part of the polity, but at the same time can be indistinguishable from general society until their legal residency status is revealed. Menjívar’s conceptualization of the liminal space is a permanent state of instability that creates shades of citizenship produced from the lack continuity in the law. Immigration policy creates the possibility for some individuals to live in a space between being a legal resident and being entirely outside of the state’s legal system. The law has the ability to blur boundaries and make the instability that results from a lack of definable migration status into a permanent reality. In her research, Menjívar (2006) explores this status of permanent instability by examining how the experience of the in-between state is expressed through social networks, art and religion.

Similarly, Getrich uses the concept of contours to describe citizenship because contours are frequently redrawn and shifted in response to immigration policy. She points out that children and youth in particular are usually conceptualized as semi-citizens, often in reference to their parents rather than as their own person. The idea of citizenship becomes not just a binary of personal relationships to state structures, but also how people understand their own and other’s location in society (Getrich, 2008). This idea challenges citizenship as a person to state contract as new significance is created, produced and then reproduced through personal and social experiences. These experiences become less straightforward when individuals have no firm connection to a single country, as seen with the 1.5 generation of immigrant youth.
This rejection of citizenship as a binary can also be seen in the research of several scholars through their examinations of the 1.5 generation. Celbuko conducts interviews with Brazilian youth to explore what citizenship means for them and finds that the legal and nonlegal binary is unable to capture their experience in the U.S. In reality, there is a hierarchy of legal membership that is acknowledged amongst these youth within the half-generation through the process of responding to these holes and spaces created by law (Celbuko, 2014).

An additional scholar points how this mixed relationship with the law impacts undocumented families in the U.S. Boehm (2012) argues that in migration studies the focus has often been on the illegal individual, but this ignores that these individuals are connected to families and often does not acknowledge that children are also involved in the process. This relationship that families have with the state is shifting and unstable because of the focus on legal status, which may be different amongst family members and change over time. For this reason public debates often do not look at how immigration policy impacts children, even though children often are cited as one of the major motivations to enter the U.S. without documents. Boehm (2012) uses the term ‘citizen aliens’ for youth who are undocumented but who she considers de facto citizens through the process of their daily lives, which puts them in continual connection and dialogue with society. Scholars of liminal legality aim to put an emphasis on the unstable and dynamic quality that policy creates in the daily lives of unauthorized immigrants.

**Bottom-Up Policy Perspectives**

In policy analysis, there is an overwhelming orientation to discuss processes and outcomes from the perspective of the state. In the debates over immigration, migrants are generally not considered to be active members of society and hold limited rights and political power. The migrant as a target of policy is considered to be a passive actor (Coutin, 1998). Policy development does not generally take into consideration their decision making processes and understanding of their social locations and political activities. In contrast, the role that undocumented migrants play in the everyday life of society contributes to meanings of identity, citizenship and membership because they provide challenges to assumed social structures. Undocumented immigrants are ‘problematic’ to our society’s understanding of
membership due to the intersection of their physical presence with their simultaneous lack of recognition by the law (Knudsen, 2005). DACA exacerbates this duality because it provides a legal identity without creating a true role for undocumented youth in society (Abrego, 2008).

In public policy, some scholars argue that the way society views a particular social group shapes the policies that target them (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Their theory says that groups in society that are powerful and seen as positive and deserving will be targeted by a higher number of beneficial policies than those groups that are powerless and viewed either negatively or as undeserving. The way in which targets are socially constructed influences what problems reach the public policy agenda, legitimate the tools that are used to address that problem and how the policy is rationalized to the public. Since social constructions are based on widely held beliefs about the target population, these assumptions about the group may not match the realities of the problems that a target population faces. This mismatch may occur in over subscribing beneficial policy or not providing enough assistance to groups that are considered to be undeserving or that hold limited political power to influence the policy making process. Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that the result of the social construction of target populations is that the public policy that is created becomes based on what is most politically feasible, and not based on policies or public programs that will effectively address the problem in society.

Further, an additional consequence of policy making based on social constructions is that the creation of policy teaches individuals that are members of a target population about their role in society. Policy has the ability to confirm beliefs about power and lack of power in addition to beliefs about deserving and undeserving targets of policy, informing the target population about how government is likely to treat them, or even how they deserve to be treated. This process bolsters the political access of groups that are powerful and/or “deserving” and discourages full democratic participation from those target populations that are powerless and/or constructed as undeserving. Through this process public policy has the ability to reinforce the advantages and disadvantages that exist throughout society.

Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that the deconstruction of social constructions is particularly important for the policy contexts that frame target populations’ power and the public’s perception of their deservingness because it provides different levels of access to the
democratic process. The inequality that policy produces through the social construction of a target population creates what Schneider and Ingram (1997) characterize as a degenerative system of democracy, or a democracy where some groups have more access to democratic participation than others. Schneider and Ingram (1997) argue that a degenerative system of democracy originates from the social constructions of target populations because individuals interact with the government every day, and the way that they are treated in these interactions has an influence on what they internalize about where they belong in society. For this reason, it becomes necessary to explore the ways that target populations are socially constructed and the types of policy created based on these social constructions.

This concept of socially constructed target populations parallels the argument that Ong et al. (1996) makes that immigrant groups within society are socialized through the policy that structures their immigration to the U.S. Ong’s hypothesis on cultural subject-making implies that the social construction of immigrant groups influences the opportunities available to them once they arrive in the U.S. A way to reveal these social constructions and the lessons that target populations learn is to analyze the impact of policy design itself. This process exposes what assumptions are made about a target population in the policy design process and how the target population reflects these assumptions.

Further, from the perspective of social constructions it is possible to explore what lessons a target population is learning from specific pieces of policy and to evaluate the messages groups absorb about the quality of their membership to the U.S. Because policy is “Always crafted within a context and tailored to fit some conception of the situation” (Schneider & Ingram, 1997, p. 69), analyzing the ways that policy design is driven by assumptions about target population can reveal power structures that are not immediately apparent.

From this perspective, policy has the ability to create and sustain identities. When policy is developed, it is based on assumptions about its target population. Mis-recognition of a group can lead to a misallocation of resources for the target population, which may also inform the way the public thinks about the population. This public perception of the target population then shapes the experiences of that group throughout their interactions with society. These interactions with society and the state then inform the ways that a target population understands themselves and their citizenship. Assumptions about a group can to
lead to reproducing and reinforcing ideologies, which then influence and permit action that does not adequately address the problem (McDonald, 2009). From the premise that “policies are lessons in democracy” (Schneider & Ingram, 1997, p. 79), it is possible to explore the types of lessons about citizenship and belonging undocumented youth learn as targets of policy, and how their identity is shaped through their interactions with the shifting policy landscape that defines their lives.

Newton (2005) examines the language used in policy hearings to look at how immigrants are portrayed during different eras of policy creation, during which they have been granted or denied levels of access to citizenship rights. Over time, as citizenship is defined and redefined and as the view of who is an acceptable citizen changes, an image emerges of who should be excluded and who has the potential to belong to American society. Newton (2005) compares the constructions seen in the passage of Immigration Control and Reform Act of 1986 to those in the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 to show how the relationship between the state and who might be considered eligible for citizenship changes over time. This study describes a parallel image to the ways in which the D.R.E.A.Mer population, those youth that were the target population for the 2010 Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, has come to be is portrayed: as high-achieving, hardworking kids, or as innocent bystanders. As a result, the D.R.E.A.Mers are considered more deserving than other undocumented migrants.

This body of scholarship suggests that the creation or removal of policies that target a specific group can shape the ways in which they understand their own role and location within society. Most policy analysis looks at issues from the point of view of the state and evaluates how well policy is accomplishing its intended goal. As a result, the perspective of the target population itself is often lost and there is limited knowledge about how those that must navigate this space of liminality understand the law and their own social location. There is an absence of research that takes into consideration how temporary immigration policies are understood by undocumented immigrants that are marginalized as a result. While the state holds the power to define membership and inclusion, there are underlying processes within target populations that give a different perspective to the policies that affect them. Examining the perspective of a target population can give clarification to how
definitions of citizenship are being challenged and provide a different view of the effects of policy.

To explore the assumptions about immigrants as a target population, several scholars have conducted ethnographic work that indicates that migrants respond to policy and that their interactions with the state are processed through their own worldviews and understandings. Coutin’s (1998) work looks at how a Salvadoran migrant community during the 1980s sought to gain permanent residency status after the passage of the Immigration Control and Reform Act (ICRA) of 1986. The community actively responded to policy decisions by manipulating the application process and trying to influence outcomes to their favor.

Additionally, Hagan’s (1994) work points to a divergence that arises from political interpretations and the actions of a target population. High application rates were interpreted by government officials as a rush to become citizens and a desire to gain a legal status. However, Hagan’s (1994) research provides insight into individual motivations and indicates that the decision to apply for ICRA was driven by the possibility of greater work opportunities and the desire to seek stability by pursuing as many different opportunities as possible, not by a desire to become American citizens. The constant uncertainty faced by the undocumented population encouraged a decision making process based on constantly changing scenarios. Applicants moved through the legal process towards permanent residency, because submitting the application gave them immediate access to legal work papers and thus a greater opportunity to stabilize their lives.

This finding highlights the discrepancies that may exist between the perception of public officials and recipients’ reaction to policy. It is because Hagan was able to explore this idea from the perspective of the target population that this insight became available. In the studies described above, immigrants are understood as active participants as they interpret immigration policy through their personal needs, such as employment, housing and travel, in order to make decisions about how to respond to the requirements of the state. Again, conducting research which reverses the traditional power structure may challenge assumptions made about populations and their experiences of policy (Soss, 2002).

Finally, Lister (2007) points to the benefits that this perspective may bring in policy study. The traditional top-to-bottom orientation expects a specific relation of power and
participation. Those groups that do not have a voice will be left powerless, and research needs to recognize that responding to policy is not always the same as being a part of its creation and may produce different outcomes. De Genova (2002) argues that there is an over-emphasis on quantitative data to approach the undocumented population, and that there should be a more qualitative emphasis on understanding the perspective of the immigrant. His critique is that much of the literature is trying to provide a solution to a ‘problem’ or assess the success of policies. As a result, the main audience of the research has been decision makers and public officials. He points to a need to do research from the standpoint of its target because without this perspective research is ‘conceptualized in isolation’ and does not give consideration to the way that policy impacts the daily lives of the migrants. As long as immigrant illegality is identified as a problem that is rooted in the state to individual relationship, the orientation of scholarly work on the topic will focus on traditional power structures instead of questioning where the structure is being modified and shaped by individuals.

**Undocumented Youth and Policy**

Using the above literature as a point of departure, it makes sense to examine how laws and processes are shaping the generation of undocumented youth as they move towards becoming adults within a society whose outlook towards them is tenuous and shifting. Scholars of undocumented youth have worked to create a portrait of this population through the lens of their residency status. As a result, much of the existing scholarship looks at the 1.5 generation from the point of view of D.R.E.A.Mers, or undocumented youth migrants that have lived the majority of their lives in the U.S. but do not have a pathway to citizenship. This scholarship focuses on their identity as Americans, based on the fact that the researchers’ goal is to advocate for immigration reforms and access to higher education. However, minimal research has evaluated undocumented youth’s connection to the U.S., which may be nuanced given the oscillating legal context as they reach adulthood.

Abrego (2011) and Gonzales (2008) have provided the foundation for the research that is available on the undocumented youth population. In particular, they have pointed out that the 1.5 undocumented generation has been exercising various forms of political engagement to advocate on behalf of their own interests. Gonzales (2008, 2011) writes
extensively about the specific challenges facing this population, looking at their life outcomes and exploring what roadblocks they face as a result of being undocumented. In looking at the transition after high school into work, he is able to touch on the tension that arises between self-identity and immigrants’ relationship with the state. Having an undocumented status is increasingly contradictory as youth leave the public education system and questions of employment and adulthood become necessary.

In terms of inclusion and exclusion, migration status is a non-issue for youth in public education until they try to access higher education. Undocumented youth interact primarily with school institutions and thus are engaging with the state in a space where they are not viewed as ‘illegal’ or ‘unauthorized’. Research has demonstrated that this is one of the major ways the 1.5 generation differs from their first generation counterparts (Abrego, 2011). The first generation is described as not having a space where they experience inclusion, and as a result, they may not be motivated in the same ways to ask for further rights (Seif, 2004). In contrast, there is a difference in the claims on membership to which the 1.5 undocumented generation believes they are entitled. This influences the types of jobs the 1.5 generation is willing to take, as well as produces higher expectations for income and educational achievement (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012).

Recent academic research has provided limited insight into the implications that the introduction of DACA in 2012 has had on the lives of young adults that have applied for deferred deportation. The research available is primarily quantitative in nature and measures the application rates in comparison to the estimated eligible population. It questions the effect that DACA has had on specific life circumstances such as employment, education, and obtaining a driver’s license. Importantly, one study demonstrates that only an estimated 50% of the eligible population has applied for DACA (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014), indicating that there is a dynamic at work that counters what policy makers anticipated. Another policy analysis comparing the proposed Federal D.R.E.A.M. Act and the DACA executive order suggests policy options for undocumented youth as a population, but relies on secondary sources of data to explore the connections between citizenship, identity and rights for the undocumented youth that are eligible for these programs (Schmid, 2013). Finally, the most recent work questions if DACA applicants’ perception of the program affects their access to higher education and employment (Martinez, 2014). These studies are
limited in their ability to describe the experiences of individuals, and do not provide a clear picture of how the process of applying for the program or the extended relationship with the state impacts undocumented immigrants’ understandings of identity, citizenship and belonging.

CONCLUSION

Using Joe Soss’s work as the foundation for questioning the way that policy construction has a bearing on how a target population views their role in society, the present research will provide insight into how the experience of applying for DACA shapes the undocumented population’s relationship with the U.S. government and their sense of belonging in society. The undocumented population that arrived to the U.S. as children lives within this reality, and can observe the ways in which government attitudes towards them shift in the changing contexts of the policies that shape their lives. At the moment when undocumented migrants reach adulthood and observe these delineations in status, they are capable of developing their own interpretations of the law. This period in time presents a unique opportunity for researchers to examine what undocumented youth observe and learn about government as they straddle these dividing lines. Examining the 1.5 generation’s reflections on the policies that frame their lives provides insight into whether the state’s assumptions about this population in policy making matches closely with migrants’ needs and self-perceptions. The 1.5 undocumented immigrant population occupies a unique location in society, neither fully included nor excluded, due to shifting policy contexts. Examining personal experiences with DACA, information about the messages undocumented youth have received from the government, how they act on this information, and how they interpret their location in American society can provide greater context for how policies impact target populations beyond legal outcomes. Flanagan et al.’s (2011) analysis of this dynamic argues that new generations help to redefine citizenship because they view the world with a new lens and fresh perspective, modifying what citizenship and belonging means for subsequent generations. This process of evolution and challenge to who belongs creates flexibility in the definitions and groups that fall in-between the dividing lines. However, we do not know to what extent the 1.5 generation observes this process of delineating insiders and outsiders as a result of their interactions with the government.
It is the aim of this thesis to explore the ways in which policy directed at the undocumented youth population produces identity, citizenship and a context for their relationship with the American government. This thesis seeks to question the ways that living in this ambiguous state impacts migrant youth as social citizens and undocumented residents in the U.S. Finally, this study will add an additional perspective of how liminal status directly impacts the lives of undocumented youth. The way that this population describes itself in light of their instability and transitory status with the state will provide a depth of understanding about their experiences and the direct impact that public policy has on their lives. Policies such as Deferred Action provide a social location that holds undocumented youth outside of the polity, but institutionalizes their dependence on the state to make decisions about their future.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe understandings of citizenship and identity among undocumented migrants in California through their interactions with the U.S. government and public policy. In order to investigate the perspective of the individuals that are targets of DACA, I utilized a qualitative research method based on grounded theory. This chapter will describe the research sample, the interview process, the data analysis and the limitations that this approaches faces in conducting research through the lens of individual experience.

SAMPLE DESIGN AND RECRUITMENT

My recruitment method was targeted at recruiting participants that were at least 18 years old, undocumented, had gone through the process of learning about DACA and applied for the program. The desired age range was between 18 and 35 years old to focus on a youth and young adult sample. Further, the aim was to recruit participants from a wide range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds to provide the broadest perspective of the population possible. In order to recruit participants, I employed a snowball sampling methodology, asking each participant if they could connect me to additional undocumented youth. This method was necessary due to the fact that undocumented immigrants are a hidden population and cannot be identified unless they choose to disclose their immigration status.

Recruitment of respondents relied on a variety of sources including initial contacts through personal introductions, university student organizations, participant introductions and my attendance at community events designed for the undocumented population. The most effective method of recruitment was through personal introductions; however, an additional listing on a university listserv targeted at undocumented students provided an
additional source of respondents. All of the research participants approached me after becoming aware of the study and its goals.

**PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS**

In total there were 20 study participants that provided interviews. Despite the snowball methodology of participant recruitment, the characteristics of the study population reflected the national estimates available for the undocumented youth population. Of the 20 participants, 18 were eligible for DACA. One additional respondent was in the initial stages of applying, and did not yet have approval of Deferred Action status. The age range of the participants was from 19-32 years old, with an average age of 23.75. The length of the participant’s residence in the U.S. ranged from 10-24 years, with the average length of residence being just over 17 years and an average age of arrival to the U.S. of 6.5 years. The following figure indicates the distribution of the sample’s age of arrival.

**Figure 1: Participant’s Age of Arrival**

![Figure 1: Participant’s Age of Arrival](image)

Figure 2 compares the number of years that participants have lived in the U.S. with their current age. The number of years that each participant has lived in the U.S. varies, though over half of the sample has lived more than half of their lives in the U.S.
The education level of the sample ranged from the completion to a GED to the completion of some postgraduate work, with the majority of participants currently pursuing or holding a bachelor’s degree. Only one participant was not enrolled in or had not completed some form of higher education, but she stated in her interview that this was her primary motivation to apply for DACA. Four participants were enrolled in community college, four had completed bachelor’s degrees, eight were working towards the completion of their bachelors at a 4 year university, and three were enrolled in masters programs.

This sample differs significantly from the population of DACA applicants nationwide after the first year of the program. Only 9% of DACA applicants held a bachelor’s or associates degree and just 1% held an advanced degree (Batalova, Hooker, Capps, Bachmeier, & Cox, 2013). This breakdown of educational attainment is primarily due to the methods of recruitment and my primary network being through a university context.
Finally, the country of origin of participants in the sample mirrored the national rate of DACA applications. The majority of the sample are of Mexican origin (17), and the two other origins were Peru (2) and Korea (1). In comparison, the national estimates 74% of DACA applicants are of Mexican origin, 11% are of South American origin, 9% of Asian origin and the rest of the world comprising 6% of eligible individuals (Batalova et al., 2013).

**Figure 3: Education Level of Participants**

- GED
- Some college
- Bachelors
- Masters

**Figure 4: Participant’s Country of Origin**

- National Estimate
- Study Sample
MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS

Data was collected through individual interviews. The goal of the interview process was to gain a more detailed picture of how the participants learned about DACA, how participants experienced the application and approval process, and what resulting views they hold of the American government and their social location in the U.S. In order to capture this story, the interview protocol was adapted from Joe Soss’s (2002) work with welfare participants. The interview questions developed for his study were adapted to follow a similar sequence but address issues that are directly relevant to the application procedures and program outcomes of DACA.

The questions are intended to follow the trajectory of participant’s experience from their initial learning about DACA, their decision to apply, the application process and their reaction once it was complete. There were 34 questions that created the framework for the interview and addressed the participant’s background, their motivation to apply, their experiences with the application process their reflections on the American government, conceptions about policy development, and their relationship with the U.S. vs. their relationship with their country of birth. The interviews were semi-structured in order to provide enough flexibility for the participants to address the issues that they felt most pressing or important in regards to their personal experiences. Relying on open-ended questioning improved the validity of themes that were consistently generated by participants because they were not prompted by the interviewer.

Additionally, midway through the data collection process, President Obama made an announcement to expand the original 2012 Deferred Action program. As a result, additional questions were added to the protocol to address this change and the participants’ reflections on the new program. A total of 6 interviews as well as one follow-up interview were able to capture this additional perspective.

PROCEDURES

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. As a result, the meeting times and conversations varied in length, with the interviews lasting from 60 to 90 minutes. The longer interviews were mainly due to the fact that the participant encouraged the continuation of the conversation, and often the extra time was spent on whatever they wanted
to discuss. It is my impression that this was due to their desire to share their stories and experiences. In addition, most participants’ level of comfort was high by the end of the interview, which became evident as respondents provided more detailed stories to illustrate their experiences and revisited earlier topics with greater depth and emotion. I tried to build rapport with the participant before the interview by creating an informal atmosphere, answering questions about the research process and clarifying how the data would be used.

The open-ended format of the questions allowed the interviewee to generate responses based on their own interpretation of the question asked. I provided clarification when requested, but tried to refrain from providing elaboration to minimize leading participants to any type of answer and allow for their own interpretations. All interviews were recorded to provide the researcher an accurate record of the information provided during the interview and for later use in transcribing, coding and analyzing the data.

The level of comfort of the participants affected the type of data that they provided. Those interviewees that were more comfortable and perceived less risk talked freely about a wider range of topics, while others who were more fearful stuck to the interview questions and provided very little detail, examples, elaborations or narrative from their personal lives, though many became more comfortable and expressive after the interview. Presumably, this was because the participants had reached a level of comfort with the goal of the research and were given the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher. Many of them re-visited themes in more detail after the formal interview had concluded.

**ROLE OF RESEARCHER**

The role of the researcher must also be taken under consideration. As a white female, American born, and without firsthand experience of applying for immigration programs in the U.S., my perspective proved to be both an asset and a liability because it provided a distinct viewpoint of the process as an outsider and observer. This lens created an avenue to probe into issues that may have seemed characteristic of daily life or that the participants were accustomed to as normal occurrences. Additionally, it provided a separation from the issues and risks that exist for members of this marginalized population and allowed me as the researcher to voice my perspective in the results of the research without fear of consequence. During several interviews this relationship was addressed by the participants themselves,
through their commentary that as undocumented immigrants they did not feel they had the ability or desire to speak out about their immigration status due to stigmas and their own desire for protection from revealing their immigration status. I not only have a different lens and context, but also the ability to address unauthorized immigration because I would not be compromised by speaking publicly.

However, at the same time, in this role as an outsider, I sensed a reluctance on behalf of many participants that took the form of filtering of thoughts, carefully worded responses, and limited elaboration from those participants that had higher levels of concern about discussing their lives with a stranger. While every effort was taken to put participants at ease and develop rapport, my outsider role no doubt contributed to the nature of the data that participants were willing to share.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, with the exception of sections that were digressions from the topic or repetitive in nature. Only minor modifications were made to the grammar of the participants in order for the meaning of their statements to be more easily understood upon later review. After the interviews were transcribed they were reviewed and coded by the researcher to detect the broader themes that emerged among the respondents.

**LIMITATIONS**

Because this research is not a longitudinal study, it was not possible to interview every individual at different points of the application process. The primary goal of this research is to evaluate what impressions interacting with the state has had on undocumented youths’ sense of belonging and understanding of U.S. policy making and to provide an opportunity for them to offer their own analysis of how their opinions have been shaped or changed over that experience. It is important to note that a major limitation of this method is that it does not capture outcomes that may occur as a result of the long term opportunities or consequences provided to DACA applicants. In addition, the participants in this study were all residents of California, and there would likely be variation in the findings if the study sample had included undocumented youth nationwide. However, it is important to note that because California is home to a large percentage of the undocumented population
nationwide, the experiences of the youth that reside in the state provide an important contribution to the literature. Further, the sample population of this study held a high level of education, and respondents with lower levels of education would likely provide additional depth to the experiences that are presented in this research. Finally, although the sample size is acceptable when compared to other qualitative research studies, it is too small to make generalizations about the wider undocumented population and their experiences.

**Validity**

The researcher used the first several interviews to test the interview protocol and found it necessary to rearrange several questions in order to maintain the coherence of the interview and limit personal questions about immigration status at the outset. After the initial interviews, the researcher compared responses to see if there were questions that were not producing data. As a result of this process, there was follow-up questioning that varied based on the information that participants discussed; however, the same structure was utilized as a departure point for the interviews. Overall the questioning alongside additional probing and follow up questions was adequate to steer the participants to topics they may have skipped or to provide further clarification. All interviews were conducted by the same person to minimize the variance in how the interview was conducted.

**Reliability**

The same interviewer did the coding and analysis of data for consistency of interpretation, which also ensured that the researcher was aware of the context of the comments. Focusing on recurring themes that appeared helps to gain a macro level understanding of common experiences rather than over-emphasizing individual experiences that are exceptional but may not be representative of the wider population. Additionally, analyzing the interviews for broad themes as opposed to specific answers allowed a broader interpretation of the data that may have been expressed differently due to individual circumstances.
CHAPTER 4

ON THE THRESHOLD OF CITIZENSHIP

DACA creates an ambiguous state of membership for undocumented youth as they hold a membership that oscillates between spaces of inclusion and exclusion. Through the creation of DACA, an additional category of membership was added to the U.S. immigration system that offers a conditional stability to undocumented youth. The result is the solidification of a partial and unstable space of liminal membership. The instability of this transitional space reinforces the constant risk of unknown consequences for being undocumented immigrants, despite holding DACA status. The result is that undocumented youth who hold DACA continue to be marginalized because it makes these youth more directly dependent on state discretion. This condition of dependence reinforces the lack of autonomy in the lives of undocumented youth, creating a state of perpetual instability that cannot be resolved unless there is a change in the law. DACA recipients receive a constant message from the state to expect inconsistent and unpredictable treatment. The result is a structuring of undocumented youth’s membership that creates a permanent state of vulnerability and leaves them with few opportunities to become full members of the U.S.

THE EXPECTATION OF UNCERTAINTY

DACA does not resolve the issue of undocumented youth’s lack of legal immigration status, but rather transforms it into a different context where they continue to face new uncertainties and marginalization. Overall, undocumented youth represented in this study described DACA as a positive step towards a greater sense of purpose in their lives. This is largely due to the recognition that it provides and the greater options for education, financial security, the opportunity to apply for a driver’s license and protection from deportation. However, these opportunities are consistently undermined by the temporary nature of the executive action. Since DACA is not a law or a permanent change to the immigration system, it can be overturned when a new president is elected or by the passage
of a law in Congress. Respondents measured the benefits against the continued instability of their liminal status. Liminal status is defined as, “Spaces between conventional legal categories that affect the immigrants’ immediate lives as well as long-term membership” (Menjívar, 2006, p. 1003). The idea of a liminal space is a position that is continually in process or sitting at the threshold of membership, but remaining limited and outside the boundaries of inclusion.

Menjívar argues that immigration policy has the ability to define who may participate in society through access to resources and what type of participation an immigrant can access in society. Liminal status produces a reality where “Law ensures that legal status is temporary and subject to continuous disruptions” (Menjívar, 2006, p. 1002), teaching DACA recipients that their role as citizens is both conditional and temporary. DACA creates limitations for undocumented youth because it formalizes a liminal space, which inhibits their full entry into society. For instance, Eve expressed the frustration that this produced for her, “I think ideally with anyone in my situation, our hopes and dreams are to be a complete part of this nation and not just have a work permit or just the ability to work.”

This reflection illustrates the recognition that membership and civic participation is more than having a social security number, a chance for work, and protection from deportation. While DACA provides a shift in their membership away from the association with the idea of an illegal immigrant, the partial nature of the belonging it offers creates a new conflict. DACA recipients are able to ease some of the stresses on their lives with work permits and driver's licenses, but at the same time are constrained by the temporal nature of the law and the need to renew their status every 2 years.

As a result of the uncertainty of their liminal status, the benefit of stability, even for a limited period of time, was considered to be valuable to the undocumented youth in this sample. As Margarita described:

The way I rationalize it is, this is two years that I’m paying $400 for. I don’t care if I have to pay more, that’s two years of not having worry, not having to struggle, not having to be scared driving around, am I going to get pulled over? Am I going to get to work? This is 2 years of stress free relief for me. That’s a price I am willing to pay every two years if I have to.

Through DACA, undocumented youth are given the ability to claim a space of belonging in the U.S.; however, because they are not given a secure place in the country, they must
occupy an ambiguous space at the threshold of that membership. When discussing the changes before and after applying for DACA, a respondent observed that the program’s temporality can also be confining. As Eve discussed, she faced a constant conflict with her partial status:

Now I feel like I can be self-sufficient. I am able to work, I am capable, there are still going to be barriers and things that will limit me. But there are times that there are still things that I am not at the same level as everyone else that has their residency or is a citizen of this country. Because even my work permit is considered a temporary work permit.

When this perspective of liminally legal status is overlaid with scholarship that addresses how interactions with the state inform individuals about their citizenship, this liminal space can be understood as teaching undocumented youth that they can expect the state to be inconsistent and unpredictable because partial membership requires that DACA recipients remain dependent and subordinate to the state. Holding a temporary status structures the options for membership that are available to undocumented youth by placing limits around their opportunities.

As a result, DACA recipients continue to live with a high degree of uncertainty in their lives. When reflecting on this temporary nature of the program, Rosalyn explained how she felt limited by the temporary quality of her DACA status:

I think it’s having to live, I don’t want to say in the shadows, but you can’t live like, you can’t thrive. You have constraints. Right now I can work and drive, but even the work permit I have to be careful and renew every two years. Maybe it will happen and maybe it won’t.

Since undocumented youth must continually present themselves to the government for approval through application process that is required every two years, they must comply with the state in order to have their DACA status re-verified. This process puts their DACA status into question at regular intervals.

Undocumented youth’s liminal status becomes ritualized through their contact with the bureaucracy through the DACA renewal process, which continues to send messages about who they are and where they belong. Every two years, DACA recipients must present themselves to the state for evaluation without assurance that they will be granted an additional work permit or protection from deportation. The DACA renewal process also renews the uncertainty that emerges as to whether they will receive the documentation they
need to continue their membership or if they will be deported by the state. This process ensures that they remain in constant dialogue with the state over their immigration status.

Further, undocumented youth do not know what happens if DACA is not renewed and have no information about what the consequences may be, leaving them constantly fearful of the outcome. This challenge is illustrated in the fear that Selena felt when she found out that her DACA status was not initially renewed:

I couldn’t believe it. It is some obscure reason. I cried, feeling like what does this mean? Do you come pick me up now? When the one I have expires? Why do I not get to know anything? You don’t know what happens, you just know that you have been rejected. But you can re-submit; they said that there was a problem with the form of payment. I am really freaking out right now.

Four months after our initial interview, Thomas also described the frustration and fear he was facing because he had recently applied to renew his work permit through DACA. Though his expiration date was two days away, he had not received any information about his DACA renewal application. Thomas explained that he had taken extra effort to comply with the guidelines, but was frustrated because despite following the process as requested he feared that his renewal may not be approved. The expiration of a DACA status places undocumented youth outside the limited membership that it grants them, putting them at risk for deportation. As undocumented youth face the uncertainty of their renewed DACA status, it creates a cycle of uncertainty and fear about their continued access to liminal membership in the U.S.

Undocumented youth that participated in this study recognized that there is a level of acceptance for them to live in the U.S.; however, DACA recipients’ membership remains contingent on the decisions of the state. This dynamic confirms the argument that Joe Soss (2002) presents that a dependent relationship with the state strips individuals of their independence and autonomy because they do not hold enough political power to participate in the policy making process. In order for undocumented youth to access the benefits that DACA brings, they must comply with the requirements that the state determines.

This liminality produces a boundary to their membership because the youth cannot plan beyond two-year increments or invest in their lives. Catalina described this feeling of restriction:
I just feel like I have so much potential to give to the world, but I am very limited to that. I know for instance my permit is going to expire in 2 years so I feel like my happiness or being here is not guaranteed. Undocumented youth are confined by the rules of compliance. They cannot be full members because they continue to straddle a line that is constantly shifting and out of their control. With few other options to regularize their status, undocumented youth are forced to follow the rules of the state. The requirement to be in dialogue with the state about their legal status takes the power and control out of their hands and leaves them with limited ability to plan for the future.

This instability that undocumented youth face also captures how the unreliable nature of the state inspires fear or the chance of missed opportunities. In order to take advantage of DACA, undocumented youth in this study suggested that they must apply for DACA because it is a program that they expect will not be available in the future due to their perspective that the state is unbelievable and untrustworthy. In discussing the process after her DACA paperwork was approved, Anna felt that she needed to take advantage of applying for a social security number immediately because the opportunity might end without warning. She believed that it could be removed at a moment’s notice:

I was scared that it was going to stop, they were just going to stop giving the numbers out (laughs). I just feel like sometimes there is like an open window, and it might close, and I don’t know when it’s going to close, so you have to move.

Selena also discussed this lack of confidence that she would be treated fairly if she is ever given the opportunity to gain full citizenship:

It depends on the terms and conditions, what the fine print was. There is always something. So, if they said that I can stay, but if I have to pay a fine I would do it. I feel like, it’s a little bit like a snobby kids club, you can’t get in.

Since she believes that the state does not treat her fairly, Selena indicated that she expects that there will be conditions and caveats that come along with the immigration policies that impact her life.

The liminal status that DACA produces creates a conflict in membership because it provides recognition to undocumented youth, but it does not grant a way for these youth to access citizenship. The undocumented youth in this sample understood this in-between status as contradictory. Celeste described how the contradictions in the ways in which undocumented youth are treated works to define the boundaries of their liminal status:
Some of these things are just ridiculous. You have to pay all this stuff and you can travel all over the U.S., but why can’t you just go out? I mean it’s pretty much everything like a regular visa, it’s just that two year period and not being able to leave the country unless you have parole.

The contradiction that undocumented youth face between belonging and limited access to opportunities frames their temporary status as members, as they remain at the threshold of membership.

**CONFLICTS IN BELONGING**

The respondents illustrated a further conflict for undocumented youth between feeling like a member of the country and not being recognized as one. The lack of formal recognition of membership by the state impacts their personal sense of belonging. The legal boundaries of membership for DACA recipients do not reflect the social realities of their lives. This contradiction in immigration and social status influenced the way undocumented youth interviewed in this study understood their own identities, because the liminal space they lived within only offered membership when their immigration status is hidden. There was a confusion that arose when the ways respondents categorized their own membership and the way the state defined their membership did not match:

You are in a pocket where you don't belong in the country you were raised/born in, but you don't really belong here either because you weren't born here. So it puts you in a gray area you are really from nowhere. One of my cousins calls me a Yankee. People are shocked I am an immigrant, but when I am sitting around with my friends I don't think of myself as an immigrant.

Half of the respondents in the sample (10) indicated that the ways they conceived of their personal identities did not reflect their lack of formal immigration status. This clash heightens the liminal status that undocumented youth hold as a result of DACA. How the respondents understand where they hold membership remains unresolved and dependent on context that is provided by the state. Undocumented youth must rely on the government for both a definition of their identity and the boundaries of their membership. This dynamic of reliance supports Ong et al.’s (1996) argument that immigrants are socialized into particular roles in society by way of immigration laws and the state’s treatment of particular groups impacts their role in society. Undocumented youth have been socialized into an unstable duality in their immigration status, which frames their membership as simultaneously socially included and legally excluded. Anna addressed these oscillating lines between
permission and restriction that frame the restriction in the membership that is offered to undocumented youth:

So at first I was like, at least they are letting us work. But as I think about it more, it’s just- I got a little bit frustrated because- I am a product of the U.S.! They taught me freedom and this ability to change your life if you work at it. That is being an American. I went through their educational system, I did well...and I am doing well and all I want to do, I say this to my friends all the time, I just want to pay taxes! They won’t let me! That’s how I feel sometimes. I just want to do what’s right, but the system doesn’t really allow me to sometimes.

The restrictions that undocumented youth face from the state reinforces the idea that they are liminal members of the nation. They are granted permission to live in the U.S. and to work, but at the same time are not given the full rights of citizenship. Undocumented youth can only act on limited aspects of membership that the government defines.

Since permission to stay in the U.S. is dependent on DACA renewal, they have a constant reminder that their membership is conditional and can be taken away. Betty explained the conflict that she faced about her identity, “We are stuck in the middle, like a divorce you don't really know where to go. They don't want to accept me and I am from this other place that I am foreign to.” Undocumented youth live between these identities as immigrant and American because they have been raised in two cultures, but cannot visit their country of birth and are not fully accepted in the U.S. Further, in this sample population of undocumented youth observed and were constrained by these boundaries, evidence of the perspective that the state plays in defining the contours of social and legal membership. Anna indicated the impact of the boundaries that immigration policy places on her life:

What frustrates me, is...for a while I felt like a prisoner of this country. Because I couldn’t leave it. And like growing up, you are taught Freedom. What does this term mean? It’s like the ability to say what you are thinking, express yourself. But how can I truly be myself if the society isn’t letting me? They are not accepting of who I am and they are not accepting because of the way I ended up here. I couldn’t really help that.

Undocumented youth are left in a liminal space without full membership to either their country of birth or the U.S. as they continue to wait for a permanent immigration policy that will alleviate this uncertainty. Living in the U.S., undocumented immigrants have deep ties to the community around them while also holding ties to their country of birth.
However, in their current state of membership, undocumented youth cannot belong to either. Oscar illustrated this conflict:

I never really thought of myself as Mexican or American, I'm stuck in between. I feel that I will never be fully accepted into either society. I don't quite fit, you are not from here, but you are not from there.

Undocumented youth that were represented here were caught between their personal identities and their legal membership in the U.S. because their status is contingent. The limitations that prevent full membership are always present for undocumented youth, sending the message that their belonging is conditional and temporary.

Undocumented youth are educated in American schools and live in American communities, but they do not hold the same rights. Even when the state provides an extension of rights to undocumented youth, they continue to be limited in the ways they may participate.

The undocumented youth in this study were trying to live within the expectations of U.S. society, but that became impossible because of the constraints that were placed on them through immigration policies. These constraints perpetuated their liminal status because they could not always live and participate in a way that was approved of by American society. The result was that their membership was a tangle of shifting and changing boundaries, where they must constantly negotiate the differences in how they could participate in each circumstance. Again, DACA leaves undocumented youth dependent on the state to resolve this conflict.

**FORMALIZED DEPENDENCE**

Undocumented youth do not have the ability to change the law or adjust their immigration status. Because of their dependent and liminal immigration status undocumented youth must wait until the government provides them with a policy that addresses their immigration status. Eligibility for DACA or permanent legal status forces them rely on government to make these decisions about their lives, which emphasizes a loss of control over their own lives. This circumstance is illustrated by one of the respondents that did not qualify for DACA. Reflecting on the extension of DACA, the respondent explained that she was currently in a limbo in regards to her immigration status. The state had created a situation where she was completely dependent on the government’s decisions as she was held
in a permanent liminal state. Elizabeth described her current options with her immigration status:

> Just wait, and keep my hope in there and wish the best, but not be so excited about it. Just keep waiting...just keep waiting. I need to depend on what their decision will be. So it’s just like, in the end it doesn't matter all the work I am doing, if at the end they say ‘oh no, we are not going to give you the residency’.

The effects of waiting for the government to make a definitive decision about the status of undocumented youth and the temporary nature of DACA, appears to have a direct impact on the way that undocumented youth understand their membership in the U.S. One participant explained that the announcement of the extension of DACA in November in 2014 forced her to confront her dependence on the government and the lack of control that DACA youth face in their immigration status. Anna explained:

> A few weeks ago when the executive action came out, I don’t usually get my hopes up. I am usually very skeptical about what’s going to happen, but I guess because I have been interviewing for full time jobs and looking at life after graduation, I just thought it would be so great if something magical happened. My problem would be solved. So I really got my hopes up. And I don’t think it’s just that day, it was an accumulation. After that I had such a big break down for two, three days. I just kept crying. I just felt so fatigued. Like tired. Nothing...things are changing, obviously, but it just feels so slow. I felt like there was this huge weight and I couldn’t take it off. I felt like, this was my situation and I had no control over it. I think that was the biggest part, I had no control.

This perspective highlights the constant ambiguity and liminal space that the population of undocumented youth described in this study live within, even with their DACA status. They are left waiting, without a way to influence the decisions of the state which structures the quality of their membership in the U.S. DACA formalized the boundaries of their liminal status by solidifying it into a law. Undocumented youth represented in this sample occupy a social space within American society, yet they continue to remain legally outside of it. The state has created a status of dependence, where there are no options for undocumented youth other than to wait on the decisions that it makes about their fate.

The actions of the government are both unpredictable and inflexible, leaving undocumented immigrants unable to make long-term decisions about their futures. The undocumented youth understand receiving DACA as a result of chance. This situation can produce a high level of fear because when they must make decisions about their future they recognize their lack of power over their own lives. Because it is often impossible to know
what consequences of future government actions may hold for a life decision, it becomes
difficult to plan for the future and they remain in a state of transition. Margarita explained
this conflict that she faced as she reached the end of her masters program:

There is a lot of uncertainty still and there is a lot of uncertainty and I am sick, I
don’t want to worry about it right now. I heard they might cut DACA. I just want
to finish the program at least. I’m done next semester. If anything that’s what it
got me a masters. I’m not thinking after that right now because I don’t want to
make plans again.

This sense of uncertainty and limited power to influence the state is also evident in
respondents’ view of U.S. politics. The majority of the respondents (17) mentioned at least
one political motivation for the creation of DACA. These respondents held a high level of
distrust of the state and frustration that they did not have the ability to effectively interact in a
person-to-state relationship. Soss (1999) argues that individuals learn about their membership
through direct interactions with institutions:

Views on political action flow partly from one’s perception of government.
Political participation seems less worthwhile if policymaking appears to be a
directive rather than a responsive activity. (p. 369)

Lydia reflected this idea that the undocumented population must be cautious about the state
because the creation of policy is understood to be politically motivated, which increases the
undocumented community’s distrust of the government:

Even though the opportunities are there, we have to be careful because we don’t
know why they are there. And we have to be careful because even the new one
that he just put out [Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful
Permanent Residents], it is going to help out many people, but I feel that he did it
so that the Democrats can stay in power for the upcoming election, but I also feel
that the Republicans can do something to go against it and push something else
out. So they have to be careful, the people who are going to apply for it because
you never know what can happen.

Lack of power was also expressed in that the respondents felt as though they were at the
whim of the state. According to Elizabeth, while DACA is beneficial, their lives were being
affected by what is essentially a game:

At a certain point, it’s not fair. They also have their goals, they have their dreams,
you know? I think that
unfortunately, it’s good that they are doing DACA, but I think it’s more of a
political thing. I don’t think that it’s fair, for the people. Sometimes it seems like
they are just playing, like we are their puppets.
Since the policies that help undocumented youth are understood to be developed out of political motivation, these undocumented youth believed that their problems would only be addressed when politicians can use the policy to their favor, creating a cycle of dependence on the government. Since DACA only alleviated the constraints on their lives, my respondents interpreted the lack of a permanent solution as government ignoring their need for relief and their identity as members.

Oscar illustrated the skepticism and distrust that was produced as a result of his perspective that policy is produced for political gain:

More than anything, I think it’s political motives. It’s just um, there is this Mexican phrase, la de ni catolico, ni dedo or something, just like give them a little bit, but not too much. Keeping them on your side kind of thing. I think that’s the democratic strategy at a national level, keeping the Latino community for now on their side to be able to have a bit of an advantage. I think that’s how they base off everything.

**Political Participation**

This recognition of the duality of the relief that DACA brings through the creation of a liminal membership is instructive of the ways that policy informs how undocumented youth act and participate in politics. As illustrated above, respondents’ distrust of the state created the expectation that politics and policy creation was a game that they could not control. As Schneider and Ingram (1993) predict in their social construction model, dependent populations such as these undocumented youth “Do not see themselves as legitimate or effective in the public arena” (p. 344), and display a passive participation in politics. Less than half of the sample (9) indicated that they participated in any type of political activism. Rosalyn explained why she has not been politically active, “Part of it is the fear, what if they arrest me and that’s it? I’m thrown out? But volunteering is something that I would consider.” Membership and participation in this perspective becomes framed by the rules that that state creates for undocumented youth.

The belief that DACA recipients hold little power or influence over the actions of the state discouraged respondents from engaging in political participation. Margarita believed that the only way that there will be change, is if there is a large, wide-scale effort:

I’m not too aware about politics. I try to not get too involved, because I always think, well what can I do? And it’s like that mentality that I am just one person and other people are so ambivalent too. And I realized that it’s all in the
politicians’ hands at the end of the day, so I need to start a giant revolution if I really want some change.

In this view, the government is too big for undocumented youth to change or impact significantly on their own. It is also risky to speak out because disclosing their status makes them vulnerable and undocumented youth are dependent on the renewal of their DACA status. As a result, undocumented youth hold limited options for challenging the decisions of the state.

Margarita went on to illustrate how she believed that undocumented youth had been discouraged from voicing their opinions because it puts them at risk when they apply for DACA to be vocal about their struggles:

It’s generic, but my story is very similar to many other people’s stories, but then I think about no matter how many times they see those stories they just still come back to the same conclusion, ‘you and your people’ kind of mentality...A lot of people don’t want to be in the spotlight. So even if I did, even if I wanted to create a lot of ripples, a lot of people don’t want to because we don’t have control or certainty about what’s going to happen to us. What are the consequences of us voicing our opinions? But we don’t know...I see it as a risk that is unnecessary for me right now...So I just try to stay out of it and I have a feeling that a lot of other people do have the same mentality. Someone else will hopefully take care of it, if they don’t then I’m in the same position that I was when no one was saying anything.

As a result, Margarita preferred to keep her immigration status hidden. Additional respondents (4) stated directly that they were not more involved in politics or activism out of fear that activism may inhibit future access to a permanent immigration status. This perspective differs significantly from the recent scholarship that addresses political activism of undocumented youth when the Federal D.R.E.A.M Act was proposed in 2010. The defeat of this law was pointed to as having an impact on the respondents that had high hopes for the passage of the law in 2010:

I burnt out of anything politicians said, I burnt out of having political talks with people, because I just kind of figured that the world keeps spinning and people do other things, like laugh and enjoy life rather than fight about things that politicians fight about. So it’s a very cynical point of view on politics, I lobbied twice in DC and twice in Sacramento. I lobbied for the D.R.E.A.M. Act, I lobbied for a new replica of AB 540. It became very apparent to me that there was a party, ‘if you are not related to my party, I don’t want to listen if you aren’t related to my party’ kind of environment in Washington.
A major difference between this scholarship and the current research is that it does not account for the long-term outcomes of the defeat of a permanent pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth. Additionally, while DACA offers greater opportunities to undocumented youth, ultimately the protection that it provides is temporary. As will be discussed in later chapters, the impact that temporary status had on these DACA recipients was that they feared problems with the state because they had to continually submit for the renewal of DACA. This dependence on the state sent the message to undocumented youth that they could not be active or vocal in situations that might be misinterpreted by the state as defiant or against the nation.

Soss (1999) describes how the perspective of a government agency informs a target population’s behavior, “Because clients associate the agency with government as a whole, these program specific beliefs, in turn, become the basis for broader orientations toward government and political action” (p. 364). From the perspective that immigration as an institution is unreliable and unpredictable, there is not a reason for undocumented youth to put themselves at risk by being politically active. They have a need to protect themselves from the state because of the power it holds in their lives. Anna described this need to protect themselves when discussing her fear to attend a meeting with the undocumented student organization on campus:

I don’t know, I don’t know. I think about it and I feel like that is so brave, I would want to, but I don’t know how that would be for me. I don’t know if that would change things for me, if becoming a citizen later on would become impossible because I am publically telling my story. I don’t know all the laws...it’s a bit selfish I feel, but that’s the real situation. I do want a certain life and by being a public speaker about the situation, I could jeopardize that, and I am scared to. I feel very conflicted, like I should be telling my story, but I am scared to and I feel selfish for feeling scared to.

Given that undocumented youth have limited options to express their opinion to the government, it is problematic that the few methods that are available to them invoke fear and hesitation. DACA’s intention as a policy is to provide freedom from fear and produce a greater degree autonomy for its recipients; however, through its temporary nature it confirms a necessity for the undocumented population to stay hidden. By staying out of contact with the government it protects future opportunities for obtaining permanent status. Undocumented youth learn through this process that they cannot easily influence politics because of their dependence on the state’s decisions and their liminal status as
members. This relationship with the state encourages the undocumented population to be passive, because of the fear that speaking out puts them at risk of losing opportunities for permanent status. Further, DACA is sending the message that it is unlikely that government will be responsive to DACA recipients because the state's motivations lie in serving their own political needs.

As a result, gaining access to citizenship held a special significance for respondents. They hoped to gain a permanent legal status to confirm their personal identities as members. Rafael expressed the hope that the state would provide an opportunity for him to prove himself, “I think that I just want a shot at being a citizen on paper. That’s all I’m asking, just one shot. That’s it. That’s the only thing I would say.” There is a value to the way that citizenship will grant additional freedom as a member and shed the label as a member of a marginalized group. The state holds the power to shape membership and in the process inform how the individuals view their membership in the country.
CHAPTER 5

SHIFTING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

The undocumented youth that participated in this study learned about the quality of their membership in the U.S. through their interactions with the state. This process is evident among the youth interviewed for this study as a shift in their narratives began to take place as the eighteen participants that had applied to DACA described the stages of the application process. Respondents who applied to DACA have faced different levels of inclusion and exclusion throughout their lives. Throughout their youth my respondents fit characterizations of a deviant population, but the introduction of DACA initiated a shift in which the lessons they learned as deviants began to evolve into beliefs about membership that reflected the characteristics of a dependent population. As the undocumented youth in this study transitioned into adulthood, the limitations that their undocumented status presented were inescapable. However, once they changed their status from undocumented and became DACA recipients there was further a shift that took place in their social construction and by extension the way they reacted to their new social position. This initial shift among respondents from a child, who was unaware of the implications of their undocumented status, to an understanding about the way that they are regarded by the state as adults helps to provide insight into their reactions to the announcement of DACA and their subsequent strategies during the application process. The observation of this shift suggests that as respondents’ social construction shifted through policy changes the expectation of how they would be treated by the state began to change as well. Undocumented youth in this sample population began to learn new lessons about membership through their interactions with the state during the DACA application process.
LEARNING DEVIANCE

Immigration policies regulated belonging and inclusion by defining the ways that respondents interacted with the state. Before DACA was created, legal and social boundaries that defined the relationship of undocumented youth relationship to the government was rooted in a social construction of them and their families as deviants. The social construction of a deviant is someone who holds a low level of power and who can expect to be punished if they come into contact with the state. Reflections by my respondents about their immigration status confirm what is predicted by the social construction model for the treatment of deviant populations, “That they are bad people whose behavior constitutes a problem for others. They can expect to be punished unless they change their behavior or avoid contact with the government” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 342). Their social construction as a deviant member of the population becomes the primary lens with which undocumented youth navigate the spaces inside and outside the lines of belonging.

While in school undocumented youth can excel alongside their peers with little differentiation. However, my interviews suggest that once the boundary of their immigration status becomes visible, it causes a shift in the way that undocumented youth understand their membership. As these youth learn that they are undocumented, their membership takes on a new meaning and becomes understood as causing damage to those members that have legal status with the state. Though schools do not differentiate between students based on immigration status, the knowledge of an undocumented status can alter identities and cause a reassignment of the significance of membership. As Anna illustrated, the transition from being like everyone else to realizing that she was a member of the undocumented population affected the way that she understood her role in society. She explained:

When I found out in middle school, I felt that I was in the wrong. That I had done something wrong. Because I was undocumented, I felt guilty like I was taking someone else’s spot. I did pretty well in school, I got really good grades, I was in the orchestra, I was always first chair, I had leadership positions in clubs, so I felt like by being here- when I am not supposed to be- I felt that I was taking someone else’s spot. Someone else could be that leader.

The legal definitions provide a cue to target populations as to where and in what contexts they are permitted to belong. Respondents discussed how, as the new restriction on membership became apparent, there was a change in the way that they understood their place in society. Because of the negative and deviant social construction of undocumented
immigrants, the undocumented youth in this sample questioned their right to belong. Since the undocumented population is considered to be a legally excluded population, the situation demands that they stay hidden and undetected by the state in order to remain in the U.S. and avoid punishment.

Confronting these categories of inclusion and exclusion produced a sense of confinement for my respondents. One respondent became undocumented due to the expiration of her visa. The shift that Rosalyn felt as a result of the change in her immigration status was immediate when she realized that she no longer had a legal avenue to remain in the U.S. She found it necessary to apply for California Assembly Bill 540, which gives long term resident immigrants the ability to pay in-state college tuition in order to continue her education. Rosalyn explained:

It was very clear to me. The first couple of years that I lived here, I was with a visa, everything was fine, I was in school. But then my parents had to close the business and then the idea of like oh my god I might not be able to renew the visa and then what happens next? So, that was it. There was no other option for me, so I had to let the visa expire and declare myself AB 540, and it was like day and night for me.

Rosalyn’s story suggests that there is a hard and tangible line of inclusion and exclusion that works to reshape the way that undocumented youth understand their relationship to the state as a result of their deviant social construction. In this example, there is an awareness that higher education is a sphere of exclusion once an immigrant becomes undocumented, despite demonstrating the characteristics needed to succeed socially and academically. Messages of exclusion set out by the legal requirements of the state are reinforced by the public as a boundary of membership. The message that the state sends is internalized due to the rules that undocumented immigrants must follow to avoid detection and continue to remain within the boundaries of the nation. Exclusion and the need to avoid contact with authorities are further reinforced by society. As one respondent explained, she began to believe the public discourse surrounding undocumented immigrants as true:

A lot of the negative feedback I get are online, reading through articles. I look at the comments, just to see what people think. A lot of the time it’s negative. I remember when DACA first came out I was doing the same thing, reading through articles. Some of it was so harsh. Like it just hurt. I think part of it was because I agreed with them. Because I was feeling very guilty, I am taking someone else’s spot, I shouldn’t be here, I’m not deserving of this. Because I
secretly thought those things in my head, someone else saying them made it feel more real and made me feel like, oh I am in the wrong.

Once undocumented youth leave the safety of childhood they are confronted with a society that views them as outsiders and a state that requires that they stay hidden in order to remain in the country. Respondents indicated that they felt need to stay hidden from the state, and that these messages taught them how they must act. Betty understood that she needed to behave in ways that did not reflect her true personality:

It comes down to being raised being told not to tell anyone you are an immigrant, so I felt like I had to be submissive. I couldn’t really you do the things I wanted, showing who I am, stepping out of my comfort zone.

Undocumented youth must live under different rules than members of groups that are positively viewed by society. As members of the undocumented population, respondents suggested that the acceptable ways of behaving were informed by a deviant social construction. If they do not stay hidden undocumented youth are threatened with the punitive consequence of deportation.

**Perspective of a Deviant Population**

For many DACA applicants, the creation of a program that offered stability and granted protection and access to services seemed unrealistic after the defeat of the D.R.E.A.M. Act in 2010. Because of the long wait to receive help with their undocumented immigration status, nineteen of the twenty undocumented youth in this study had a vivid memory of when they heard that President Obama had announced that they would be allowed to apply for a social security number, driver’s license and work permit. The reactions recounted by the respondents ranged from tears of joy and a sense of relief, to outright skepticism. Many applicants interviewed here described the program as an ‘answered prayer’ and ‘what they had been waiting for’, but even among those individuals with optimism about the program, respondents’ excitement was tempered by the distrust and fear they held of the government. The announcement brought a series of questions and doubts because of skepticism that government would provide a beneficial policy to undocumented immigrants and the unknown consequences DACA might bring. In providing personal details to the state through the DACA application process, undocumented youth were placed in a vulnerable position because one of the primary strategies that the undocumented population relies on for protection is remaining invisible.
Respondents touched on the vulnerability that they felt in the initial stages of the application process as they became aware of the program, but did not yet have enough information to make decisions about how and when to apply. Celeste explained her reaction:

Full of questions, once you hear you are like, now what? When you try researching something that is so new, there are just so many gaps, that you are just like, what is going on? You really don’t know what you are going into. Then you also have my parents who were, saying like, is this really happening? Is this like a scam or something? You are kind of like in that defense, is this real? And you kinda just don’t believe it at first.

As a result of being a member of a population constructed as deviants for much of their lives, it was a hurdle for respondents to accept that they must present themselves to the state in order to receive the benefits offered through DACA. Many respondents felt that hidden consequences had the potential to be worse than the challenges faced as an undocumented immigrant. Some respondents initially did not want to apply for DACA:

To apply, I actually didn’t want to do it. I was scared that it was a scam. I wasn’t very hopeful. I feel like at this point I was just like this is my status and this is how it’s going to be. I was really scared that because they would essentially have all of my information, where I lived, where I went to school, high school, where I grew up. So I was just really scared that this was, they were just going to track me down and have me deported.

This dynamic illuminates the instability and fear that undocumented youth in this study lived within as members of a deviant population and their expectation that contact with the government would produce punishment. Further, these youth had limited power to change or influence the actions of the state, but at the same time as undocumented immigrants felt they had few options other than to comply with the program. Michael simply believed that it would be a negative experience to apply for DACA, “I was very skeptical moving forward. I don’t want to, if it means I am going to get hurt and have to deal with more stress than I have already dealt with.”

The tentative response of the undocumented youth represented here is indicative of a deviant outlook towards the state, and the belief that it was unlikely that the government would create a policy that is truly beneficial to the undocumented community. DACA applicants feared that once they applied they would be immediately deported, or their home addresses would be given to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and their family members would be put at risk. Since DACA does not offer protection to the undocumented youth’s family, providing details about their lives exposes family members to
the state. As part of the decision making process to apply, Sophie considered the impact on her family:

I have heard from some people that immigration goes to their house, and it’s not just me, I realized. I have a whole family that is not from here, but if immigration were to come and take my whole family because of me, because I am trying to do something for myself, then I would feel bad.

The doubts and skepticism about DACA highlights how the undocumented population has learned to expect that the state will treat them as deviants. Gilberto was considering returning to Mexico when the President made the announcement and remained skeptical until he could verify that DACA applicants were not being deported. His reaction was:

Until I see President Obama signing it, then we talk. Then I will get excited. But you know politicians they just talk, talk, talk, not until they sign anything, it doesn’t make it legal. But when he signed it was like, oh my gosh, this is really happening. It took me two months to file because I was still skeptical. But then I thought I don’t have anything to lose.

My respondents interpreted DACA through a deviant lens because they had come to expect punitive treatment from the state.

**The State as Unpredictable**

In their youth, DACA applicants that participated in this study internalized the difference in the permissions of membership available to them and relied on strategies to stay hidden. In response to a lack of power when interacting with the state and fears about the unknown consequences of the program, respondents felt it was necessary to employ strategies of protection during the application process. In order to reduce the risk and exposure to the government there were several strategies that these undocumented youth employed. The first was gathering as much information as possible from sources such as forums on social media and attending information sessions at schools or local churches to gain a fuller picture of the program. Applicants initially found it challenging to access information about the details of the requirements of DACA and any potential consequences. It became necessary to ‘scratch around’ to get details about who might be able to assist in the application process. Respondents did not know on whom they could rely and did not want to put themselves at risk unnecessarily.
The second strategy was to wait. Several respondents waited to compile their applications until after DACA was officially published on a government website. Other applicants chose to wait several months while other youth applied and they could observe any potential problems. As Celeste described this strategy, “I waited 3 months before I applied for it. A couple of my friends had already applied, we were still questioning, and how long will this go on for? There are just so many questions.” This was a form of protection because they believed that DACA might be a way to identify and deport undocumented immigrants.

The final strategy was to hire legal counsel to assist in the application process. Of the 18 respondents that applied for DACA, only 2 applied without the help of any type of legal counsel. The support of a lawyer was viewed as a source of security that provided extra insurance both psychologically and legally. The importance of the opportunity to obtain identification and the perceived hardship of not being granted a work permit is underscored by the fact that applicants were not willing take chances with the outcome of their applications, despite financial hardships. Thomas explained that relying on a lawyer was necessary:

I don’t think that there should be anybody that is applying to DACA or renewing it that would want to do it on their own. That’s very risky. I am one of those people who is like, be careful and have someone that actually knows and knows the immigration system to help you out. I have been fortunate to receive pro bono services, but even if that hadn’t been an option I would have made it a point to see a lawyer. One little mistake on that DACA application can cost you a lot.

Additional respondents commented that the forms were simple and they probably could have completed them on their own, but hiring a lawyer increased the possibility of approval. As Lydia explained:

We were kind of afraid that if we filled out something wrong our chances of getting accepted were going to be very bleak and then we couldn’t really advocate for ourselves and we couldn’t tell anybody ‘I didn’t know how to do it’, so in that case it was more for reliability issues. The application itself was very simple.

Lack of confidence in dealing with immigration officials is an indication that undocumented youth represented here do not feel powerful enough to work directly with government. This lack of efficacy confirms the social construction model, which predicts that deviant populations do not have the tools to effectively advocate for their needs from the state. Relying on an intermediary becomes necessary because undocumented youth that were
interviewed for this study indicated that they believed that there is a risk of not being treated fairly and that applicants do not have enough knowledge to protect themselves. This belief points to the lack of influence or ability to produce a reliable, consistent decision from the state. As a members of the undocumented population, the respondents believed they would not be treated fairly in the process. Hiring a lawyer helps to provide the assurance of additional help in navigating the state’s requirements. Finally, it illuminates the constant fear of direct contact with the government as members of a target population socially constructed as deviants.

The expectation that my respondents as a target population was that they must be cautious and careful when interacting with the state. This lens also informed the strategies that these undocumented youth employed in the process of applying for DACA. Applying for DACA was ultimately viewed as a risk, but one that applicants were able to manage through the process of self-assessment and to ensure that they met the requirements. Applicants reported that acceptance for DACA was a yes or no question with little room for variation. Respondents were aware if they met the qualifications for DACA or not before they submitted their documents to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Self-evaluation assisted the respondents that were not eligible for the program to become aware of their ineligibility before taking the time to apply. This knowledge assisted undocumented youth in limiting vulnerabilities of exposure to the government for those individuals who did not qualify by allowing them to avoid contact with the state. As Margarita described the process:

So, it was like, look at your situation and see how likely you are, based on the criteria and your situation to get accepted or approved and then it is a risk that you are willing to take or not. I chose to take that risk, and I don’t know anyone that didn’t. Everyone that did apply got accepted, so anyone that didn’t apply, it was because they knew already.

As a result, the state is understood by the study participants to be rigid and irrational toward the undocumented population, resulting in the exclusion of other individuals that respondents considered to be deserving of the program. My respondents experienced this as a form of exclusion that the program created for those that did not qualify. Oscar and Celeste explained the requirements to apply for DACA, which include physical evidence that applicant was present in the U.S. as of June 15th, 2007:
Researcher: Do you think it’s reasonable that they ask for that specific piece of paper with a date on it?

Oscar: I don’t believe it’s reasonable, um, you know, but I guess it’s just a technicality. They had to choose a day. It’s just a random day

Celeste: You don’t really know, it’s just like a weird date. Why would they just pick that one? Yeah, maybe it would have been reasonable, but then after you know all these people, like Oscar, he has been here for so long, and left for like 2 years? A year? And came back. It’s like, what? You are here most of your life? Why can’t you just apply for it?

In this discussion, it became evident that the decisions of the government appeared to be arbitrary when taken from the point of view of the respondents. Placing parameters around which youth were allowed to belong to the eligible population separated the undocumented into categories of deserving and undeserving.

Overwhelmingly, DACA applicants expressed a feeling that the decisions of the state were random and unpredictable. Despite their ability to assess their personal eligibility from the requirements for DACA, respondents expressed a feeling of vulnerability in the application process and believed that their approval was up to chance. Selena expressed the doubt in the reliability of the application process:

It’s just all up to them and to how merciful they are feeling the day they are checking yours. Because you don’t know, you don’t know who is deciding, you don’t know who is looking at it, if they just randomly pick them or what.

The primary reaction to the application was the impression that it was out of their control and impersonal. The impersonal nature of the process was the aspect that most respondents commented on (17) when reflecting on the experience of applying. In a practical sense, the guidelines set out for applying for DACA could be used as a tool to avoid risk; however, it worked to reinforce the idea that the law is inflexible towards undocumented youth. It taught DACA applicants that if they did not comply with the program they would be punished. Further, since applicants could do a self-evaluation before they applied, their continued doubt about receiving approval for DACA highlights that they lacked power in their relationship to the state.

At every stage of the application process respondents expressed the need to try to minimize the risk that they felt in exposing themselves to the state. However, eleven respondents reflected on the feeling that once they mailed their applications the wait time made them especially nervous and uncertain because it was completely out of their
hands. Margarita expressed this uncertainty, “It’s like the mystery of you send your application, cross your fingers, take a risk and hope that it gets approved. I really don’t know.” The obscurity of the process increased as they waited to hear a response from U.S. Customs and Immigration Services once they had submitted their application. The wait times without response in this sample varied from one month to one year. Applicants relied on comparing their situations to those that already applied for reassurance, because there was little information available to assist applicants in navigating the process. To gain access to additional information, they relied heavily on online forums and DACA social networks in order to compare their situations and hypothesize the reasons for their delays in application approval. This unease was expressed consistently in interviews:

You fill out this application, you put it in an envelope and then you send it wherever it needs to be sent. I jokingly say just pray that your person reviewing it is a really nice person. Because you really don’t get to find out until you get a letter from them. The only time that Department of Homeland Security ever contacted me was when I got my fingerprints. But you don’t hear anything until they contact you. The first time going through it, it made me feel nervous, especially when I hadn’t heard from them for 2 or 3 months, I was like- what the heck? I’m worried that I am not hearing back from them. During that time, I was like I am sure there are a lot of applicants that applied, but going three months without hearing back is kind of worrisome.

Respondents recognized the dependence that they had on the government’s decision. Even as respondents recognized that the state must follow the law, it was evident the applicants felt a loss of control and lack of confidence in a positive outcome. Despite gathering extensive documentation and seeking the assistance of a lawyer, Louisa recognized that she held an expectation that her approval was up to chance:

Everything that I showed must have helped me, but I feel like it was up to the person whoever it was that was choosing you, like yes, you get to stay. I don’t know why, but I almost felt like it was a lottery and they were choosing, but I don’t know why.

Undocumented youth in this sample indicated that they reliance upon the state to decide their future began to reshape the way that they viewed themselves from a member of a deviant population to one that is dependent, yet powerless. The expectation that the government would not treat them fairly is one of the characteristics of a dependent population, “They see themselves as alone and as individual players who have no chance of winning a game that they view as essentially corrupt” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 342).
Undocumented youth in this sample suggested that the application reviewers would not follow the rules and would treat them differently because of their undocumented immigration status. This echoes the message that undocumented youth have internalized from the state throughout their lives. Rafael questioned the ability of the government to be consistent in the approval process:

This kind of process is kind of detached. You don’t know who is reviewing your case or going over your documents which makes it kind of scary sometimes. So on several occasions I heard of people that needed to provide more information, so it would make you wonder who is reviewing it? Maybe the evidence was sufficient, but the guy looking over it is really picky.

As members of a population that had historically been treated as deviants, they did not believe that they would be granted the same consideration that someone that is a citizen or legal resident. As a result of this internalized position and their socialization living as undocumented immigrants, they had learned from the state that they were only partial members and expected that they would not be granted fair or impartial consideration.

A TRANSITION IN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

As clients of the state, applicants have little ability to influence government. The respondents’ reflection on the DACA approval process points to one of the aspects that most widely characterizes the undocumented population in this sample, that they felt a loss of control in dealing with the state. Through DACA, undocumented youth were required to put their futures in the hands of the government, which consistently sends the message that they do not belong and are not welcome. In order for them to gain protection, they must be vulnerable to the state and give up the only defense they have: staying hidden. To become protected, undocumented youth must also become visible. The fear and lack of control these respondents felt was reflected in their belief that approval was random. The conflict that the respondents’ faced in the application process also provided one of the turning points from which they were able to move away from being constructed as a deviant target population and began to adopt beliefs that were characteristic of a dependent target population as they could no longer avoid the state.

DACA applicants could assess the likelihood that they would be approved for DACA; however, they did not trust the government to treat them fairly. It was evident from the sense of obscurity about the process and the need for luck that they envisioned their membership as
at mercy of the state. The treatment of undocumented youth in this context was not likely to be based on their qualifications or an impartial decision. Their beliefs in the temperamental nature of the government implied that it would only grant this privilege when it was beneficial to the state. Betty expressed this lack of belief in an impartial process:

> There is democracy, but there is that person that is looking at that application and you know, nature is going to kick in, if they are having a bad day that might have some sort of influence on it, it shouldn’t, but you know things don’t go that way most of the time.

The contradiction found in the self-assessment of risk before applying and the doubts of fair treatment presents a context where the applicants were displaying qualities from both deviant and dependent social constructions. In both social constructions, undocumented youth hold limited political power. As deviants they faced a fear because of their direct contact with the state. As dependents, DACA applicants acknowledged that their future was in the hands of the government. The reflection on both the fear that arose and the questioning of whether they would be treated fairly hinged on formal approval and recognition from the state.

These undocumented youth did not know who would be reviewing the application, what they were evaluating it for, or when they would receive a response. This uncertainty was heightened by the minimal contact the applicants received about their application once it was sent to Citizenship and Immigration Services. Respondents suggested that they felt powerless and had no way to check on the progress of this application. Yet approval provided a confirmation that the undocumented youth had entered a new target population, at which point they believed that DACA is a beneficial and trustworthy policy.

An additional indication of the power of the state to influence a target population can be seen through the policy tools it relied on to overcome the undocumented population’s fear of interacting with the state. As Schneider and Ingram (1993) predict, the types of policies that will be awarded to powerless and dependent populations are often temporary and rely on the applicant to present themselves to an agency to gain the benefits. Further, the state uses a particular type of policy tool in order to encourage the target population to comply with the policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

DACA encouraged undocumented youth to apply for the program through promised protection from deportation, a social security number and a temporary work permit. These
tools were specific in that they directly addressed the instability that undocumented youth face, but also provided an incentive to overcome the reluctance that the undocumented population has to be in direct contact with government. Further, DACA did not provide any type of outreach or recruitment for the applicants and instead relied on local organizations and the media to spread the information about how and where to apply. As Schneider and Ingram (1993) explain, the members of dependent target populations are not sought out but, “Rely on those who are eligible to make their case to the agency itself” (p. 339). Contact with the government is structured, and undocumented youth have little power or influence in the process. In their interaction with the government, it became apparent that undocumented youth were dependent on the decisions and evaluations of the state, which impacted them as citizens. This message was deepened through undocumented youths’ understanding of the limited options that they faced as immigrants without a legal status in the eyes of the state.

Despite a context of uncertainty and instability, the decision for respondents in this sample to apply was straightforward because of their dependence on the state. Three respondents reported that they had considered returning to their country of birth and were on verge of making plans before the announcement was made. Six respondents said that applying for Deferred Action was the only option that was available to them. Sixteen of the respondents had already graduated from high school at the time of the announcement and viewed their future as limited. When asked about what other options were available to her, Rosalyn responded:

It was that or go back to Mexico. I was very close to leaving. Probably I would have helped out with a business or something because my parents still have ties. But it was going to be strange, I was going to leave school, dropping out, but it was the only thing for me to do. There was nothing for me here, but going back was the only reasonable thing, I guess.

The decision to apply for DACA came from what was described as desperation due to lack of hope for greater opportunities for employment. Rafael pointed to this sense of dependence on the outcome of his DACA application, “There was this big uncertainty upon graduation that I would be left working this dead end job as a dishwasher, even with a college degree, for an undetermined amount of time.” Undocumented youth felt applying was not a choice because it was the only way to alleviate their current situation and lay the groundwork for better opportunities in the future.
CONFINEMENT AND FREEDOM

As a result of the constant threat that the state implied for these undocumented respondents, the opportunity to apply to DACA also became an opportunity to change the way these youth were viewed by the state. The legal dividing line of inclusion and exclusion defined the ways that they were able to live in society. Respondents reflected on the changes that they felt once their DACA status was approved. Suzie described how her life has changed:

Yes, definitely it has. I was able to get a job, it’s not the best job in the world, but it’s a job and I don’t feel like I am out of place. Like, if I get pulled over I won’t feel scared. I will feel fine because I have my driver’s license, I am ok to be here.

The acquisition of DACA status impacted the personal identities of the undocumented youth in this study. Betty described the way it allowed her ability to be more honest about her own identity through the freedom of the restrictions she felt when she was socially constructed as deviant:

After DACA I felt like I bloomed because I feel free, I can say I am an immigrant, I know my rights, you can’t use that against me, you can’t take advantage of me. I feel like I am an advocate for students, I know there are a lot of students that aren’t aware of opportunities that there are.

As a result of this change, DACA recipients responded to the social constructs surrounding immigration policy and began to place themselves in this new role of a deserving recipient. The new narrative that DACA created was about the role of a student who is limited by the laws of the state and therefore needs the assistance of government to unleash their potential.

Many of undocumented youth in this sample reflected on a contradiction they experienced as their beliefs about themselves, which were internalized messages from the public sphere, no longer applied to them as DACA applicants. This process of recognizing their social construction as undocumented immigrants and the conflict that it presented with their academic and social achievements was an indication that the messages about which socially constructed group they belonged to had shifted. Rafael also expressed this feeling that the quality of his membership in the U.S. had shifted:

I feel like I am a citizen, it’s just a matter of the money and reapplying, because I can drive and get a job. I’m excluded from Federal and government jobs, which is a bummer and loans and stuff like that. Other than that it feels great, to be honest with you.
The change in the way that the state categorizes undocumented youth can have an impact on how they understand their personal membership in the U.S. An additional way that respondents described the evolution of their social construction was a sense of physical freedom. Freedom was described in the ability to drive with a license (16), move to new cities (2), and travel to other states (6). The freedom was both physical freedom of movement, and freedom from the confines of a deviant social construction. This shift was evident in the way respondents thought about where they could go and what they could do. Finally, there was a transition from feeling discriminated against and staying hidden to one that they understand as a level of acceptance. Catalina explained:

I think it’s better, just having that peace of mind being anywhere at any time, at least in the US without having some sort of fear. And I feel not as discriminated as much, for instance when I was 21 I would go out and I would have to carry my Mexican passport because that is the legitimate ID that most places take. But when you present this big book to somebody, I mean...most of them know right away that you are not a legal citizen.

With DACA these undocumented youth entered a different level of acceptance in the eyes of the government and society.

Freedom became a way for respondents to disentangle themselves from the rules of a deviant population. DACA youth in this sample suggested that they were granted permission to re-shape their relationship with the American government, which, in turn, allowed them to change the way that they moved about the country and the ways in which they lived. Selena directly addressed this release from confinement:

It was so exciting, there are so many people! When you have been stuck in San Diego and you see the streets of New York City you are like, look at all the people! It’s overwhelming. And you are just like, I love it. It’s just being able to know that you can’t get taken away and being able to go out to new places and do new things that you couldn’t before. It feels good. Before it was like I was chained to this little box in San Diego, but now it’s like the chain is gone. Let’s go everywhere!

Selena’s restriction was lifted, both the limits that she faced geographically and in the opportunities that were available to her.

However, given the depth of the messages that the state sends to target populations, many of the respondents provided oscillating reflections on the ways in which the messages of dependence and deviance played into their understanding of DACA. While it was evident
that a transition took place, many of the youth were able to identify spaces where the legacy of their deviant construction continued to follow them. Celeste explained this confusion:

It changes but it is still, I don’t know. There are changes and there are still some things that are the same. Some of the changes are, like, they say that you are safer out on the street with a license and stuff, ID and no deportation. But that doesn’t take away the fear, if you see a Border Patrol Agent you are like wait, oh no, they can’t do anything anymore. But you are still living with fear sometimes, you just forget about it. They pretty much teach you to be afraid and you kind of have to protect yourself out there. You are going out there with nothing pretty much, so if anything happens, deportation and all that stuff, you really can’t do anything about it. I guess, that still remains the same.

Undocumented youth in this study found that once they were granted DACA approval, they could test the new limits of their membership. This process assisted them in moving away from the deviant social construction of their childhood. However, it also points the power of the messages that the state sends to target populations as DACA applicants continue to hold fear of the state and believe that its actions are unpredictable. A shift in respondent’s self-perception and membership became possible as respondents began to understand that there were more spaces in society where they would be treated positively by the state. However, they continued to carry threads of the message that they were deviants and that the stability that DACA offers could change at any moment.
CHAPTER 6

DEMONSTRATING WORTH

In June of 2012 the Department of Homeland Security issued a memo describing the re-prioritization of deportations and the creation of DACA. In response to this memo President Obama gave a speech about the motivation behind the change in policy towards undocumented immigrants that arrived as children. His speech outlined the attributes and qualities of DACA recipients that make them deserving of the ability to obtain a work permit, social security number and protection from deportation. When taken from the perspective of social constructions, this announcement can be understood as a division and re-articulation of a target population that is typically considered deviant and criminal into a population comprised of youth who are deserving of membership in the U.S. Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that the discourse surrounding a target population creates a bridge to their status as citizens or members. The re-construction of the youth population of undocumented immigrants into a favorable and deserving target population allowed for a shift in the way that these youth were treated by the state. Further, it informs and frames how undocumented youth in this study understood the requirements to gain membership into the nation.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS AS AMERICANS

The creation of DACA placed boundaries around who may belong to a new group of undocumented immigrants that are deserving of membership, educational opportunities and authorization to work in the U.S. Defining who is eligible to receive DACA reinforced a division of categories between deserving and undeserving immigrants. This division allows the state to grant benefits to a specific subpopulation of undocumented immigrants that remain unavailable to the entire undocumented population. Obama’s characterization of DACA eligibility relied on the idea of innocence. This innocence divided undocumented youth from other immigrants who are understood to have intentionally committed a crime by
not entering the country through the legal channels. To define this separation, the
President’s speech placed the blame for undocumented youth’s lack of legal status on their
parents, while emphasizing the injustice of their situation, explained that it would be unjust,
“To expel these young people...simply because of the actions of their parents” (The White
House, 2012). Additionally, President Obama argued that the immigration system was
broken and the creation of a new policy helped to correct its unfairness:

Imagine you’ve done everything right your entire life- studied hard, worked hard,
maybe even graduated at the top your class- only to suddenly face deportation to a
country that you know nothing about, with a language that you may not even
speak. (The White House, 2012)

This rationale supports the theoretical perspective that policies which impact dependent
groups seek to correct a perceived injustice in society (Schneider & Ingram,
1993). Simultaneously, it points to the undocumented youth’s vulnerability to deportation
and stresses their membership in the U.S. by highlighting an idealized image of a hard
working American immigrant that is making clear contributions to the nation.

President Obama relied on a characterization of DACA recipients as social members
of the U.S. His speech created a sympathetic image of Americans who understand
themselves as part of the country despite their lack of access to membership and talent that is
wasted through the restrictions they face. Undocumented youth are described as, “Talented
young people, who, for all intents and purposes are American- they’ve been raised as
Americans; and understand themselves to be part of the country” (The White House,
2012). By emphasizing the qualities of undocumented youth that make them candidates for
more favorable policies, President Obama’s speech encouraged a shift in the way that
undocumented youth were seen by the public. In calling attention to their idealized
American characteristics, DACA as a policy offered permission to these youth to take on an
American identity. Permission for these youth to become American stands in contrast to
before DACA, when undocumented youth’s only option was a membership in the group of
undocumented immigrants who are socially constructed as deviants. Michael called attention
to a recognition of membership that this produces:

I am assuming that Obama understands this, that he had a concept of what us
individuals brought here from childhood, we are Americans. But we aren’t legal,
so we aren’t Americans, but we aren’t Peruvians, Nicaraguans, Brazilians,
Argentineans, Mexicans, Salvadorans, whatever it is the nationality that they
came from. We aren’t that because we weren’t raised in that community.
DACA addresses the legal hurdle of membership that undocumented youth face because it grants a form of permission. However, there is an oscillating quality to their belonging that depends on the law to recognize them as members.

Finally, Obama’s speech created normative expectations of how members and citizens behave by assigning value to activities that are considered to be American. President Obama highlights these American qualities:

They study in our schools, they play in our neighborhoods, they’re friends with our kids, they pledge allegiance to our flag. They are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper. (The White House, 2012)

The President’s speech laid the groundwork for a justification as to why this group of undocumented youth deserved treatment that differs from the rest of the undocumented population. From this speech both the American public and the undocumented population were given the message that these individuals have a right to remain as members in the country. Though undocumented youth were not born here, they are described as having qualities and attributes that are approved of as American. Gilberto expressed a confirmation of this characterization when expressing his own commitment and connection to the U.S. during his interview:

When you pledge allegiance to the flag every day for ten years, it has to tell you something! I’m not doing the Mexican anthem, I don’t even know it. (Recites the Pledge of Allegiance). We all went through 9/11, we all went through Katrina, we were not born here, but we went through the American life.

Through the creation of a new role with a dependent social construction, President Obama provided the framework for undocumented youth to shed the image of the immigrant as a criminal and enter a new space of membership.

**Creation of a New Target Population**

The new narrative for undocumented youth that Obama supplied acted as a justification for the government providing these youth with favorable policy. With a dependent social construction, DACA youth represented in this study were able to move from a place that was outside the bounds of membership and hidden, to a membership that was recognized by the government and considered deserving. By extension, respondents began to change how they understand themselves. This shift in the social construction of the undocumented youth population became evident in the narratives of the interviewees and
supports the theory that actions of the state have the ability to inform citizen’s understandings of their own membership in society (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Suzie expressed a new sense acceptance of how she saw herself in the U.S.:

At first I was embarrassed, but now that I know that there are many students, I’m not embarrassed. And also I am not embarrassed because I got DACA because I want to become a better person. I want to do something with my life, continue college and get a job, so since it is helping me I am not really embarrassed anymore.

The process of shifting the social construction of undocumented youth was further reinforced as DACA provided a new label of identification for them to use, which supported the division of their identification with other undocumented individuals. Social constructions that seek to improve the public understanding of a group can modify the label applied to the target population as new constructions are created or the target population is re-articulated through policy design (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The use of new terminology allows the target individuals to overcome stigmas attached to unfavorable social constructions by assigning a new and positive association. The evolution of the terms used to describe the undocumented population reflect this attempt to remove the stigma of the deviant, and can be seen through the shift in labels over time. The labels assigned to the undocumented youth have included unauthorized, D.R.E.A.M.er, AB 540 (Abrego, 2008), and now DACAmented (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014).

The importance of this re-assignment of the target population is recognized by undocumented youth represented in this study. As Selena illustrated holding DACA status allowed her to shift her identity:

Now that we are DACAmented, maybe. But when you are undocumented a lot of people see you really badly. They see you really badly. They think that you come here to steal their jobs, but it doesn't always work that way.

As undocumented respondents reflected on what this process meant for their identities as citizens and experienced a shift between deviant and dependent categories, they observed a conflict in the way undocumented immigrants were understood in society and how they understood themselves.

Soss (1999) argues that the internalization of a social construction of a population can translate into the target population’s belief that the public in general shares the same perception of them. As respondents recognized this change in treatment after the creation of
DACA, they began to align themselves as members of the newly defined DACA population. However, while DACA confirmed what respondents believed about their membership as Americans, they faced a conflict with the policy because it only offered partial and temporary belonging. The temporariness of the membership available for undocumented youth emerged as a belief that they must demonstrate their worth in order to be considered for full membership in the future. Further, many of the respondents had family members with different classifications under immigration law, which fragmented individuals within the same nuclear family into different levels of access to membership. As a result, respondents were confronted the roots of a negative and deviant social construction as it came into conflict with how they viewed their families and friends, who continued to be portrayed as deviants.

This sentiment was described as a desire to be seen as human, alongside the critique that the public misunderstands who undocumented immigrants are and the reality of their lives. This was the most frequent observation about debates on immigration, that the public and the government do not view undocumented immigrants as humans with complicated realities. My respondents understood the general public to hold a broad perception of all undocumented immigrants as unworthy. As Elizabeth explained, “To let them know that we are similar to everyone, you are human, a person and that you have rights and that, that status does not make you more or less than them.” Respondents did not understand themselves to be inferior and they must struggle with the public perception that they must be either good or bad. Because the undocumented youth in this study had immediate family members and friends that do not qualify for DACA and remain within in the negative social construction, they were in conflict as the categorizations available did not fit their realities. Rosalyn echoed this idea that young undocumented immigrants were often portrayed incorrectly:

Well I think sometimes that immigrants are portrayed as criminals, and I completely understand that there are people that do wrong in every legal status, but for them to, like, be able to know people like the D.R.E.A.M.ers like us, having good intentions and just trying to have a normal life.

She was aware that her status as an undocumented immigrant was considered to be stigmatized and undeserving, but at the same time, understood the undocumented population as not having the opportunity or power to demonstrate their similarity to Americans. The
reality of their partial membership was sending the message that they had not yet proven their worth, and they continued to experience a level of exclusion as a result.

Rafael reflected on the similarities that he shared with American citizens, especially because his undocumented status remains hidden, “Not that many people know yet, and I think that they would be really surprised to know. I don’t think that they would ever imagine that I was undocumented.” Rafael’s comment reinforces the notion that undocumented youth can only be pointed out as different when their immigration status becomes evident. His membership was not questioned until his immigration status became visible, and as a result, he is able to challenge the image that the public holds of the undocumented immigrant. Obama described undocumented youth as American and indistinguishable from other Americans, but legally, their membership remains outside the boundaries of inclusion.

It is possible to see the impact of this shift in social construction through the narratives of undocumented youth in this study as they internalized this change in their status and the resulting impact on their membership. One respondent spoke directly to the impact that Obama’s announcement had on the way that she felt the view of the undocumented youth population had changed. When she heard President Obama’s speech, Margarita remembered her reaction:

Overall, it was validation. Seeing that we weren’t necessarily in the shadows anymore. It was the President of the United States, the highest here in America, saying that we know that you are here, we are acknowledging you, this is how we are going to help you. For everyone else to see that now. Like, we are not putting you in the spotlight for another negative reason, like they do in the media. We are actually highlighting you because of everything else of your situation and you are a student. So we want to help you, it was just the realization that finally they are acknowledging us.

**SEEKING APPROVAL**

A desire to become a “worthy” DACA recipient instead of an “unworthy” undocumented immigrant is expressed through respondents’ effort to demonstrate their worth to the U.S. government in their application and their behavior once approved for the program. As a result of the delineation between “good” and “bad” members of the undocumented population, during the DACA application process, one of the primary concerns of applicants was to demonstrate that they were deserving of the program. They did this by confirming their new social construction as hard-working individuals that were
making contributions to the country. The ways in which undocumented youth approached the application process became centered on showing that they deserved to be part of DACA, not because they technically qualify, but because they were socially worthy.

This dynamic became evident in respondents’ reflections on the format of the application itself. The questions on the application are impersonal, consisting of facts about their personal information such as transcripts, places of residence, birth date and dates of entry into the country. Only one section provided the opportunity to give the reviewer insight into them as individuals, through a small box intended for elaboration on their financial need for a work permit. Once completed, the application was then mailed to a facility in Arizona. Some respondents were informed that their paperwork was then sent on or transferred to various processing locations throughout the country. For the applicants, this process was interpreted as impersonal and mysterious. While respondents recognized that the bureaucratic system existed to encourage impartiality, they frequently suggested that they could have improved their chances for approval if there had been personal contact, such as an interview or the ability to express themselves more fully.

In order to challenge the impersonal nature of the application, participants consistently included more information and documentation than necessary when submitting the application. This practice stemmed from a desire to be seen in a certain light when their applications were reviewed. Applicants tried to illustrate these qualities by including evidence of their accomplishments, ranging from academic and volunteer positions to black belts in karate. Betty pointed to the variety of ways that she tried to demonstrate her worth:

I got letters of recommendations from places that I volunteered. Letters from places I did community service, and my pastor. To show my good moral character. It wasn’t necessary but I wanted them to look at my application and be like, I would like this person to be my neighbor. I wanted them to get insight as to who I am. I wanted them to look at me and say ‘here is this undocumented person who has done more than what a lot of people who were born here have done’, you know? I definitely wanted to show them that I was a good citizen. Why would they not want me here?

Respondents’ strived to demonstrate that they had something to offer the nation and want these characteristics to be taken into consideration when they are evaluated for DACA. When observed next to Obama’s announcement about the program, these behaviors can be understood as a process of aligning themselves with the construction of hard-working
students that deserve relief from their situations because they are legitimate members of the country.

By providing additional evidence of their worth, the undocumented youth represented here believed that they were able to increase their chances of acceptance. Respondents understood that the submission of additional documents was not required, but saw it as a strategy to improve their results. These extra documents were intended to demonstrate their value and confirm that they were worthy of the benefits of DACA and, by extension, permanent membership to the U.S. Rafael commented that when he submitted his application, “I wanted to overwhelm them with diplomas and stuff just to make sure.”

Additionally, the respondents were concerned about the lack of space or opportunity to make an argument about why they personally should be approved. Primarily, they found this frustrating because they had no ability to tell their personal stories, as they could with items like scholarship essays. Respondents also saw the inclusion of additional documentation as a way to limit the variation that they perceived in the approval process. Applicants wanted it to be unmistakable to the government that they had something to contribute to the country and that they would benefit from DACA. The goal was to demonstrate that they were good people that wanted to be members of the country, despite the fact that the program did not ask for or require evidence of these qualities.

To provide further context to the applicants’ desire to be seen as worthy, several of the respondents (5), were DACA recipients who worked at DACA application clinics as volunteers and in lawyer’s offices preparing the applications. The respondents reported that their clients often wanted to include extra documentation with their application. Each of them indicated that this extra information did not help the case, and might have been irritating for the reviewers due to the extra paperwork, but often their clients insisted on it. These patterns suggest that DACA applicants feel doubt about whether or not they are viewed as worthy of membership in the eyes of the government and are attempting to challenge the constructs of unauthorized immigrants as criminals and deviants by displaying their American accomplishments. There is a desire to prove that they are members of the U.S. in the ways that President Obama outlined in his speech.

Their relationship to the state in this context is one where undocumented youth bear the burden of demonstrating that they have value to the U.S. From the perspective of a
dependent population with little power to impact the government, DACA applicants challenged the characterization of the undocumented immigrants as deviants and troublesome, while providing evidence to confirm the more positive and sympathetic social construction provided by the state. The undocumented youth in this study aimed to demonstrate that they are ‘good immigrants’ and the only way to improve the outcome of the application is to provide evidence of their worth as members. Finally, the findings here suggest that undocumented youth have a desire for their acceptance into DACA to be based on merit and personal characteristics rather than based impersonal qualities, such as their age and date of entry to the country. Undocumented youth seek to demonstrate that they are good enough to be full members of U.S. society.

**GOOD AND BAD IMMIGRANTS**

Further, respondents indicated that their personal worthiness in qualifying for DACA was not captured in the bureaucratic requirements of the program. These DACA applicants were aware of individuals who, from their perspective, were similar to themselves in circumstance and deserving of DACA, but excluded from the program because of the lack of individual evaluation DACA provides and the inflexibility of eligibility. There was a conflict that arose between those individuals that respondents believed should qualify and those that the government defined as eligible. The result was that individuals who were worthy based on their behavior and personal accomplishments may not have been accepted based on the bureaucratic criteria. Lydia explained this conflict that she felt:

> So, there are those students, who even though they have had a life of suffering and many years of being unprivileged and not being able to advocate for themselves, they were not able to do this because of the date that they came into the country. Even though they have worked as equally hard at college or whatever. So, I feel for them it wasn’t fair.

From this point of view, eligibility for the program was inconsistent and excluded some undocumented youth that had worth to offer the country. The strict requirements of DACA sent a direct message of inclusion to the youth that were accepted into the program and exclusion to the youth that fell outside of the eligibility requirements.

Elizabeth provided her reaction when she found out that she was not eligible for the program, “I had this illusion that I would get DACA, but when I didn’t, I had this feeling. I haven't done anything bad. Why am I still getting this different?” The dividing lines that the
state determines reinforced that undocumented immigrants were dependent on its decisions and created categories of immigrants that were more deserving than others. While those that received the benefits of DACA were grateful, this division also confirmed a belief that the state is not responsive to their needs because the program excluded their friends and family members that they considered to be deserving despite the state’s perception of them. The suggestion that some undocumented immigrants were more deserving than others served to reinforce the binary of membership between insiders and outsiders, and those who remained on the outside had no way to penetrate the dividing line. There were no options available to youth that did not qualify, except to continue within this deviant status and wait for change. Undocumented youth were entirely dependent on the decisions of the state and the qualifications that it determined, regardless of their social roles. This dynamic reinforced the idea that government holds the power to evaluate the undocumented youth’s worth as citizens.

While some respondents noted members of the undocumented population that were left out, others pointed out the differences between the youth who had been approved for DACA and those that did not fit the requirements as an indication that the latter were ‘bad immigrants’ who were not deserving. The question of demonstrating worth to the government was also about distancing themselves from those immigrants that continued to hold a deviant social construction. Three respondents expressed the notion that youth who were not eligible were personally responsible for their ineligibility. This interpretation reflects the theory of social constructions because it supports the perspective that immigrants who hold deviant constructions are, “Bad people whose behavior constitutes a problem for others. They can expect to be punished unless they change their behavior or avoid contact with the government” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

One respondent illustrated this idea when he relied on his own worth to explain the importance that undocumented immigrants follow the rules and wait until an opportunity becomes available to them. Gilberto explained:

Or the hopes of every undocumented person: if something opens up, we want to be clean. A lot of people probably went the sketchy way of doing stuff, which now, after DACA it was an open door, but a lot of people couldn’t do it because their parents or they did sketchy things in the past.
Gilberto placed the ineligibility of some undocumented youth on their personal actions, suggesting that these individuals did not deserve the benefits from DACA because they had manipulated the immigration system dishonestly. This perspective served to confirm their category as deviant and provided an explanation for why they remained outside of the program. He implied that these youth could not ask anything of the state, but must wait until they were provided with opportunities. If individuals missed the opportunity, it must have been their fault. Additional respondents expressed that now that they were DACA recipients, they were part of a different group and were no longer members of the undocumented population in general because they had been given their work permit and a social security number. Respondents made references to ‘when they were undocumented’ or ‘now that they are legal’ to express that they had left that status behind and now had permission from the government to be in the U.S.

One respondent pointed to the detailed information that the DACA application requires to confirm the distinction from ‘the bad ones’ and that this information was necessary to place a limitation on who is allowed in the country. There was an attempt by the DACA recipients in this study to move themselves further away from the image of the undocumented immigrant that is portrayed in the media or in politics as a criminal that cheats the system. Their approval for DACA by extension became approval of their worth from the government. Omar explained the importance of immigrants bringing value to the U.S.:

If you have nothing to contribute, you might as well go back. You are actually not moving forward here, you are not working on something, why are you going to take advantage of free programs that only U.S. citizens can get? Why don’t you just go back? Save yourself the trouble and stop making us look bad.

By becoming a member of DACA, undocumented youth were following the rules and becoming visible to the state, which is the opposite of an ‘illegal immigrant’. Through this process of distancing themselves, respondents could shed the association with the undocumented population that is deviant and move to closer to becoming accepted members. By challenging the ‘illegal immigrant’ construct through applying to DACA, these youth could simultaneously be seen as successful individuals and be granted approval based on an American set of criteria for citizenship.

However, this shift in personal identification is problematic because DACA applicants have not been granted full or permanent membership. In this way, the government
is sending the message that undocumented youth have not yet fully demonstrated their worth. These youth’s desire to prove their worthiness remained because they had not been granted a stable place in society. They were able to note these delineations and even point to them as reasoning for how to decide eligibility for residency of immigrants in general. Suzie explained the need for this classification:

I do feel like not all immigrants should be able to become citizens because there are immigrants that are not doing anything to help the country, you know? I would tell them that they should really look at some people and if they are going to make a difference, in the country they should let them be here because they are going to make the country better!

There is an internalization of the rhetoric that surrounds immigration policy, which allowed DACA applicants to explain the differences and divisions that now exist amongst the undocumented population.

**GOOD CITIZENS**

As part of this separation between good and bad undocumented immigrants, there is an ongoing necessity to be viewed positively by the U.S. government. DACA recipients in this study had the desire to only be seen by the country in a positive light and wanted to be seen as doing a good job. In the words of Gilberto, “And now what I tell people is, let’s show what we can do and what we are all about, let’s prove to this country that we didn’t make a mistake.” In this view, there was a need to not let the country down and a subtle threat that the state may eliminate the program if they did not demonstrate their legitimacy or value. Reaching the current point of recognition and acceptance is based on DACA applicant’s accomplishments, but future opportunity is based on how well they can live up to the state’s expectations. Respondents sought to challenge the idea that immigrants take from the country and as a result, it is important that they are able to demonstrate their skills and success through personal contributions. Participants recognized that the program offers partial access to membership, so the process of proving their worth becomes an ongoing and continual, which they cannot afford to jeopardize.

For Anna this need to prove her worth extended to the avoidance of seeking treatment for mental health needs in case the government saw asking for help as unacceptable. She explained:
I feel that I definitely have depression because of my situation. I will never go see someone about it, because I have this mentality that I can’t let the government have any information on me that is negative, just in case. I want to prove to them that I am very worthy of being a citizen. I think that is my mentality about it. I know they are not supposed to break the confidentiality of patients but you see it happening all the time when there are crazy shootings. I feel like it could happen and someone could find out. And then it would be one negative check on my book.

This need to demonstrate worth was expressed a desire among the respondents to keep hidden the negative aspects of their lives as a way to earn citizenship. In addition, it serves to confirm that the deviant social construction is incorrect, so that being undocumented does not mean one is unsuccessful or inferior.

As a result, earning citizenship becomes a question of merit and receiving approval from the state. This was highlighted as five respondents pointed to marriage as one of the easiest routes to citizenship. However, most dismissed marriage as an option because of the requirement to depend on someone else to gain residency. Respondents expressed a desire to earn citizenship on their own merit, and a need to achieve a permanent immigration status without any help. Eve said that she did not want to get married to gain citizenship because, “Even if I do find that person that I end up falling in love with, I feel my problem is that I feel like need to get that on my own. It needs to be something that I am granted because I deserved it.” Undocumented youth represented in this study wanted to be accepted because of their worth, not because they were able to check off the list of legal requirements. Anna echoed this sentiment about earning her citizenship:

I don’t want to depend on someone else with such a big part of my life. When it comes to it, if I happen to get married and that is how I happen to get it, then that will be ok. But I don’t want to get married when I feel like it’s not that time yet, just so that I can get my citizenship. I would like to avoid that as much as possible. I feel like that is not who I am. I truly believe that if you work for something, you make it happen. So, I know the situation is different, but I feel like it would be very degrading to depend on someone just to get your independence.

Respondents suggested that once they obtain a status of full legal membership, they could remove the classification of an unwanted immigrant because they would have the formal and permanent approval of the state. However, the requirement that DACA recipients must always re-apply to be reviewed for eligibility appears to teach the undocumented youth in this study that their role as members in the country is contingent on ongoing good behavior.
and the approval of the state. Undocumented youth are in a subordinate role and must perform up to the expectations that the government has laid out. Gilberto understood receiving DACA as a way to prove to the U.S. that he could be independent and add value with his membership:

I think it’s this, as long as you don’t ask anything of the country, I think you are good to go. When the amnesty happened, people started getting welfare, getting all this, but the point was to help the country, not the country help you. This is what DACA is mainly. They could have just given us the residency, but no. Let’s see what you can do. Let’s give you the right to work, do what you can do. But the difference is we aren’t asking anything from the country. We got the permit, but we aren’t getting welfare, medical, nothing like this. So we are not taking anything.

His desire to demonstrate his worth illustrates how social construction informs his conception of membership and the ways that he interacted with the state. The goal became showing the government as a DACA recipient that he was deserving of the policy and challenging the message that undocumented immigrants are deviants who live outside of the law. Anna acknowledged the impact that this had on the way that she lived:

I’m trying to live a good life, do well in school, do what I believe is right, but I can’t do much to change my situation right now. I do sometimes feel like I try to make up for my situation by trying to be the best or do really well in something. I feel like overall I am a very good person. It’s a way for me to present myself as someone who is wanted.

Through DACA, respondents conformed to a new image that the state constructed of the ideal member and gained access to rights that were previously off limits. As a result of the requirements that define the undocumented youth and the selectivity of the application process, it allows for a separation between those immigrants that are deserving and those that are not. Respondents’ observation of this change is evidence that they received a new message from the government that allowed them to alter the way they are viewed and to re-evaluate their own qualifications for membership. The acceptance that Gilberto felt when he received his DACA status was understood as coming directly from the state:

When I got accepted I was so happy. I almost cried, this is a big dream, a big step, the U.S. is granting you permission to stay, you should feel honored for that. I do feel like it’s personal because I sent them all of my achievements.

As government modifies its attitude and treatment toward DACA recipients, the narrative around the identities of my respondents started a process of self-re-assignment of who and where they are as members of the country. Policies have the ability to teach target
populations about what rights and services they deserve as their interactions with the government become lessons about citizenship.
CHAPTER 7

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN PUBLIC POLICY

The exploration of the messages that are learned by the targets of policy provides a number of considerations for public policy. The findings of this study suggest that the impact of DACA on undocumented youth is a process that can be best understood as continually evolving. It becomes evident from this analysis of the individual experience with DACA that U.S. public policy can improve by placing a higher importance on policy that is flexible enough to account for the complicated realities that individuals face.

When considering a complex system of laws such as the U.S. immigration system, often the solutions presented to the public focus on the politically feasible options. When explored from the perspective of undocumented youth, an image emerges of a program that does not take the lives that it impacts into enough consideration. Debates about immigration and social policy in general would benefit from a greater consideration of the treatment of the targets of that policy and from including the perspectives of the target population in its creation. It becomes evident that when policy informs and structures the quality of membership for millions of individuals, there is much more at stake when constructing policy besides a solution to a problem or the political benefits that the policy itself may bring. If an overarching goal of the American democracy is a robust and engaged citizenry, then it becomes imperative to interrogate the ways in which policies work to empower or disempower its target populations.

This perspective becomes especially crucial for target populations that are subject to a negative social construction or who hold low amounts of political power. The question of the ways that policy works to empower or disempower individuals demands a shift from pragmatic concerns about policies’ political feasibility to the need to seek to drive the U.S. towards greater inclusion of those populations that are consistently marginalized by the current structure of institutions and policy making. Further, taking social constructions into
consideration during the creation of policy also would offer an additional critical lens to the policy process. The outcomes may shift away from a demand to demonstrate quantitative results to a promotion of changes in the ways the state carries out its day to day activities. This thesis points to the need for more active social science research that questions the social dynamics that are taken for granted within public policy in order to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals are impacted by the actions of the state. An increase in the diversity of voices that participate in policy making can only serve to be an asset to the future of public policy in the U.S.

Finally, it is clear that because of its temporary nature, DACA offers little more than a patch to the U.S. immigration system and prolongs the perpetuation of undocumented immigrants’ marginalized status in U.S. society. Undocumented immigrants tend to hold an invisible location in society due to their lack of formal political power; however, as this research has sought to describe there are tangible consequences to lives by ignoring the ongoing problems that exist in immigration policy. Further, the American government needs to be further challenged to make substantial changes and progress in addressing the non-sequiturs within in the current immigration system, rather than continuing to rely on symbolic patches created by temporary policies.

**Future Research**

Due to the limited time frame of this research, there are additional questions that were not able to be addressed. Given that this study was conducted as the first wave of eligible DACA recipients were renewing their DACA status, there is an opportunity to examine the renewal process and how DACA youths’ membership evolves over time. From conversations with study participants that were in touch with the researcher after the conclusion of data collection, it became evident that as undocumented youth they continued to face many of the same struggles and fears as when they initially applied for DACA. The long-term impacts of holding a temporary status on outcomes for these youth will be an important question in the future to explore how and if they are able to obtain citizenship or legal residency.

Further, a major limitation of this study is the fact that all of the respondents were connected to the researcher through educational institutions. This created a strong bias
towards individuals with stronger networks of support. One of the major questions the researcher could not address through this study was how these dynamics affect individuals that are not in school or connected to a source that informs them about DACA. What is happening with the undocumented youth population that drop out, do not have the resources to graduate high school, have limited English ability, or have weak ties to other undocumented residents in the U.S.? Given the necessity to stay hidden and the available data on the population that has applied for DACA, the reasons behind the gap in application rates and the estimated eligible population needs to be addressed to gain a fuller picture of the ways that the state impacts marginalized populations.

An avenue of research that could provide additional insight into the impacts of public policy on target populations in the U.S. is through the identification and exploration of target populations that have faced comparable shifting policy contexts to provide a point of comparison on whether the shifting social constructions to question if the views held by undocumented youth are repeated in other target populations. Without a questioning of the contexts in which public policy is created and the assumptions that are within its construction, a cycle that encourages and allows for marginalized populations will remain in place.
REFERENCES


cultural and developmental approaches to psychology: New syntheses in theory, research and policy (pp. 113–137). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Adapted from:

BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION
How old are you? Where were you born? How long have you lived in the U.S.?
Can you tell me about what you do now? (School, work, etc.)
In what contexts do you feel that your undocumented status is most evident?
How often and in what ways must you identify yourself as undocumented?
At what point did you learn that you were undocumented? Did that change the way you saw the U.S. or your country of birth?
In what contexts do you feel that your undocumented status is most evident?
How would you describe your relationship to the U.S.? How would you describe your relationship to your country of birth?

APPLICATION PROCESS
Before Application
Can you tell me about what was going on in your life at the time you applied for DACA?
What led to your decision to apply?
How did you learn about DACA? Do you remember when you first heard about it? What was your reaction?
Before you decided to apply to did you consider the decision at all? Did you feel like you had any other options available to you?
Was it clear that you were eligible for the program or did you learn that later?
Did you have any major concerns or hopes about the program when you decided to apply? Was there any one thing particular that you hoped you would gain once you received your DACA status?
Did you talk about your decision to apply with anyone? Did they have any major hopes or concerns about the program?

**PROCESS OF APPLYING**
Can you tell me about what it was like to apply?
Do you remember what kinds of questions they asked? Did they seem reasonable?
Did you have any type of help with the application process? (lawyer, nonprofit?)
How necessary do you think that assistance was? Do you think you will file the renewal on your own?
Did you personally file it? How? (at an office, over the internet, etc.)
Was the application process clear? Do you feel like you had the opportunity to explain your eligibility?