ABSTRACT

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In this study, I examine the storytelling strategies used by young, undocumented political activists who advocated passage of the DREAM Act and broad reform of U.S. immigration laws. Based on 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork, 37 in-depth interviews, and content analysis of movement materials, I show how these young people used stories to elicit sympathy and support, claim an “American” identity, and assert agency in a contested political arena. In my first analytic chapter, I argue that the cultural rules that prescribe different emotions for women and men complicated activists’ efforts to give expressive storytelling performances and ultimately led to a gendered division of emotional labor that disproportionately burdened women. Next, I examined the narrative identity work strategies activists used to shift the boundary of and signify membership in the category “American.” I argue that by using white, middle-class markers of American respectability, the undocumented youth activists could present themselves as culturally assimilated into American society and thus challenge their legal exclusion. Doing so, however, reinforced notions of “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants. Finally, I examined their efforts to reframe the broader debates around immigration reform and elevate themselves to positions of moral leadership. I argue that by claiming proprietary control over their storytelling strategy, undocumented youth activists were able to subvert the influence of adult citizen-advocates in the immigration policy debates, articulate their own stake in the issue, and control the public participation of allies in their own group. However, they struggled to assert similar authority vis-à-vis their allies in backstage movement spaces where norms of equality
prevailed. My research indicates that while storytelling can be a potent strategy for marginalized groups seeking social and political change, activist-storytellers must navigate the broader cultural terrain – including its normative expectations, social hierarchies, and power differentials – to enact it. As a result, narrative strategies aimed at resisting and contesting oppression can inadvertently reproduce and maintain other inequalities.
Storytelling in the Political Mobilization of Young Immigrant Rights Activists

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the life and memory of Karen Jean Higgins whose feminist sensibility, open-mindedness, and enthusiasm for learning inspired me.
I was born in Savannah, Georgia, the middle of three girls. Shortly thereafter, my family moved to the Piedmont region of North Carolina where my sisters and I grew up and were socialized. We attended public schools and benefited from additional lessons from our parents. My mom spent countless hours throughout our middle and high school years teaching us to write precisely and thoughtfully, while my dad challenged us to communicate honestly and simply. Both of them taught us to ask questions, be self-reflexive, and challenge injustice when we saw it. They also encouraged us to embrace our creative and artistic sides.

So, when I started college at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I enrolled in the acting program, intending to become a professional actor. In my junior year, though, I began to worry about making a living that way and switched to psychology. I took my first sociology class (Sociological Social Psychology) in my final semester of college and instantly wished I had pursued that line of study all along. After brief stints as a chiropractic assistant, English teacher in Korea, and client advisor for the Center for Creative Leadership, I made my way back to school (and sociology). In 2006, I obtained my master’s degree in sociology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and began the doctoral program at North Carolina State University, where my research has focused on the reproduction of inequality, social change, and the social psychology of immigration. I am grateful to be sharing this journey with my steadfast partner in love, laughter, and adventure, Joseph Higgins, and our ever-changing assemblage of soulful creatures.
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A clever person once said that finishing graduate school is not about jumping through hoops, but crawling through straws. I laughed when I heard that, but I could have cried. Sometimes, the process felt exactly like that. Completing a doctoral program is hard. Like anyone who has made it to this privileged place at the end of the straw(s), I have a lot of people to thank for inching me along. First and foremost, thank you to the young immigrant rights activists who welcomed me into their lives and trusted me with their experiences, perspectives, and visions for social change. I am honored to know you and grateful for the opportunity to observe, participate in, and write about your efforts to make the world a little more just. Your commitment to social justice and willingness to do the work inspire me.

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sometimes, asking difficult questions, and helping me sort it all out. Cathryn, you embodied a feminist sensibility before I knew what that was – playing the trumpet loudly and “with pride” – and you modeled compassionate, engaged teaching. I’m grateful for your example. Sis. Meredith, we shared a room growing up and so much more as adults. Thank you for inspiring me with your endless capacity to imagine new possibilities around every corner, for speaking your mind even in the face of resistance, and for always being up for an adventure. Haley, Selah, Jimmy, Drayton, and Rowen, thanks for cheering me on. I’m doing the same for you! Marsha, your creative spirit and feminist mentoring continue to nurture me. Gloria, I would have written a different dissertation if it weren’t for you. Paul and Carol, where would I be without your love and support all these years? Heli Koppel-Benson, you probably don’t know how much your friendship, support, and interest in my work has meant to me. Kevin, thanks for making the serious business of writing a dissertation a lot more fun. Robert, you can finally call me Doctor; Mary, thanks for helping him get my name right! Cornelia and Ray, you bring so many interesting people together in conversation every month. Thanks for including me.

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continually engaging others in conversation about the things I study. You have a disarming and compassionate way of getting people talking about themselves and the contradictions that keep inequality going. I admire that (and so much more) about you and aspire to be as good a “street” sociologist as you already are. I love you and am lucky, grateful, and happy beyond words to have you by my side through this journey and in life.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I have different immigration stories… or, I guess, a changing immigration story, right? Because things change all the time. So, I would say that in terms of immigration stuff, all of the stuff that has happened in the last two years has been added to the immigration story. The civil disobediences, the deciding to stay in the country, the deciding how to continue trying to live my life, how to get a job – all that stuff has sort of changed my story. But I mean, but there’s also different stories about what I want to do in the next couple of years and what I have to do to get there. I have stories: I have love stories, I have stories about biking, I have stories about liking music. There’s all sorts of different stories, I guess.

– from an interview with Delia, an undocumented youth activist

This dissertation is a study of storytelling in a social movement for immigration reform. Like Delia, I too have different stories to explain how I got involved in this project. I have a story that starts in the seventh grade when I befriended an immigrant from Colombia and witnessed the everyday racism she encountered in a small, predominately white, southern town. I have another story that begins in high school, when a friend from Germany asked me to explain American settlers’ treatment and ultimate genocide of native people. I didn’t know about that, yet. I have another story that starts in college when I first learned that “Operation Wetback” was the real name of a real program in the federal government to drive Mexican and Mexican-looking people out of the country. Finally, I have a story that begins in graduate school when I discovered a group of undocumented youth activists working diligently to develop and use their personal stories to politicize their struggles and win support for

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1 All names are pseudonyms.
immigration reform. Although all of these stories have shaped the direction my research has taken over the years, that last story is the one I’m going to tell about how this project started.

THE STUDY

In the early spring of 2010, I wrote my qualifying exam on the “social psychology of migration and assimilation.” A few years earlier, I had done my thesis research on the social construction of the “American immigrant” during the Ellis Island years. So when it was time to choose a dissertation topic, I knew I wanted to continue my study of immigration. But my training as a critical sociologist had sensitized me to issues of inequality and made me especially interested in people’s efforts to bring about progressive social change. So I began looking for a location where I could do ethnographic research on immigration reform work – broadly construed. Toward that end, I joined several Listservs on immigration-related matters and began attending informational seminars, protest rallies, and meetings organized by local advocacy organizations. One group was meeting monthly to discuss an array of anti-immigrant laws that were being proposed (at an alarming rate) by conservative state legislators and to plan letter-writing campaigns to challenge them. Another group was engaged in a multi-year campaign to expose and fight the dangerous and exploitive working conditions of the state’s predominately undocumented tobacco farm workers. Yet another group was organizing international trips to show U.S. citizens how “free trade” policies impacted small communities in Latin America and forced people to migrate. There was a lot going on in my area. It was just a matter of deciding what my focus would be.
Then, in March 2010, someone sent out an email on one of the Listservs to let people know that the “Trail of DREAMs” would be traveling through the state at the end of the month. I’d never heard of them. After a quick Internet search, I learned that this was a group of college-aged immigrants – three of whom were undocumented – who were walking from Miami to Washington, D.C. Their goal was to raise awareness about barriers to higher education for undocumented youth. When they passed through communities on their route, they encouraged local residents to walk with them and learn about their stories. The group had left Miami on January 1 and expected to arrive in the Capitol on May 1. At that time, they planned to call on Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform, including the DREAM Act.

It took me a moment to absorb what I was reading. These were undocumented immigrants? They were telling people they were undocumented? Weren’t they afraid of being picked up by the immigration authorities and deported? And what was the DREAM Act? This was the first time I’d heard about this bill. After another Internet search, I learned that it was one of several pieces of legislation that immigration reform advocates were pushing Congress to pass as part of a comprehensive immigration reform “package” in 2010. This particular bill was narrowly drafted to provide relief for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children and were raised in American culture but faced legal barriers to full inclusion in American society because of their immigration status.

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2 As I learned later, they were more afraid of being assaulted by anti-immigrant nativists as they made their way on foot through the deep South.

3 The DREAM Act was first introduced in Congress in 2001 and has been reintroduced every legislative session since. Although each version is different, the bill would provide a path to citizenship to undocumented young
After reading about the bill and who it was designed to help, I sympathized with the young people’s struggles. As I saw it, they had little say in the decisions that landed them in the United States and no control over the immigration classification system that branded them undocumented. It seemed only fair to allow them a chance to adjust their legal status. But I felt ambivalent about the bill. It would help only a tiny fraction of the nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants estimated to be living in the U.S. at the time. The problems with an immigration system that would allow such a large number of people to live and work in a country without legal status seemed to call for a more substantial solution.

Still, I was intrigued by the group’s boldness and decided to join them when they arrived in my state. On the first day, dozens of supporters came out to walk with them. After a few hours, I made my way to the front to talk to two members of the group. One of them shared a story about growing up poor in his native country, moving to the U.S. as a teenager, excelling in his high school, but then struggling to afford the out-of-state tuition rates undocumented youth were charged in his home state of Florida. The other told a similar story and elaborated on the group’s goals. They hoped that by walking through conservative and stereotypically anti-immigrant southern communities and sharing their stories as they went, they would be able to connect with people on a personal level, dispel stereotypes, and build support for change. I was inspired by their resolve and by their optimism: they believed they could change the law by changing the culture. I was also moved by their stories.

Toward the end of the second day, I joined the other two walkers. This time, when I asked them about their stories, one of them laughed quietly and said, “Cue track three.” The people who arrived in the U.S. as children, graduated from U.S. high schools, attended college or joined the military, and stayed out of legal trouble.
other one heard this and also laughed. I asked what that meant. They explained that they loved sharing their stories, but that sometimes it got old. At that point, they’d been doing it countless times a day for three months. As they proceeded to share their stories with me anyway, I wanted to melt into the sidewalk. I was embarrassed that I had not recognized the work that went into their storytelling strategy. Indeed, I hadn’t even thought of it as a strategy until that moment.

I wanted to know more. Was anybody else doing this? Were they doing it for the same reasons? Was it working? I spent the next several days trolling the Internet. Almost immediately, I discovered video clips from a rally that had taken place a few weeks earlier in downtown Chicago. One after another, eight young adults declared themselves “undocumented and unafraid.” They shared their stories of growing up in the U.S. and called on other undocumented youth to join them in “coming out” and demanding legislative change. Two other groups – one from New York and another from Baltimore – were planning their own walks in solidarity with the Trail. Young people, I realized, were organizing and starting to form their own groups to push for immigration reform. Like the members of the Trail of DREAMs, they were using storytelling as their primary social change tactic.

As I soon learned, DREAMers had borrowed the “coming out” narrative frame from the gay and lesbian rights movement.4 In an interview, one of the female movement leaders (who also identified as queer) explained how this came about. Beginning in 2009, a small

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4 Gay rights activists, in turn, built on storytelling strategies developed in earlier movements to challenge stigma and invisibility through personal disclosure. The feminist movement against rape, for instance, developed the “speak-out,” in which women publicly disclosed their personal experiences in order to politicize and challenge their stigmatization (Whittier 2012).
group of undocumented youth who were working with prominent citizen-advocates to try to stop the deportation of an undocumented college student began meeting to talk about their experiences. In these gatherings, they spoke openly about being undocumented, something they had rarely done outside of private conversations with family members and their closest friends. For them, being able to talk freely about a stigmatizing status was a liberating experience. As she explained:

We were able to say, “I’m undocumented,” out loud, and it was just, like, a good thing [laughs]. And we literally were sitting at our table just talking to each other about how good it felt to be able to say that, and how amazing it would be if we would be able to bring that to other people. And someone said, “It’s like coming out. It’s like when you come out when you’re queer.” And then someone asked, “Is there a national coming-out day for LGBT people?” And then we said, “Yes. Yes, there is.” And we were like, “What if we did a national coming-out day for undocumented people?” And we just sat there and talked about it…. And someone said, “Well, we need to make it our own. You know, gay people come out of the closet. What do undocumented people come out of?” And so, that’s how we came up with “coming out of the shadows.”

The young woman went on to explain that these early conversations laid the groundwork for the Chicago rally discussed above. This rally structure, one that combined “coming out” with personal storytelling, quickly became the model used by undocumented youth around the country in their local advocacy efforts.

I was drawn to this movement by DREAMers’ public actions, especially their storytelling. It was shocking to hear them say out loud that they were undocumented. But their stories were emotionally gripping. They made me care about them and want to help. But, as one of the Trail of DREAMs walkers reminded me, storytelling in the context of a social movement was work. It was a strategy aimed at bringing about particular social and
political changes. So, then, what was going on behind the scenes? How were these storytelling performances crafted? How were young, undocumented immigrants persuaded to enact them? And what were the consequences? This dissertation aims to answer these questions through an ethnographic examination of the backstage processes that enabled the creation of public storytelling performances in the undocumented youth movement. In what follows, I will discuss what scholars have learned about storytelling in social movements and will suggest how my research contributes to and extends that body of work. I will then explain the background and context for this particular movement. Next, I will describe my methods, data collection, and analytic approach. I will conclude by outlining the analysis presented in the remaining chapters.

STORYTELLING IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Throughout American history, social movements have been filled with stories and storytelling (Davis 2002). As McAdams (1995) asserts, storytelling “may be the way through which human beings make sense of their own lives and the lives of others” (207). In telling their stories to each other, victims of injustice and oppression can begin to build a collective identity (Hunt and Benford 2004). As part of a political strategy, storytelling can also be used to elicit sympathy and persuade others to take action (Davis 2002; Polletta 2002). In the context of social movement framing, storytelling can deflect blame, for instance, when “survivor” stories are used to encourage listeners to recognize both the vulnerability and agency of members of oppressed groups (Dunn 2010). Storytelling can also overcome the
cognitive limitations of social movement framing (Polletta 2002). Smith (1998), for instance, argued that American abolitionists were effective at gaining public support in part because the firsthand accounts told by escaped slaves offered listeners a way of understanding their suffering that rational arguments and deliberative debate could not.

There is nothing intrinsically political about telling stories. But under certain circumstances, stories can radicalize individuals or motivate collective action. These consequences arise from the particular social context, the way a story is organized and told, and processes of interpretation (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Like all forms of narrative, political storytelling draws on certain norms of content and performance (when, what, how, where, and by whom stories are told) for its coherence and meaning. These rules both enable and constrain the types of stories social movement actors tell (Polletta 1998, 2006). As Ewick and Silbey explain, “Even the most personal of narratives rely on and invoke collective narratives – symbols, linguistic formulations, structures, and vocabularies of motive – without which the personal would remain unintelligible and uninterpretable” (1995: 211-212). This cultural familiarity is what allows storytellers to explain behaviors and create images their audiences understand and to which they know how to respond (Dunn 2010; McAdams 1996).

In this way, storytelling can also reproduce inequalities, for instance, when storytellers draw on themes and images that reflect and uplift the dominant culture and its norms, values, and beliefs. Unlike social movement frames that can be revised almost without end (Klandermans 1992; W. Gamson 1988), there just aren’t that many storylines marginalized groups can use to elicit sympathy and respect from the dominant group.

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5 Frames are the interpretive schemas or “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns” of social movement groups (Benford and Snow 2000: 614).
(Polletta 1998). Even when stories are told with the explicit aim of challenging stereotypes or raising awareness of a social problem, they can still reproduce hegemonic narratives in the broader culture (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Polletta 2006). As Ewick and Silbey (1995) remind us, the norms and conventions governing the content and performance of stories limit what, when, how, where, and by whom stories are told. In some cases, movements organize around particular events and opportunities that arise in the social context itself. Those circumstances shape the kinds of stories social movement actors tell.

In the immigration reform movement, it is especially important to acknowledge the legislative context in which DREAMers constructed their stories. The DREAM Act is a very narrow bill that would apply to only a sliver of the undocumented population. By most estimates, there are between 11 and 12 million undocumented people currently living in this country (Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker 2012; Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013). A recent report by the Migration Policy Institute found that no more than 2.1 million of them could meet the initial criteria for the DREAM Act, and less than half would be able to fulfill all the requirements and become permanent legal residents (Batalova and McHugh 2010). That means that in pushing for this particular bill, DREAMers had to fashion themselves according to the restrictive conditions laid forth in the bill itself and show that they should have one of those coveted spots. It is in this context that they crafted their stories. My research offers an opportunity to examine how they navigated these constraints.

In the context of a social movement, stories can also be used to craft positive identities. When we tell stories about ourselves, we signify that we are certain kinds of people (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Self-narrative enables us to situate and explain
our lives and behaviors, create positive self-images, and repair stigmatized ones (Davis 2000; Jackson 2007; Loseke 2007; Mason-Schrock 1996; Plummer 1995; Stein 1997). However, scholars note that an important way members of a group maintain a coherent, viable, and emotionally-resonant shared identity is through boundary maintenance – clearly demarcating the parameters of who and what is included, and then policing the boundaries (Schwalbe et al. 2000). One way of doing this is by controlling the narratives a group uses to give meaning to and sustain a collective identity. But who is included in the narrative? Who is left out? My research offers insight into how narrative identity work in social movements can enable some groups to craft positive self-images while excluding others entirely.

Just as stories can be used to build a shared identity, their emotional resonance is often what wins storytellers sympathy and support (Jasper 1998, 2011; Polletta 2006). In the context of a social movement, “sad tales” (Goffman 1961) or “war stories” (Fine 1995) sum up what it feels like to be a victim of injustice and, in doing so, justify a particular line of action. Emotions are an integral part of social life, pervading all aspects of social movements (Jasper 1998). Emotions arise from protest activities, motivate people to take part in movements, shape members’ relationships to each other, and influence their commitment to the cause (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Jasper 2011). Accordingly, activists can use emotions in their efforts to bring about change. To do so requires emotion work, or the ability to elicit or suppress certain feelings in ourselves or others (Hochschild 1979; Thoits 1996). Emotion work is guided by cultural feeling rules that affect how we interact with others. They tell us which feelings are appropriate to feel or express in a given situation (Hochschild 1979; Shott 1979). We learn these feeling rules the same way we learn other social
expectations: through socialization into our culture and its systems of inequality. In U.S.
society, for instance, dominant gender ideologies associate masculinity with emotional
control and strength, and femininity with sensitivity and weakness (Kimmel 1996; Sattel
1976; Schwalbe and Schrock 2009; Shields 2005). Thus, feeling rules can both mark and
reinforce status differences (Bartky 1990; Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006; Hochschild
1983; Hochschild and Machung 1989; see also Clark 1987). My research provides an
opportunity to examine how feeling and expression rules are negotiated in the context of a
social movement and the implications for the reproduction of inequality.

Finally, most scholars who study narrative have treated stories as “texts” or “social
products” whose meanings can be unpacked through careful content, discourse, or narrative
analysis (Polletta et al. 2011). This interest in storied content has produced a vast and
growing body of research on the meaning- and sense-making functions of personal stories
(Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Polletta et al. 2011). While research on narrative in social
movements is still in its nascent stages, scholars have generally taken the same path,
privileging content over process and intensive interviewing and content analytic methods
over ethnographic research (Davis 2002; Fine 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 2008; Polletta et
al. 2011). This has left us with a dearth of knowledge about the “how” of storytelling, or the
“social processes and circumstances through which narratives are constructed, promoted, and
resisted” (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 256). Narrative analytic approaches that incorporate
ethnographic fieldwork, on the other hand, allow us to see how storytellers “call on or
otherwise respond to the contexts, contingencies, and resources of narration to fashion their
accounts” (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 256). By combining content analysis of activists’
stories with an ethnographic examination of the backstage processes by which they were crafted, I deepen our understanding of “narrative work” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) in the context of a social movement. More specifically, I show how stories are not just “social products,” but interactively-constructed and institutionally-regulated “social performances” (Polletta et al. 2011: 110).

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Every year, approximately 65,000\(^6\) undocumented immigrants graduate from U.S. high schools and confront a sober reality. They cannot work legally, obtain a driver’s license, or receive federal grants or loans for higher education. In some states, they are not allowed to enroll in public two- or four-year colleges; in others, undocumented students are required to pay out-of-state tuition. In most cases, there is no independent way for them to adjust their legal status without first leaving the country. Under current U.S. immigration laws, undocumented immigrant minors usually obtain legal residency through their parents or another adult relative who must apply for them.\(^7\) If that has not happened before these young people reach adulthood, the only option in most cases is for them to return to their nation of birth and apply for a visa on their own, with no guarantee of receiving one. Even with a visa, many would still face punitive bans, up to ten years, for having already lived in the United States without legal authorization.

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\(^6\) Another 15,000 drop-out before finishing high school (Passel 2006).

\(^7\) Immigration laws do make limited provisions for undocumented, unaccompanied minors.
The DREAM Act

In 2001, U.S. Senators Richard Durbin and Orrin Hatch introduced a federal bill that would provide a path to legalization for some of these young adults. Different versions of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) have been introduced every congressional session since, most recently in May 2011. Although the details of each version vary, the DREAM Act would provide temporary residency status to undocumented immigrants who can prove that they entered the country as minors, have lived here continuously for at least five years, graduated from a U.S. high school or obtained a certificate of General Education Development, possess “good moral character” (usually interpreted as not having a criminal record), and have completed two years toward a four-year degree or two years of military service. After a multi-year waiting period, if they stayed out of trouble, they would be allowed to apply for permanent legal residency.

On December 18, 2010, the DREAM Act failed to pass the U.S. Senate by three votes, after passing the House on December 8. As of August 2014, the DREAM Act has still not become law. However, in June 2012, President Barack Obama announced his administration’s creation of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a new program that would allow DREAM Act-eligible youth to apply for a (renewable) two-year reprieve from deportation and a work permit. Most observers – reporters, politicians, and immigration reform advocates – credit the actions of “DREAMers” (potential beneficiaries of the bill) and their allies for getting the bill this far and for influencing the political decisions that led to the creation of DACA.
Contemporary History of U.S. Immigration Reform

The last time Congress passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill was over twenty-five years ago, when President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. IRCA created a path to citizenship for about 60% of the five million undocumented immigrants estimated to be living in the U.S. at the time. It also increased funding for enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border and made it illegal for employers to knowingly hire undocumented immigrants. In the years since, the number of immigrants living and working in the U.S. without legal status has only increased, peaking at about 12 million in 2007 and remaining at between 11 and 12 million ever since (Passel and Cohn 2012). Opponents of expanded immigration often point to IRCA as evidence that any bill that includes “amnesty” for existing undocumented immigrants won’t work.

Subsequent legislation, most notably the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) passed during the Clinton administration, has made it significantly more difficult for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States to adjust their legal status. Under provisions established by IIRIRA, immigrants who reside in the U.S. without legal authorization for more than one year cannot apply for legal status without first leaving the country for ten years, unless they obtain a waiver. Waivers are rare and are typically granted only when immigrants can demonstrate that their deportation will cause extreme hardship for a relative who is a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident.

In addition, section 287(g) of IIRIRA allows the U.S. Attorney General to enter into agreements enabling state and local law enforcement agencies to enforce federal immigration laws. This provision was largely ignored until it gained the attention of lawmakers following
the events of 9/11. Many public officials argued that the federal government did not have the resources to monitor the nation’s vast immigrant population and that state and local law enforcement agencies should assist in enforcing immigration laws (Lacayo 2010).

Participation in the 287(g) program expanded steadily until it was dismantled in late 2010. It was replaced by “Secure Communities,” a biometric information-sharing program administered by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) under the executive branch’s Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (American Immigration Council 2011). This program requires state and local law enforcement agencies to check arrestees’ fingerprints against DHS immigration databases. If there is a “hit,” ICE is automatically notified and issues a detainer asking local law enforcement to hold the individual until ICE field officers can transfer custody. Originally piloted by the Bush administration in 2008 in fourteen jurisdictions, the Obama administration began expanding the program in 2011. As of January 2013, Secure Communities has been implemented in all of the nation’s 3,181 state and local law enforcement jurisdictions (Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2013). Participation is now mandatory, although some community leaders have contested key aspects of the program (Fritze 2014; Levenson 2013; Olivo 2011).

In recent years, federal immigration reform legislation has prioritized enforcement over providing a path to legalization. In late 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the “Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act.” Along with other punitive measures, this bill would have made it a felony to be in the country without legal authorization or to aid an undocumented immigrant. The bill sparked a (short-lived) national movement that reignited the immigration policy debates. In the spring of 2006,
millions of immigrants and their supporters marched in cities across the country calling for a comprehensive approach to immigration reform that included the legalization of undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. (Bloemraad, Voss, and Lee 2011; Johnson and Hing 2007). Despite several proposals in both houses of Congress, no such bill has passed since 1986.

Indeed, the sociopolitical climate has become even more anti-immigrant in some places and has fueled the recent rise in state-level immigration legislation, most notably, Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 (SB 1070). Passed in 2010, SB-1070 requires Arizona law enforcement officers to make an attempt during a “lawful stop, detention or arrest” to check the citizenship status of anyone they “reasonably suspect” is in the country illegally. Similar laws have since passed in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Indiana, while others have been introduced in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Minnesota. The passage of these state-level immigration restriction laws, coupled with state-federal enforcement partnerships through programs like 287(g) and Secure Communities, have increased the odds that even “low-priority” undocumented immigrants, such as college students, would become caught up in the nation’s immigration detention and deportation system. It is in this sociopolitical context that undocumented youth began organizing around the passage of the DREAM Act.

SETTING AND METHOD

Data Collection

This project is based on data gathered from fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and movement documents. From May 2010 to January 2012, I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork
with a local immigrant rights group composed of undocumented youth activists and their college-aged allies. I continued my involvement with the group after that, but primarily through interviews and email correspondence on the group’s Listserv. As I will explain in greater detail below, my participation in this group and the broader movement was primarily in the role of a researcher-ally. I usually took an active, if minor, support role in the movement activities I observed. Most of my fieldwork was conducted at locations in a southeastern metropolitan area. However, I frequently traveled with the local group out of state. All told, my study encompasses observations of movement-related events in Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Washington, DC.

In addition to my fieldwork, I conducted thirty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with DREAMers, and an additional five interviews with movement allies. Among the DREAMers I interviewed, nineteen were women and thirteen were men. They ranged in age from nineteen to thirty, although most were in their mid-twenties. Twenty-nine self-identified as Latina/o, two as Arab, and one as Asian. Nine identified as queer, and twenty-three as heterosexual. Three had master’s degrees, eleven had bachelor’s degrees, and sixteen were either currently enrolled in college or were taking classes intermittently when they could afford it. Only two had not attended college at all. All of the allies I interviewed were in their mid-twenties. Three were men, and two were women. Two self-identified as white.

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8 DREAMers who did not identify as heterosexual most often described themselves as “queer,” but some alternately identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
two as Asian American, and one as Latina. All had bachelor’s degrees and were middle or upper middle class.  

Twenty-two interviews were conducted face-to-face in homes, restaurants, cafes, parks, and on the steps of public buildings. Fifteen interviews were done by phone as follow-ups to earlier conversations and informal interviews. Except for my first interview with a movement leader early in my research, I observed and interacted with participants in the field several times before interviewing them. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. They ranged in length from one hour to three-and-a-half hours. Most were about an hour-and-a-half. On one occasion, a DREAMer and her best friend (a citizen-ally) asked to be interviewed together. Another time, when I visited a DREAMer at his home, he similarly invited two of his close friends (DREAMers) who lived nearby to participate in the interview. Although I was initially concerned about interviewing people together, I found that, in these two cases, participants were intrigued by the details of each other’s stories, often jumped in to ask additional questions, and even cried with each other as they listened in. All other interviews were conducted one-on-one.

Finally, I gathered hundreds of pages of movement materials. These included training guides used to teach new members how to create their stories, PowerPoint slides from the Youth Empowerment Summits, flyers announcing storytelling events, and press releases and mission statements created by local and national groups. I also compiled stories DREAMers

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9 When allies told their own stories of becoming involved in the movement, they regularly described their “privileges,” including their subjective class status. In addition to their self-identification as middle and upper middle class, I used allies’ educational background and employment in professional jobs to determine their social class. For instance, two of the allies attend expensive private liberal arts colleges, another worked as an intern in a law office and later for a U.S. Representative, another was pursuing a master’s degree in public administration, and still another worked full-time for a Latina/o human rights organization.
posted online, news articles about the movement, and op-eds and blog posts written by DREAMers, their supporters, and, occasionally, their critics.

**The Local Group**

The local group I studied formed in May 2010 following informal meetings between four undocumented young people who met each other while participating in immigrant rights events in the state. After a few late-night meetings at a local International House of Pancakes restaurant and at each other’s apartments, they drafted a mission statement declaring their purpose: to build an immigrant rights movement in their state and persuade their congressional representatives to support the DREAM Act. They decided to invite other undocumented young people and citizen-allies in their friendship circles to join them. They also posted contact information for their group on a website created by other DREAMers outside the state to promote youth activism around the DREAM Act.

Although the membership of the group shifted somewhat during the period of my research as new people joined and others left, at any point in time there were usually about ten active members. Membership was about equally split between undocumented immigrants and citizen-allies, and between men and women. All members were in their mid-twenties. All of the citizen-allies had bachelor’s degrees and were middle or upper middle class. Most were white; one identified as Asian American. All of the undocumented members were Latina/o. When the group formed, only one undocumented member had completed her bachelor’s degree. After several months, two additional undocumented youth who had
recently graduated from college joined the group. Everyone else was taking classes at a community college or a four-year university, or was saving money for that purpose.

**Gaining Access**

I first learned about the local group when I found its information on the website for DREAMers that I mentioned above. There were no details about the group, so I emailed the group’s contact person to ask more about it. Lili, a DREAMer, responded by saying that they were just forming and that their aim was to “take action” to bring about immigration reform. She invited me to attend their next meeting, which was scheduled for the first week of June.

We met on a Tuesday evening at a local coffee shop. I arrived at the same time as one of the undocumented group members. I immediately recognized her as the young woman I’d met months before during a campus protest against the increasing influence of private money in public universities. At the time, she caught my attention because she was running out into the street to talk to people in their cars when they stopped at the light. I was alarmed by her tactic but impressed by her enthusiasm for social justice. I asked her about her major. She responded by loudly calling out that she wasn’t a student – that she couldn’t attend college because she was undocumented. Later, she explained that since she wasn’t a citizen or a legal resident, she would have to register as an international student. But because she was undocumented, she couldn’t get a student visa that would enable her to enroll as an international student.\(^\text{10}\) It sounded complicated, and I didn’t totally understand. But it seemed

\(^{10}\) For most undocumented immigrants, the major obstacle to attending college is the cost of tuition. In many states, undocumented students are required to pay out-of-state rates which can be more than four times higher
wrong that she couldn’t attend college, whatever the reason. When I saw her again at the coffee shop, we talked briefly about that earlier incident and quickly moved on to a discussion about her involvement in this new group. As one of its founding members, she described her vision for the group and her hope that they would be able to build enough support to not just get the DREAM Act passed but to inspire a youth-led immigrant rights movement in the state.

While we waited for the other members to arrive, I explained my research interests in immigration reform and asked what she thought about me studying and writing about their efforts for my dissertation. She said that she thought it would be “great” to have a researcher in the group. As the other members began to arrive, I started to have doubts about the feasibility of the project. Six people came to this meeting, but only five were members of the group. Were there going to be enough people involved to do a comprehensive study? Despite my doubts, I was drawn in by their enthusiasm and determination to bring about change. Through tears, the same young woman described becoming deeply depressed when she graduated from high school and realized she wouldn’t be able to go to college. Other young people, she asserted, were going through the same thing, and it had to stop. Over the course of the next three hours, the group laid out plans for an ambitious, multi-week direct action initiative aimed at getting a local U.S. Senator to proclaim her public support for the DREAM Act. Two undocumented group members declared that they would quit their jobs in order to participate. Another said she wasn’t sure she wanted to do that yet, because she was saving up to take a couple of college classes in the fall. But if they could get the DREAM Act

than the in-state rate. As undocumented immigrants, they are also barred from receiving federal financial aid, including subsidized loans and Pell Grants.
passed, she said, “It would mean so much more than just two classes.” It seemed like she, too, was leaning toward quitting her two jobs in order to advocate full-time for the DREAM Act.

I left that meeting feeling energized, skeptical, and worried. What they were planning was exciting and their confidence that it would work was infectious. But I was also pessimistic about the prospect of the DREAM Act passing, given the increasingly vitriolic anti-immigrant socio-political climate at the time. I wanted to scream, “Don’t quit your jobs!” I worried about what would happen to members of the group if the bill didn’t pass. I also wondered what would happen to my dissertation project. Would the group fizzle out before I had time to complete my research?

I decided to attend their next meeting, another late-night affair, at a group member’s apartment. This time, several other members came, and I was feeling more confident that the group was going to be large enough to study. Members spent seven hours that night planning protest actions. They talked tirelessly about who they would recruit to support them, what their public message should be, and how they would manage weather problems or health emergencies. They were putting serious thought into their actions. As I drove home (at four in the morning), I knew I wanted to make this group’s social change efforts the focus of my dissertation. If I ran into problems later, I reasoned, I could always turn it into an interview project.

Over the course of the next week, I met with members one-on-one and in small groups to ask what they thought about me studying and writing about the work they were doing. Everyone agreed that it would be good to have an academic in the group. During the
period of my research, I found that members of the group were often contacted by students from local universities who were similarly interested in observing and documenting the group’s activities. At one point, a graduate student followed a female group member around for several weeks as he completed a film project on her experiences as a young undocumented woman in U.S. society. Another graduate student developed a similar project around the life of a different group member. For several days, a reporter and camera operator from an international news agency filmed yet another member of the group as part of a broader project on the experiences of undocumented immigrants around the world. As I learned, these young people wanted others to know about their struggles. So, they were relatively open to outsiders, particularly those who could amplify their message outside the movement.

As my research expanded beyond the local group to include participation in meetings, trainings, and conferences out of state, I similarly asked the organizers for permission to observe and take notes. I always introduced myself as a graduate student who was interested in storytelling in the undocumented youth movement. The first time I asked to observe at an out-of-state event, an undocumented member of the local group vouched for me, describing me to one of the organizers as not just a researcher but also an ally. The organizer said he would put it to the broader group. No one objected. In fact, most agreed to participate later in formal interviews and gave me their contact information. After accompanying local group members to several of these events and participating in minor ways (e.g., as a note-taker during break-out sessions, helping set up for events, driving members to dinner, and so on), I found that members of the broader movement accepted my presence, talked openly with me,
and included me in most activities. During the period of my research, no one ever said no to my fairly broad request to observe and learn about their storytelling movement work.

**Being a Researcher-Ally**

Because the local group was small, trust was important, especially as members developed plans for risky actions and needed everyone to do their part. For that reason, I was a participant observer and assumed various ally roles in the group. For instance, I volunteered for multiple stints at “night watch” as several undocumented members of the group carried out a nearly two-week long direct action near the state capitol. Other times, I marched alongside the group or held signs at protest events. On still other occasions, I just listened or handed out fliers as other members of the group spoke publicly. On a few occasions, I told my own “story” of becoming an ally – once, after an undocumented member of the group asked all the allies to tell their stories as part of a fundraising event. I also frequently drove undocumented members who could not legally obtain a driver’s license to events both inside and outside the state. Finally, I agreed to serve as one of the group’s “funds coordinators,” a role that involved receiving cash or check donations and passing them along to a non-profit that set up a bank account for the group.

As previously noted, I also participated in numerous regional and national movement events, including planning meetings, trainings, and preparations for protest actions. On one occasion, for instance, I accompanied an undocumented member of the local group to Washington, D.C., for a four-day training in civil disobedience to prepare for a demonstration on Capitol Hill. I observed the training and the demonstration. I later returned
to Washington to watch as eight of these activists stood trial for their actions, waived their right to legal representation, and defended themselves in front of a judge.

I also participated in three Youth Empowerment Summits (YES) in different states on the east coast. These were formal one-day training sessions organized by leaders of the movement to teach new members how to tell their stories in compelling ways. I drove members of the local group to these events where they participated as facilitators. Since we always arrived a day before the summit, I was able to observe the preparations for the event, listen as facilitators practiced for the sessions they would be leading, and participate in the actual trainings. Whenever I accompanied group members to out-of-state events, I usually shared meals and sleeping spaces with them and the other participants, and I took part in their social events and casual gatherings. This level of access to backstage spaces enabled me to not only see how members of the movement developed and carried out their storytelling strategy, but also to engage them in casual conversation, ask questions, and learn more about their experiences and perspectives.

**Analytic Strategy**

I approached this research from a symbolic interactionist (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969), feminist, and grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) perspective. Symbolic interactionism is rooted in the work of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969). Symbolic interactionists see people as social agents who both create and respond to meanings that emerge from interaction (Blumer 1969). They can, thus, shape perceptions and be shaped by them. From this perspective,
people can always make choices and take action, but they often must do so in the context of restrictive material conditions and structural arrangements (Mead 1934).

In their analysis of identity, symbolic interactionists distinguish between *structural* approaches (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1977; Stryker and Burke 2001) that emphasize prediction, statistical generalizability, and quantitative methods, and *processual* approaches that emphasize the negotiation of meaning, interactive processes, and qualitative methods (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). My research is informed by the latter perspective. Processual interactionists see identities as socially constructed, emergent, and negotiated in face-to-face interaction. From this perspective, our identities are not fixed entities; rather, we draw on different cultural resources to create virtual selves and signify that we are (essentially) certain kinds of people (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). In this way, identities are not meanings “attached” to the self (e.g., Burke and Tully 1977: 837; Stryker and Burke 2001: 286–87); rather, they are “indexes of the self” or signs that *evoke* meaning as interactants interpret and respond to each other’s presentation of self (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 115).

Thus, as a symbolic interactionist fieldworker, I paid close attention to how members of the movement created and conveyed meaning about their actions and about themselves. I looked for patterns in the things they said, how they said them, and to whom. And I watched for differences in emotional expression and emotion work (Kleinman and Copp 1993). As a feminist researcher, I also was attuned to how people’s words and behaviors reproduced inequalities in the broader culture (Kleinman 2007). In addition, I looked for “patterned absences,” noting, for instance, that men rarely participated in storytelling events that
focused on experiences with depression or suicide, and that few undocumented youth who
identified as working-class participated at all in the movement.

Similarly, I paid attention to the ways in which my own identities shaped the
research. I was aware that my statuses as a white, middle-class, 30-something graduate
student and citizen gave me significant social advantages that many of the undocumented
members of the movement lacked. Like other allies in the movement, I talked openly about
these differences, acknowledging them as “privileges” when I shared my own story. It was
common for allies and undocumented members of the group to converse casually about the
privileges of citizenship, whiteness, and access to higher education.11 On some occasions, my
status as a graduate student in sociology seemed to open up these kinds of conversations.
During a long car ride, for instance, an undocumented member of the group described
something she’d read recently about “institutional racism” and asked me to explain more
about it. Two other undocumented women who were also in the car wanted to know if there
were books or films that I recommended to help them better understand it. I shared Peggy
McIntosh’s essay on white privilege with them and offered to check out the documentary
film “Race: The Power of an Illusion” from the university library. Perhaps because we shared
the same status as women, some of the undocumented women in the group (and the broader
movement) initiated similar conversations with me about gender inequality and feminism. I
once spoke with a male ally about similar issues after he described being mentored by
feminists he admired in college. On these occasions, members of the movement seemed to
see me as a teacher, spoke candidly about their observations of inequality, and asked me to

11 Most members of the local group had read at least parts of Paolo Friere’s (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed
and often quoted him or referred to things he had written.
help them learn more. I usually responded by offering my interpretations and by suggesting short essays that they could find online. At these times, my statuses seemed to aid rather than obstruct my research.

A few times, however, being ten years older than most members of the movement may have limited my ability to participate in some social events. For instance, about a year into my research, some of the undocumented and ally women in the group (all in their mid-twenties) started meeting a couple of times a month to go dancing at local clubs. I was never invited to these “ladies night” events (as they called them), but instead learned about them after hearing women talking casually before a group meeting. Similarly, in the second year of my research with the group, two of the women – an undocumented member and an ally – began participating in Mexican-style wrestling matches to fundraise for the group. I was invited to the matches, but not to their practice sessions. This suggests members of the group sometimes placed me in a separate category from “regular” allies, and it’s likely that I was not invited to other social events too. Even so, I spent a great deal of time with most members of the local group in both formal and informal settings, especially when they were working on their stories. Despite being left out of some social events, I don’t believe this significantly impacted my understanding and analysis of their storytelling work.

In a different way, being older than most members of the movement, white, and a citizen sometimes shaped how I responded during tense encounters with other citizens. For instance, during a trip to a rural part of Tennessee, three undocumented Latinas and I entered a convenience store in the late evening to purchase snacks. Two of the women were wearing T-shirts with “undocumented and unafraid” emblazoned across the front. As we made our
way through the store, several middle-aged white men seated at a back counter abruptly stopped talking, turned toward us, and stared silently as we perused the shelves. This made me nervous, and I encouraged the women to quickly select their items so that we could leave. They did. When we got into the car, no one said anything. So I blurted out, “Well, that was weird!” Immediately the women began laughing and joking about the how those “old white guys” must have been “freaking out” seeing all these “illegal aliens invading” their store. I’m certain that my actions shaped how they were feeling, what they did, and how they responded to me in the car. Although these encounters with unfriendly citizens were not common, they nonetheless exposed me to some of the experiences of fear, mistreatment, and disrespect many DREAMers told me about in their interactions with nativists. At the same time, it gave me more insight into the emotion work they must be doing on a regular basis to not only manage their own feelings when these things happened, but also those of anyone accompanying them.¹²

Finally, because I spoke and understood Spanish only at an intermediate level, I expected to sometimes miss important interactions between Spanish-speakers in the movement. To my surprise (and relief), members of the movement nearly always spoke in English. This was the case when they were talking with groups outside the movement (e.g., at rallies or during panel discussions) and when they were talking casually among themselves. Sometimes, during public presentations, they would speak in both English and Spanish, translating what they had just said into the other language. There were only a few

¹² In a similar way, Cahill and Eggleston (1994) found that wheelchair users often felt embarrassed when someone fussed over them or treated them rudely in public. As a result, they engaged in emotion management strategies that not only aimed to control their own feelings, but also those of friends or family members who might otherwise react angrily at their treatment and make things worse.
times when members spoke solely in Spanish, but these were always brief exchanges. Although these occasions were rare, when they occurred, I was not able to understand what was said. I usually followed up later, though, to ask them about it. I never heard any of the Asian or Arab members of the movement speaking anything other than English. As I learned, members of the movement wanted to be seen as American. Speaking English fluently – often with American regional accents – was part of how they demonstrated their cultural assimilation into this identity.

My data collection and analysis were guided by the inductive principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). With this approach, there is continual movement back and forth between analysis and data collection, and coding and memo-ing are ongoing processes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Kleinman 2007; Lofland et al. 2006). While I was in the field, I often carried a small notebook and audio-recorder to make verbatim notes and to document public storytelling events. I also wrote down fleeting impressions, analytic comments, and my emotional reactions to things that were happening in the field (Kleinman and Copp 1993). As soon as I left the field, I used these jottings and recordings, as well as my “head notes,” to type out full field notes, “notes-on-notes,” and analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Lofland et al. 2006).

As I developed hypotheses, I tested them out in the field and during interviews, and modified my analysis and interview questions as I learned more. For example, while observing the planning meetings for an upcoming storytelling event, I heard movement leaders repeatedly refer to certain members’ stories as “great” or “strong.” Participants said
the same things. One woman, for instance, told me in an enthusiastic tone that one particular man had an especially good story and encouraged me to talk to him. So during a break, I approached him and asked about his story. He quickly led me into an empty room, plopped down on the floor, and began to tell me his story. I was completely unprepared for what he shared. He described one tragic experience after another. I was shocked and couldn’t contain my own tears as he talked. Was tragedy what made a story “great”?

After that experience, I began asking people informally and in interviews for examples of stories that they thought were especially good. What did they like about them? After analyzing their responses, I learned that the content did not matter as much as the performance, the ability to elicit a sympathetic response and “make people cry” – as the young man’s story had done for me. With this new understanding, I began to pay more attention to whose stories elicited that kind of response in audiences. I discovered that in most cases, it was actually women who were telling stories that evoked the most sympathetic reactions. It was common for them to break into tears themselves as they shared their stories. Seeing this pattern, I began asking members of the movement how they felt after they shared their stories at various public events. I found that women and men experienced storytelling differently; women often felt ambivalent while men nearly always felt good. Storytelling, I came to understand, required emotion work – and women were doing considerably more than men. By moving back and forth in these ways between data collection and analysis, I was able to build on my early findings and come to a deeper understanding of what they meant sociologically. I used the same inductive strategies to analyze movement documents.
THE ANALYSIS AHEAD

In the next chapter, I analyze the backstage processes involved in crafting emotionally expressive stories that members believed would advance the movement’s interests. As I found, DREAMers were caught between a dominant gender culture that devalues emotional openness and sensitivity, and a movement subculture that promoted expressive and evocative storytelling as a primary social change tactic. Because members of the movement believed the best stories showed audiences what it felt like to be undocumented, this explicitly expressive tactic caused problems for men who had to overcome dominant cultural expectations that they control their emotions. At the same time, it created binds for women who worried about being perceived as weak if they showed too much vulnerability. In short, their desire to both elicit sympathy and avoid appearing weak created a dilemma for both the women and men in the movement. The narrative strategies they developed for managing this dilemma relied on conventional beliefs that define masculinity and femininity as emotional opposites. I found that this led to a gendered division of emotional labor that disproportionately burdened women and led them to identify with masculine conceptions of power. These adaptations to the gender order ultimately left intact the ideological link between vulnerability and femininity and reinforced the system of beliefs and institutional practices that devalue both.

Chapter three explores the identity work DREAMers did to signify “Americanness” and thereby demand full inclusion in U.S. society. Despite the seemingly inflexible, legalistic way that “American” is conventionally defined in the U.S. (as a native-born or naturalized citizen), the undocumented youth I studied adopted a fluid interpretation that made room for
people like them. I found that they used three main identity work strategies to shift the boundary of and signify membership in the category “American.” This involved efforts to construct American as a subjective feeling and moral identity, a status that can be earned, and a quality that one demonstrates – especially through political engagement in American society. By incorporating (white) middle-class-defined markers of Americanness in their public stories, they were able to construct themselves as good, moral people who deserved a chance to become full, legal Americans. At the same time, DREAMers’ identity work appeared to legitimate inequality by downplaying the collective effects of structural obstacles, like racism and class oppression, on the ability of most undocumented immigrants to present themselves as similarly good candidates for citizenship.

In chapter four, I examine efforts by DREAMers to reframe the debates around immigration reform in a way that enabled them to elevate themselves to positions of moral leadership and claim a legitimate stake in the issue. I found that DREAMers’ statuses as both young activists and undocumented immigrants contributed to feelings of marginalization in the broader immigration reform movement. DREAMers perceived themselves to be in competition with the more established and influential (adult) citizen-advocates in their efforts to assert political agency and win support for their political priorities (passing the DREAM Act). To subvert the power of (adult) citizen-advocates in the policy debates, DREAMers altercast citizen-advocates as illegitimate authorities on issues of immigration reform. At the same time, movement leaders sought to cultivate in other undocumented youth a sense of efficacy, power, and “entitlement” (as one of them put it) to speak with authority on these matters. In addition to portraying undocumented youth as already effective leaders who were
like earlier generations of freedom fighters, they also defined personal storytelling as a uniquely powerful and proprietary tool undocumented youth could use to bring about change. By framing storytelling in this way, DREAMers were also able to limit the participation of allies in their own groups and maintain their claim to being the proper public face of the movement for immigration reform.

Finally, in chapter five, I discuss how my findings contribute to greater understandings of three main processes in social movements: (1) how expressive tactics like storytelling are inflected through categories of difference such as gender and class; (2) how cultural and ideological markers of difference can be used by activists to challenge legal/structural boundaries; and (3) how marginalized factions can frame movements in ways that amplify their perspectives and assertions of political agency. I conclude by discussing the broader implications and limits of my analysis and by identifying areas for further research.
CHAPTER 2
GENDERED STORYTELLING IN THE UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH MOVEMENT

Like activists throughout history, the young people involved in the contemporary immigrant rights movement – popularly known as the DREAM Act Movement – saw personal stories as powerful political tools that could destabilize an unequal social order that cast them as undeserving Others – “criminal aliens,” welfare cheats, and pernicious invaders. They believed that their stories, if told in a compelling way, could alter perceptions, win sympathy, and challenge exclusionary laws. To show policymakers and the general public that they were good people who defy stereotypes and deserve a chance to become U.S. citizens, members of the movement sought to tell stories that conveyed their sympathetic, blameless, and respect-worthy natures. As one of the movement leaders said at the first large-scale, public rally organized by and for undocumented youth, “It is using our lives and stories as a political tool for change.” The best stories, they believed, were those that showed audiences what it felt like to be undocumented and moved them to take supportive action.

Storytelling is not just a way to push for political change, it is also a means by which we make sense of our lives, create positive identities, and repair stigmatized ones (Davis 2000; Jackson 2007; Loseke 2007; Mason-Schrock 1996; Plummer 1995; Stein 1997). When we tell stories about ourselves, we signify that we are certain kinds of people (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). For marginalized groups that have little political power, low social status, and few other ways of claiming respect, self-narrative may be an especially valuable tool for crafting positive self-images (Snow and Anderson 1987).
Like the young people I studied, scholars tend to emphasize the transgressive potential of storytelling (Polletta et al. 2011), the power of “personal stories, especially, [to] make the abstract real and the political personal” (Polletta 2009, 11). But people narrate their lives within a broader social context that limits the kinds of stories they can tell and how they can tell them (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008; Polletta 2006). To access resources or assistance from social institutions, for instance, storytellers must fit their narratives to the expectations and criteria set by those institutions (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Loseke 2007). Often these are not outlined directly, but rather reflect dominant ideas about the kinds of people who deserve help. Dunn (2002), for instance, found that women who had been stalked by their partners were able to receive assistance from the courts only if they presented themselves as fearful, blameless, and helpless victims. Other storylines that revealed, for instance, that a woman had maintained periodic contact with her stalker discredited her claim to being a real victim and jeopardized her appeal for protection. Legal help, in other words, was contingent on women being able to show through their stories that they were legitimate victims (see also Nolan 2002; Tatum 2002). Self-help groups similarly socialize members to narrate their problems and their biographies in specific, institutionally-sanctioned ways (Denzin 1987; Rice 2002).

Stories are also limited by cultural assumptions about the storytellers themselves (Fine 2002; Polletta 2006). Stories told by members of powerful groups tend to be taken more seriously and evaluated more positively than those told by members of less powerful groups (Loseke 2007; Polletta 2006; Polletta and Lee 2006). For instance, in his analysis of written news reports on anti-racism campaigns in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands,
Van Dijk (1991) found that ethnic minorities were quoted less often than whites, and when given voice, their perspectives were treated by reporters and editors as less credible than those of white speakers, who were often asked to substantiate or dispute minority claims. Similarly, Groves (1997) found in his research on animal rights activists that women were discouraged from serving in leadership roles because the activists themselves (both women and men) believed women were prone to telling emotional stories that would undermine the seriousness of their movement. Seeing men as naturally less emotional, they promoted them to top positions where they could lend male authority and credibility to their concerns.

Hegemonic beliefs, then, can create the same kinds of constraints as the overt suppression of certain voices.

Research on men and women in social movements suggests that normative ideas about gender may create special challenges for social change agents. Scholars find that militant styles of protest that involve, for instance, provoking confrontations with police or intimidating those who might consider crossing picket lines appeal especially to male activists (Fonow 1998; Kolarova 2009). The risky nature of these activities enables them to demonstrate their toughness, courage, and refusal to back down. Alternatively, movement-building activities that emphasize cooperation, interdependence, and attention to relationships are often seen as the special purview of women (Barnett 1993; Robnett 1996), as are movement tactics that encourage emotional expressivity, personal disclosure, and empathy (V. Taylor 1999). Taken together, these studies suggest that activists who use personal stories to carry out their struggles must manage contradictory cultural expectations, and that gender is likely to create special challenges.
This chapter uses participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of the undocumented youth movement to analyze the backstage processes involved in crafting emotionally expressive stories that would advance the movement’s interests. As I will show, movement activists were caught between a dominant gender culture that devalues emotional openness and sensitivity, and a movement subculture that promoted expressive and evocative storytelling as a primary social change tactic. In Western societies, showing vulnerability is associated with femininity and can elicit attributions of weakness. Members of the movement were brought to the U.S. as children or young teenagers, were socialized into the dominant culture, and held similar beliefs about the meanings and risks involved in sharing one’s feelings – especially in public. However, they also believed it was important to show audiences what it felt like to be undocumented as a way to elicit sympathy and support. Their desire to both elicit sympathy and avoid appearing weak created a dilemma. How did these young people construct and perform what they perceived to be effective, emotionally expressive stories that still allowed them to claim respectability as proper men and women in U.S. culture?

From a social constructionist perspective, storytelling is not a straightforward, objective recounting of one’s experiences; rather, people craft and perform stories in a given context, using the cultural resources that are available to them (Davis 2002; Fine 2002; Jackson 2007). I show how members used gender as a resource to negotiate the contradictions they faced.\(^{13}\) Men learned to give angry and indignant performances and to account for occasional shows of vulnerability by emphasizing their masculinity. Women

\(^{13}\) My analysis is also informed by West and Zimmerman’s (1987) understanding of gender as an interactional accomplishment (see also West and Fenstermaker 1993).
learned to blend tearful, feminized appeals for sympathy with defiant (and masculinized) fist-pumping. While these strategies enabled them to deflect attributions of weakness, give emotionally expressive and evocative performances, and preserve their claims to being proper women and men, they did so at a price. They ultimately left intact the cultural link between womanhood and vulnerability and the gendered system of beliefs, practices, and institutional arrangements that devalue both.

ON THE STAGE: MEN GIVING MASCULINE PERFORMANCES

Feeling rules tell people which emotions are appropriate to feel and express in a given situation (Hochschild 1979). Different rules not only apply in different situations; they also mark and reinforce status differences (Bartky 1990; Hochschild 1983; Shields 2005). In Western societies, emotional stoicism, toughness, and rationality are considered essential components of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). From an early age, boys in U.S. culture learn from their parents, teachers, peers, and media that big boys and real men don’t cry (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992; Kane 2006). Being able to control oneself, including one’s emotions, is crucial for signifying not only that one is a member of the privileged gender category, but also that one deserves the power, status, and other material and symbolic rewards that come with claiming membership in that group (Kimmel 1996; Messner 2009; Sattel 1976; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). It is also a key way men hold on to power. In high-status, male-dominated, professional jobs, for instance, men typically try to show no emotion or they cultivate angry and intimidating emotional displays to induce fear and compliance in others (Pierce 1996; Sutton 1991). The expectation that men show such a
limited range of emotions in order to claim full status as men might be expected to create problems for men who are involved in social change groups that promote emotionally-evocative and expressive public storytelling as a primary means of advancing their political agenda.

In the undocumented youth movement, men got around this problem by telling stories that signaled their competence as men and by developing emotional displays that supported their masculine presentations of self. They emphasized, for instance, their accomplishments in school, achievements in sports, ambitions for powerful careers, and potentials for breadwinning. In addition, they tended to express a narrow range of emotions – most often indignation or righteous anger – and avoided showing emotional vulnerability, or accounted for it in ways that supported their claims to manly virtue.

Eduardo’s case is a good example of the kinds of stories and emotions men in this movement tended to share publicly. He told his story at one of the first public rallies organized by undocumented youth. The goal of the rally was to connect with and mobilize other youth:

This past summer, I graduated from one of the top high schools in the state of Illinois and was accepted into one of the most highly respected universities in the city. With my school supplies packed, classes registered for, newly met friends, and a $20,000 grant in my hands, I was excited, happy, overjoyed. Exactly one week prior to beginning the biggest milestone of my life, I received a call from a person who worked in the financial aid office. She asked for a piece of information: a social security number. Because I am undocumented, I was unable to produce a number. I had my work stripped from my hands. I was denied one of the most fundamental of human rights.

Eduardo portrays himself as someone who has worked hard, followed the rules, and done well so far. When he attempted to continue on his upward path, his ambitions were unjustly
thwarted by arbitrary rules that discriminated against undocumented immigrants. As he told his story, Eduardo expressed indignation at being denied access to financial aid and the promise of a middle-class future. His emotional expression reflected and reinforced his image of himself as someone who had earned and was entitled to certain rewards.

When men told their stories in this movement, they often expressed this kind of outrage at the unfairness of the situations they faced. Many of them vowed to “fight back” aggressively and used language that asserted dominance and control. For instance, they did not make “asks,” they made “demands.” Men engaged in this kind of tough talk and angry emotional expression even when describing tragic situations. Jacob, for example, related the experience of losing his mother to cancer, something he attributed to her years of breathing toxic fumes while working as an undocumented immigrant in this country:

Anyone who had proper documentation would not work under those conditions. She lived every day in fear that one day La Migra [the immigration authorities] would walk through those factory doors and take her away from us, her family. La Migra never came but the broken immigration system took my mother from my family. She died of cancer two months ago. At that point, I realized that I wasn’t going to let my mother die in vain. I have made the choice to fight against this unjust and inhumane system, to end the exploitation of hard workers trying to put food on their families’ plates. And now she’s buried in the land of freedom, in the land where she’s considered a criminal. I stand here to demand comprehensive immigration reform. I stand here to demand justice. And I stand here to say that I am not afraid anymore.

Jacob could have expressed sadness over his mother’s death or emphasized the depression he fell into or his persistent feelings of loneliness – emotions he shared privately in an interview. Instead, he expressed outrage at the exploitive and dangerous working conditions that he believed killed his mother and caused his personal suffering. He vowed to avenge her death and to “demand justice” and social change.
When men shared their stories in public – even when they described circumstances like Jacob’s that were likely to elicit a sympathetic response – they almost always framed their experiences with injustice as affronts warranting outrage. In addition, many men rejected sympathetic responses from audiences by telling them bluntly that they didn’t want their “pity,” but rather expected them to be moved to action by their own sense of indignation. As Clark (1987) argued, sympathy tends to flow from those in power to those with less power. By derisively labeling shows of sympathy “pity” and preemptively rejecting this kind of response, these men not only claimed power vis-à-vis their audience, they also asserted that they are the kinds of people who can manage their suffering on their own, and thus deserve respect and admiration.

Even when men reported feelings that could be perceived as “unmanly,” they talked about them in ways that reaffirmed their claims to masculine virtue. Victor, for instance, talked about “fear” in this way:

When my mother, a single parent, brought me to this country, she told me that this was the land where I could work hard and make my dreams come true. However, she probably didn’t know and never told me that in order to live in this country I was going to have to learn how to live in fear – you know that same fear when your stomach tightens up and you feel cold sweats all over your body. The same fear that I began to experience when I was only nine years old and when my Latino-Vietnamese neighborhood was targeted by the Department of Immigration. During the weeks when the raids were going on, my sisters and I had to stay inside our apartment by ourselves with the windows and doors locked and the lights off, waiting and praying for our mother not to get caught on her way back from work. This is the same excruciating feeling of fear that I felt from time to time every time I had to see a police officer in my rearview mirror knowing that I’m going to work to help my family and help my own life. However, I know that that can be taken away by being pulled over. This is the same fear I continue to have every time I have to think that I’m going to have to let go of my dream of getting that job –
you know, that job that we all dream for, the job that’s going to make us want to get up in the morning and feel accomplished.

First, Victor distances himself from the fearful child he used to be. Since young boys are not held to the same emotional standards as adult men, this allows him to escape accountability as a grown man for those feelings. Then, when talking about being afraid as an adult, he emphasizes his devotion to his family and commitment to becoming a respectable worker. Victor thus depicts his current fear as an understandable response to threats that make it difficult for him to meet his obligations as a man.

By revealing vulnerability but then accounting for it in ways that reaffirmed his manhood, Victor supported the interests of the movement in sharing sympathetic stories without jeopardizing his claim to a valued, masculine self. This storytelling approach also enabled Victor and other men in the movement to publicly acknowledge a wider range of feelings, while simultaneously showing emotional control. By talking about but not displaying fear (or otherwise breaking down emotionally) as he shared his story, Victor showed that he was not controlled by his emotions; rather he controlled them. This is important for signifying a masculine self (Kimmel 1996; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Shields 2005; Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe 2011). Practicing together was another way men helped control their emotional performances and maintain their claims to manly virtue.

*Behind the Scenes: Helping Men Emote*

Men sometimes worked independently on their stories, but more often they helped each other develop what they believed would be emotionally-engaging and effective
performances. This was especially common when men sought to express “feminine-defined” emotions, such as vulnerability. Helping each other plan emotionally-expressive performances was important, “so it’s not just like, you know, ‘oh, victimized me,’” as one of the male leaders of the movement explained in an interview. Uncontrolled emotional displays could be discrediting by making men seem pitiable rather than respectable. The following exchange took place the night before a “youth empowerment summit,” a one-day conference organized by movement leaders to recruit new members and teach them how to use their personal stories politically. Paul and Thomas were helping their friend Ivan prepare his story to share with summit participants the next day:

Paul: Just show more emotion.

Thomas: Yeah, way more. You have to be really vulnerable. The more vulnerable you are, the more vulnerable they’re all going to be in their stories.

Paul: And more images.

Thomas: Like, you were saying something about crossing the barriers to college. So, what are some of those barriers to college? From your personal life or like, “I was tired of seeing my friend or something suffer and have to do this, this, this to go to college.” And then you said at one point you were still living in fear, but fear of what? Like, articulate it. Like, Paul always says in his story, “My mom would tell me, ‘Every time you see a cop car, don’t open the doors.’” So, every time I’d see a cop car, I’d be like, ‘Oh my God. That’s ICE [Immigrations and Custom Enforcement] coming after me.’” Or some shit like that.

Paul: Not really, but I just put it in there [everyone who’s been listening to this conversation laughs].

Thomas: [laughing] I do that, too.

Fabio: [calling across the room] That works, too! It makes people care!
As we can see from this exchange, when men tried to help each other incorporate feminine-defined emotions into their performances, they often did so in ways that deflected attention from the actual feelings. Although Thomas and Paul urged their friend to “show more emotion” and “be really vulnerable,” they emphasized the strategic reasons for doing so: it will teach new recruits effective storytelling techniques. Fabio added that it might also be effective in winning sympathy for the movement. In other words, this wasn’t about Ivan as an individual man being vulnerable, but about a leader in the movement doing whatever it takes to advance the interests of the broader group. Scholars find that men often cope with demands for emotional labor by recasting them as opportunities to signify masculine selves. Leidner (1993), for instance, found that insurance salesmen managed expectations for deference by defining interactions with customers as contests for control. Pierce (1996) similarly found that male trial attorneys sometimes exhibited “strategic friendliness,” or feminine-defined forms of politeness, if they thought it would help them win their case. By treating emotional expressivity as a means to an end (Sattel 1976), men in the undocumented youth movement could maintain control over a potentially threatening storytelling process and their claims to being proper men.

The above exchange also shows how men used humor, mockery, and shows of insincerity to distance themselves from the emotions they were trying to infuse into their stories and the (feminine) selves implied by them. After describing how Paul showed vulnerability in his own story, Thomas immediately characterized his emotional disclosure as “some shit like that,” implying they shouldn’t take it seriously and shutting off opportunities for the men to empathize with Paul’s experience of fear. Moreover, Thomas and Paul joked
that they duped audiences into feeling sympathy for them by adding details to their stories that weren’t true. This kind of dismissive banter about emotions and storytelling enabled men to build trust with each other – to say, in effect, “I won’t judge your show of vulnerability if you don’t judge mine.” It also communicated a shared understanding that the pain or fear they sometimes expressed in their stories was not a reflection of who they really were. That was just an act put on for effect (as they all know). They were only “surface acting” (Hochschild 1983), showing the right emotions but not really feeling them. In these ways, the men helped each other affirm and protect their self-images from the threats posed by expressing “feminine” emotions.

*Helping Men Feel like Men*

While these strategies were especially helpful in getting men to show emotions typically defined as feminine, most of the time men in this movement expressed a narrower range of emotions – usually indignation or righteous anger – that did not conflict with their image of themselves as real men. As we saw earlier, men frequently told stories that showed them to be unjustly stymied in their efforts to provide for their families, better themselves educationally, and achieve respectable employment – their efforts, in other words, to claim full status as men. Although it might seem easy to get men to feel anger in response to perceived affronts to their manhood, movement leaders had to help new members channel their anger into stories.

At formal trainings like the youth empowerment summit described above, movement leaders modeled their expectations by sharing their own stories. In a typical example, a male
ally who was leading a storytelling session described how he joined the movement after learning that his undocumented sister would not be able to accept a scholarship because of her status. He said:

I got pissed [stamps down hard on the floor for emphasis]. You know? I got pissed because I don’t like when people mess with my family…. Shit, if someone’s going to pick on my sister, it’s going to be me, right? So, that’s why I got involved…. I can’t just walk away from this because this is our responsibility, right? We’re not in this because social justice is cool. We’re in this because it’s our fucking responsibility [pounds fist on the table] and we have to fulfill that. You feel me?... Sorry, I get a little intense sometimes.

Unlike the men in the earlier example who coached their male friend to show vulnerability, a feminine-coded emotion, this man expressed with gusto the one emotion that is culturally marked “male”: anger. By stomping and pounding, he showed new recruits how to deliver an emotionally-impactful (and masculine) story. Like the men in the previous example, he also accounted for and ennobled his anger by citing his broader “responsibility” to the movement, to “social justice,” and, in this case, to his family. The message to new members was explicitly gendered: real men take care of their families, and they get angry and fight back when somebody threatens them.

Although new recruits (men and women) typically responded enthusiastically and with noisy applause to these kinds of hyper-masculine performances, some men who were new to the movement struggled to give this kind of performance. These men did not feel very powerful or believe they had much control over their lives, and they were skeptical about their ability to fight back. In other words, they didn’t feel like men, much less social change agents. The challenge for movement leaders in these cases was to re-masculinize them.
Movement leaders and other rank-and-file members often worked together to help these men feel better about themselves and tell more agentic stories. They frequently did so by linking notions of efficacy to constructions of masculine virtue. The qualities that made one a good man, they suggested, also made one a good leader in the movement (and vice-versa). We can see how this worked during a small group session in which new members were practicing telling their stories. Dempsey, a twenty-something man from Latin America, explained to the group that he was married and had a young son, and what he wanted most was to buy a small house and let his wife stay home to raise their child. But, as an undocumented immigrant, he couldn’t find a job that paid enough to make this possible, and the threat of deportation always hung over him. And so he felt discouraged and defeated. As he told them, “Before I got married, I wanted to have a better life, you know? I wanted to have my house. I wanted to have my own car in my name. I wanted to have those things in my name.” The male facilitator responded first:

Those are things that sort of, in a sense, validate you, right? When you’re married and have a family, it’s a responsibility. I think a lot of people can identify with that. At the end of the day, you’re just trying to make it – just like anybody else. What’s so illegal about that? Right? So, I think those are the things you want to put in a descriptive scene so that we can see “Dempsey is a family guy that’s trying to make it.”

Dempsey held patriarchal beliefs about the proper role of men and women in families. However, his inability to measure up to his own masculine ideal by becoming a successful breadwinner left him feeling discouraged and immobilized. The facilitator’s goal was to help him feel more powerful and capable of fighting back as a member of the movement. However, his efforts to achieve this drew on and reproduced conventional gender beliefs. By
encouraging Dempsey to cast himself as “a family guy that’s trying to make it,” he showed him how to transform insecurities about his manhood into an assertion of male entitlement: 

As a man, he had a “responsibility” and a right to provide for his family. When he asked rhetorically, “What’s so illegal about that?” he affirmed the naturalness of heterosexual, patriarchal family structures in which men assume dominance over dependent women and children.

The facilitator also reminded Dempsey that remaining in the country was a “choice” that revealed his fighting spirit: “You choose to not give up. You choose to not self-deport. You choose to stay. And in a sense, that’s fighting back.” Other men and women in the group added that Dempsey made a clear choice to attend the summit that Sunday, when he could have stayed home and watched football like “most other guys” – including undocumented ones. Real men make choices – the right ones. Instead of being passive (like a woman) about his circumstances, they implied, Dempsey took initiative (like a man) by showing up at the training. Not only was he a man, he was better than most. To help Dempsey identify as a man and feel like one, the group members drew explicit comparisons to other, less agentic men. Collective efforts to enable men who felt discouraged about their ability to act as change agents typically proceeded in this manner. Members of the movement usually combined emotion work to heal men’s egos (Bartky 1990) with identity work to rebuild their masculine self-images.

Generally speaking, when men (and women) helped other men do emotion work, they did so in ways that emphasized their status as men and reaffirmed their masculinity. They built camaraderie through dismissive joking about showing vulnerability, affirmed the
naturalness of patriarchal family relations, and assured seemingly de-masculated men that they were not just men, but better men than most.

“Doing Masculinity” and Feeling Good

Through these experiences in the movement, men learned that the proper way to tell stories was to emphasize agency and control, cultivate and assert a sense of male entitlement, express masculine-typed emotions, and – if they couldn’t avoid expressing feminized emotions like vulnerability – dis-identify with them. These gendered scripts not only drew on and reproduced conventional beliefs about what it means to be a good man in contemporary U.S. society, they also reinforced the men’s sense of moral propriety in fighting back. Not surprisingly, men who shared their stories in public generally felt good about it. One man described his experience this way:

When I shared my story, I felt pumped. Or maybe that’s just the way I am when I’m speaking. Maybe I get too nervous that I get excited, and that was one of those moments – I was too nervous, so I got excited and really didn’t give it much thought…. It felt exciting. It felt liberating, I guess I would say. Yeah, liberating, exciting. I think I might have been a little bit nervous that I would say the wrong words or my voice would crack or something ridiculous [laughs]. But, um, I don’t know, it was a fairly large crowd…. Yes, it’s about us on stage but, you know, it’s much more than that. It’s also about everybody in the crowd. And the way I saw it was, it’s about everybody who can’t really say anything. So, you know, just do it. And once you’re in the spotlight on a stage like that [laughs], you have to do it. There’s no turning back [still laughing].

For this man and most of the men I spoke with, sharing their stories in public was almost always a positive experience that left them feeling good about themselves. Even the minor nervousness many of them acknowledged seemed easily manageable and contributed to their
sense of themselves as strong, in-charge kind of men. Although the man quoted above admitted feeling “a little bit nervous,” he also reported taking control of that feeling so that he could speak up for the less strong.

Other men had such positive experiences sharing their stories in public that they worried about keeping their egos in check and not letting the attention go to their heads. Consider, for instance, this man’s experience sharing his story for the first time at a large public rally:

I felt validated by the experience of other young people who were so courageous and who were putting their life on the line and then also the responsibility, right? Because when you open your mouth, you have a certain responsibility to yourself and to others. So how do I keep myself responsible and also humble, you know? Because, you know, one of the young people said, “Oh my God, you get all these cameras in front of you and they make you feel like you know everything.” And I was like, “Well, let’s not take that for granted, you know? Those reporters are only there to give us our 20 seconds of whatever snippet. That doesn’t mean anything.”... So anyway, it was humbling, I think, overall, you know?

For this man, sharing his story was validating, humbling, and ego-inflating all at the same time. It was, as he saw it, an act of courage – one that could give him and the other youth who were sharing their stories big heads if they weren’t careful. All of the attention boosted his sense of importance and affirmed that his personal problems mattered to the broader society. For the men I spoke to, these kinds of exuberant responses to sharing their stories in public were common. Women felt a lot more ambivalent.
ON THE STAGE: WOMEN GIVING FEMININE PERFORMANCES

The content of women’s stories was not much different than men’s. Like men, women generally highlighted their achievements in school, their work ethic, and their middle-class ambitions. But women also tended to share more details that showed their love for and commitment to their families, and their desire to give back to their communities. Women’s stories diverged most dramatically from men’s in their emotional expressivity. Like men, women expressed frustration over their circumstances, but they also expressed pain and vulnerability, often crying as they spoke. As a group, they assumed more responsibility for showing audiences how much it hurt to be rendered invisible in this country.

This pain is evident in a story told at a court hearing where several undocumented youth were on trial for charges related to an act of civil disobedience in a congressional representative’s office. As she took her seat in the witness chair, Yasmin turned so that she was speaking directly to the judge who had stopped typing on her laptop and was looking her in the eye. In response to a question about what the group was doing before being arrested, Yasmin explained that they had been sharing their stories with immigration staffers. As she recounted the incident, she told her story to the judge and those gathered in the courtroom:

We asked them if they had children and if they would do anything – would they sacrifice anything for their children. And they said “yes.” And that’s what our parents did. They brought us here for a better future, for better economic opportunities. My parents worked at the poultry plant for 20 years. And they always instilled in me to value education [begins crying] and to become someone in life. Like I said, I was fortunate enough to go to college – and so, we shared our concerns – about how it is to be undocumented and go through so much in this country and how it affects you in the simplest things. Like, to go to Wal-Mart and exchange something, you need a federal,
government-issued ID. And if you don’t have that one, the cashiers, they’ll say, “Well, too bad, you can’t exchange that.” You can’t – it’s hard to rent an apartment. It’s hard to buy a house. It’s hard to buy a car, to get health insurance.

Although this was an unusual storytelling venue, Yasmin’s story was not. It was representative of the kinds of stories women in this movement routinely told and the way they told them. What we see in Yasmin’s story is someone who loved her family members and appreciated their sacrifices, who worked hard in school but was humble about her achievements, and whose singular ambition was to “become someone in life.” Rather than showing righteous anger or indignation over her circumstances, she expressed tearful frustration at being denied the (seemingly) little things other people take for granted. In fact, all three of the women who shared their stories that day cried on the stand, while the one man who also shared his story did not.

In this movement, women often showed this kind of emotional vulnerability when they told their stories in public. Even when they expressed more pointed anger at immigration policies that criminalized them or their families, they often “softened” their performances by breaking into tears as they spoke. This *quintessential* expression of femininity took the edge off what could otherwise be truly gender-transgressive performances.

Yasmin’s story was also notably feminized in that she made a direct appeal for compassion and parental love. She described asking the immigration staffers to put themselves in her parents’ shoes and to imagine what they would do. In effect, she was asking them to see her as their own child – a lovable (and vulnerable) young person for
whom they “would do anything.” Although she described doing this in a private office, women in this movement often made similar appeals when they shared their stories in more public venues. Men did not.

Unlike men, who seemed uncomfortable appealing to audiences for sympathy, women often told stories with the explicit aim of eliciting a sympathetic response. Elisa, for instance, was one of the few storytelling participants at a public rally who did not actually share her story. Instead, she emphasized what it felt like to be undocumented: the “frustration, sadness, and fear… not knowing if I will be able to come home to my mother and brother… another 10 years of dreams shut down… dreams of an education, dreams of a normal life without fear.” As she later explained, she used her storytelling time in this way because she “wanted people to feel what [she] was feeling.” She wanted them to empathize with her and to care about her struggles. At a different rally, another woman, Freya, read a poem she had written in which she asked, “Why do I have to tell you my sad story for you to see the human being in me?” She went on to describe the “mistakes, tears, laughter, and joy” that made her a universal human being – just like her listeners – and thus deserving of the same rights and considerations. Women in this movement, much more than men, did not hesitate to make these kinds of direct appeals for sympathy and understanding. They did so, as we’ve seen, primarily by showing emotional vulnerability as they entreated audiences to like them, care about them, and help them.

While men sometimes showed vulnerability in backstage areas and in training venues, women participated disproportionately in public storytelling events that emphasized emotionally painful themes, including struggles with depression. One such event was
organized after an undocumented man (who was not a member of the movement) had committed suicide. Five of the six speakers were women, and all of them told stories about their own experiences with depression. One woman said:

If you look at my arms, you’ll see faint scars. They’ve been there for years – some from eighth grade, high school, even last month. They’re scars of frustration, of anger, of disappointment. I’m tired of having to live this way every single day. I’m tired of having to let legislators on Capitol Hill decide what I can and cannot do. I’m tired of having to see my parents worry about what’s going to happen to them and what’s going to happen to me. It’s not fair that we have people in Washington, DC, deciding our lives. Why can’t I decide my life? I’ve lost control and that’s when I resort to that – when I feel like I have nothing, when I feel like I have no choice, no voice.

This woman painted a vivid picture of the despair sometimes felt by undocumented youth.

On this occasion, a clear gendered division of emotional labor emerged: women did most of the emoting, while men generally assumed support roles (i.e., lying on the ground symbolically “dead” as the women spoke, taking photos of the event, and serving as media contacts).

This kind of division of labor was not unusual. At various storytelling venues, women often talked openly and tearfully about their struggles with depression, while men more often offered support and remained in the background. During lobby sessions, for instance, I heard only women sharing experiences with depression and suicide with congressional staffers, while men nodded or placed a sympathetic hand on a woman’s shoulder as she spoke.

Women did not challenge this arrangement, because they believed it aided the movement and allowed them to show their strength as women. Like men who redefined occasional demands for emotionally vulnerable performances in instrumental ways (i.e., as a means to an end), women in the movement often viewed painful emotional disclosure as an
act of daring. A woman who planned to talk at a recruitment event about her suicide attempt as a teenager explained why to her group: “I know it’s something that a lot of DREAMers are going through and a lot of people are very shy to talk about. And I feel like, I mean, I don’t give a fuck.” She believed movement leaders resisted talking about things like suicide because they worried about stigma. Given this common perception among women in the movement, their willingness to share such painful stories didn’t just support movement goals; it also enabled women to show courage as they confronted social taboos. Public storytelling, in this sense, gave women unique “opportunit[ies] to display competence” (Abel 1991: 96).

“Doing Femininity” and Feeling Ambivalent

In Western cultures, women are expected to be the “bearers of emotion” (Jaggar 1989: 158) and to use their feelings in the service of others (Shields 2005; see also Bartky 1990; Lorber 1994). In the undocumented youth movement, women generally accepted this role because they believed it advanced the movement’s goals. Showing vulnerability, they believed, helped them to connect with and mobilize other undocumented youth and allies. They also believed it humanized their struggle. As one woman explained, it showed those who did not yet support them “who the illegal alien is: this person of flesh and blood, this person with a face that smiles, that cries.”

Women’s interests in showing vulnerability in their stories were complicated, however, by worries about appearing weak. Kristy, for instance, described her resistance to participating in a big rally where she would be sharing her story. She had been involved in the movement for over six months and had shared her story numerous times before, yet she
was having doubts the day before this event. As she explained, “People were practicing their speeches, and I couldn’t do it. I was like, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t want to be a victim. I don’t want to be anything.’” She had internalized dominant ideas that equated victimhood with weakness, a quality she did not want to claim.

Like other women, one of the things Kristy valued most about her involvement in the movement was her newfound sense of confidence and power. After organizing protest events, speaking to government officials, and sitting as an invited guest and “expert” on various panels and committees, she saw herself as a capable and agentic leader. She didn’t want to present herself in a way that made her seem weak and unworthy of respect. As Dunn (2002, 2005, 2010; see also Picart 2003) found in her study of female victims of stalking and domestic violence, members of marginalized groups often struggle to document their victimization without sacrificing moral worthiness by appearing weak. Because women in the movement associated victimization with pitiable weakness, they often felt conflicted about telling stories that emphasized their suffering. Although they believed it was important (especially to their recruiting efforts) to show vulnerability, they also believed, like Kristy, that respectable people don’t complain too much or wallow in self-pity.

Men in the movement could distance themselves from attributions of weakness by emphasizing their masculinity. Women had no such option. If they had tried to signify masculine selves, it would have been discrediting. According to conventional gender norms, real women are supposed to be emotionally sensitive, demonstrative, and willing to sacrifice themselves for others (Hochschild 1983; Lorber 1994; Shields 2005). These cultural expectations complicated women’s choices about how to present themselves in their public
stories. Although they worried that showing too much vulnerability could make them seem weak, not showing enough could make them seem unwomanly. Men in the movement did not face the same dilemma.

Not surprisingly, women often expressed ambivalence about sharing their stories in public. In an interview, Mina described her storytelling experience at one of the first large public rallies organized by undocumented youth:

Mina: I was nervous. I was really nervous. I remember just seeing… the people that were coming out [as undocumented], going one by one, and then my turn was up – it was my turn to speak. And I just went up there, and… I just felt my knees shaking. I didn’t know what to do. And I just felt this overwhelming feeling. It was overwhelming, it was powerful, but at the same time, it was very painful.

Emily: And what was painful about it?

Mina: The fact that it was like a realization: there I was, not even a year after I had left my house, not even a year after I had left school, and I was just really coming out and putting my life on the line. But, I think it was also a realization and frustration, like, “Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to address 300 people?”

Unlike the men in the movement, who generally described their public storytelling experiences positively, Mina had a more mixed response. For her, the experience was simultaneously powerful, painful, and frustrating. While men presented their nervousness as minor and easily managed by thinking of their responsibility to speak for those who couldn’t, Mina described shaky knees and secretly wondered why she had to do this. Other women said they felt “overwhelmed.” One woman remarked, “If I was anyone else, I wouldn’t have to go up there and conquer my fear.”
Sometimes women were surprised and unsettled by how vulnerable they felt after sharing their stories. Ana, a woman who usually exuded confidence and was seen as a leader in the movement, described how she felt after reading a reporter’s column that featured her story:

I felt so vulnerable. Like, she talked about how I touched my neck when I talked about being undocumented, and, like, I looked away and how it had been very difficult for her to get me to say my last name…. And even now, I’m choking up [voice is shaky]…. Like, I just started crying when I read that. I feel like it was the first time that I realized how public and how vulnerable what we were doing was making me feel.

One way we come to understand who we are is through reflected appraisals – our perceptions of how others see us (Cooley 1902). Although Ana generally felt confident, seeing her “self” reflected in the reporter’s column – a young woman who “touched [her] neck” and “looked away” when talking about her immigration status – made her suddenly feel exposed and vulnerable. This unsettled her so much that she choked up months later when recounting the experience. Women often described these kinds of unexpected reactions and seemingly contradictory feelings related to sharing their stories. Men never did.

*Managing Emotions and Deflecting Images of Weakness*

Members of some social groups, by virtue of their status, do not have to do as much emotion work as others (Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006; Hochschild 1983; Hochschild and Machung 1989). Hochschild (1983) suggested that gender ideologies that associate masculinity with natural competence and authority constitute a “status shield” that helps men avoid certain demands for emotion work. In this movement, women’s belief that they had a
unique capacity to express painful emotions and that it showed their strength as women supported the emergence of a gendered division of emotional labor. However, women’s frequent expression of vulnerability sometimes conflicted with their desired image of themselves as strong and capable leaders and made them worry about appearing weak or helpless. Thus, to be able to share the kinds of stories they believed were effective, but that sometimes made them feel bad, women engaged in substantial amounts of emotion work. Their goal was to transform their stories or their performances in ways that made them feel respectable while sharing painful experiences.

Like all stigmatizing labels, “victim” can become a master status if it sticks (Goffman 1963). In the undocumented youth movement, women sought to portray themselves as far more than victims as a way of countering this totalizing effect. One woman, for instance, often blended painful discussions of hardship with references to her desire to bicycle around the world. As she explained, “I don’t want it to be just a story. What do they call it? Sob stories? Where everything is just sad. Because I think I’m a lot angrier than I am sad, even though I’m sad a lot. And despite that, I’m still happy.” This woman did not want to tell a story that focused too much on her suffering or implied that she was helpless to fight back. Like Kristy, she didn’t feel that way. On the contrary, she sometimes felt angry or even happy – emotions that indicated she was not just a victim. By including images and emotions that showed the diversity of her experiences, she aimed to convey to others and to herself that although she sometimes suffered, it didn’t consume her. Her story also showed that she understood the “code of agency” (Dunn 2010: 5; see also Leisenring 2006; Picart 2003), or
the hegemonic notion that everyone, no matter how difficult their circumstances, can always choose a better path – or a more positive perspective.

Another way women tried to deflect attributions of weakness was by including compensatory images of strength in their stories. At a rally in which women shared their experiences with depression and suicide, one of the participants ended her story by declaring in a defiant tone, “I want everyone to know I’m a survivor!” Women’s stories often included similar pronouncements about how their hardships and subsequent involvement in the movement had transformed them from being fragile, pitiable victims into strong fighters worthy of respect. These stories were often followed by an explicit call to action, which underscored the women’s claim to being activists and leaders, not passive victims.

Other women reworked their stories to bring them in line with the stronger, more agentic self-images they currently had of themselves. One woman, for instance, believed that the first time she blogged her story, she came off as too desperate. As she put it, “I felt like I was desperately trying to say, ‘Look, I’m as American as you are. Just give me a chance.’” She later rejected this presentation of self as too deferential and accommodating (i.e., too feminine). In learning to tell her story in public, she developed a fist-pumping style of delivery she described as “unapologetic.”

Indeed, many women masculinized their stories, adopting defiant presentational styles typically used by men to elicit deference (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).\(^\text{14}\) For example,

\(^{14}\) In their analysis of masculinity and manhood acts, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) argue that in patriarchal societies, women who compete with men for power often do so on men’s terms, putting on “compensatory manhood acts” to demonstrate their worthiness of respect. Because politics is culturally defined as masculine, women may similarly feel compelled to act like men to claim respect in this social sphere.
members of the movement often launched their stories by declaring themselves not only “undocumented,” but also “unaffect,” “unapologetic,” and/or “unashamed.” Women inserted these descriptions in their stories to indicate that they were not just vulnerable, but also strong, resilient, and respectable. Although both women and men used this language, it served a distinct compensatory function for women. It allowed them to use gender as a resource to elicit audience sympathy – by crying and showing emotional vulnerability – without discrediting themselves as pitiable victims.

These women’s strategies show the complexity of the task they faced in trying to assert strong and agentic activist identities that are still respectable – and properly feminine. Like men, their strategies aimed to distance them from associations with weakness when they expressed vulnerability or pain. Also like men, the women often felt angry and indignant about their legal exclusion from American society. But unlike men, women could not assert overtly masculine selves without appearing unwomanly. Instead, they blended feminized shows of vulnerability with compensatory images of strength. By masculinizing their performances in small ways – by declaring themselves to be fighters who beat depression, or by pumping their fists as they told tearful stories – they were able to give the kind of emotionally expressive performances they believed were effective, while still feeling like strong, respectable leaders.

But striking the right balance between feminized expressions of vulnerability and masculinized expressions of strength was not always easy. On one occasion, a young woman began sharing her story at a rally organized by a Latina/o student organization on a college campus. In a quiet, tearful voice she described herself as “a human being, with feelings, with
a heart, with feet, with hands.” She told them, “If I bleed, it’s red.” But later, she adopted an angrier tone and called out the students, urging them to do more to support undocumented immigrants and the movement. As she told them:

Wake up, dude! You, Latino, Latina, you think that because you’re in college, oh, you’re doing something? No, mijo [sweetheart]. Get out into the streets! Then you will do something. Then we can talk. But you think that just because you’re going to college – no! The time is now to get out of class, and take it into the streets, take it into the neighborhoods, and stand up and fight for your community, because our community is under attack!

As she was speaking, the audience grew increasingly quiet. When she finished, there was only light applause and several people left. A few days later, I interviewed one of the allies in her group and asked him about the incident. He told me:

My friend Ryan, he works with NAACP stuff. He’s come out to a couple events. He said, you know, “You gotta really watch that, man. Because she questioned the students there and she hit them hard.” Which is good to a degree. I mean, there’s a healthy level of that, I think. But she did it in a way that was very angry and bitter. And I don’t blame her…. But I did talk to her briefly about it. I just said, “You gotta be careful about that”…. And she said, “You’re right. Make sure you watch me on that.” And then she told her story again in Greensboro and it was more positive, I think. There’s definitely still rage underneath, but it was more positive.

This example shows the difficulty women sometimes faced in trying to balance their desire to support the goals of the movement by showing vulnerability with their desire to present themselves as strong, respectable leaders. It also reveals the unspoken rule in the movement that women should not express too much anger – a masculine-coded emotion – when they shared their stories in public. When women masculinized their performances in small ways (e.g., through fist-pumping, calling themselves unafraid or unapologetic), it didn’t pose a problem. But if they showed too much anger – even if it was aimed at
mobilizing audiences – other members (specifically men, in this case) worried that the women were alienating audiences. Women, thus, were urged to tone it down and to give more “positive” (i.e., more feminine) performances. Although men in the movement routinely gave angry performances, I never heard anyone offer them similar advice.

This example also shows an inherent complication in using storytelling as a social change tactic. It depends entirely on the expressive skills and cooperation of the storytellers who, as we saw, did not always give the kinds of strategic performances members wanted them to give – those that supported their shared movement goals. Sometimes women resisted expectations that they portray themselves in ways that reinforced gender stereotypes of women as weak, vulnerable, and not angry. But as the above example shows, their resistance was not always supported by other members of the movement who preferred that women present themselves as more vulnerable and as less angry.

As the preceding pages have shown, undocumented youth worked together and on their own to manage the contradictions that arose around expectations for emotional expressivity in their public storytelling. Gender served as both a resource they could use to craft compelling stories for change, and a constraint on the ways in which they imagined and performed their stories. Ironically, their strategies for managing competing desires to elicit sympathy and not appear weak led them to devise strategies that ultimately reinforced the narrow gender scripts for emotional expressivity that caused them problems in the first place.
CONCLUSION

Gubrium and Holstein (2009: xvii) distinguish between narrative content (what stories are about) and “narrative work” (how stories are produced, shared, and changed) and contend that we know a good deal about the former but very little about the latter. Indeed, most scholars who study narrative have treated stories as “texts” or “social products” whose meanings can be unpacked through careful content, discourse, or narrative analysis (Polletta et al. 2011). This interest in storied content has produced a vast and growing body of research on the meaning- and sense-making functions of personal stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Polletta et al. 2011). While research on narrative in social movements is still in its nascent stages, scholars have generally taken the same path, privileging content over process and intensive interviewing and content analytic methods over ethnographic research (Davis 2002; Fine 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 2008; Polletta et al. 2011). This has left us with a dearth of knowledge about the “how” of storytelling, or the “social processes and circumstances through which narratives are constructed, promoted, and resisted” (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 256). Narrative analytic approaches that incorporate ethnographic fieldwork, on the other hand, allow us to see how storytellers “call on or otherwise respond to the contexts, contingencies, and resources of narration to fashion their accounts” (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 256; see also Swidler 1995: 29, on “locating culture in social practices”).

By combining content analysis of activists’ stories with an ethnographic examination of the backstage processes by which they were crafted, I deepen our understanding of narrative work (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) in the context of a social movement. More specifically, I showed how stories are not just social products, but interactively-constructed
and institutionally-regulated social performances (Polletta et al. 2011: 110). I found, for instance, that despite the seemingly personal nature of their public stories, participants often worked together to develop and refine performances that advanced movement goals. When members were not giving the “right kind” of performance (i.e., one that helped the movement), they were instructed to do things differently. Through modeling and coaching, leaders taught new members how to select, interpret, and infuse pieces of their biographies with emotion to create compelling narrative performances. Moreover, by using their implicit knowledge of cultural feeling rules, they were able to create strategic performances that they believed would elicit sympathy and move people to take supportive action. In these ways, members of the movement did much more than “use [their] personal stories as a political tool,” as one of the leaders put it. Their narrative work enabled the creation of specific “personal” stories that could serve collective goals.

My sustained presence in the field also allowed me to identify storytelling patterns and inconsistencies that are not as apparent in interviews or written accounts. Continuous, on-the-ground observation was especially important for understanding the emergence of a gendered division of emotional labor in the movement. Although men and women both said the best stories were the ones that could elicit sympathy, in practice, women consistently showed more vulnerability when they shared their stories publicly than men, who tended to stay in the background and support the women. Like male fast food workers who can dodge potentially emasculating demands for emotional labor by letting women work the front counter (Leidner 1993), men in the undocumented youth movement were able to avoid showing vulnerability most of the time because women were doing it (and not complaining
about it). While these patterns are well-documented in other social institutions, such as the workplace and the home (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Hochschild 1983; Martin 1999; Pierce 1996), my research shows how social change tactics that are explicitly expressive – like storytelling – can lead to similar inequalities in the division of emotional labor in social movements. They do so by activating deeply-ingrained beliefs about the link between gender and emotional expressivity.

These gendered beliefs and meanings come from the broader culture in which the movement is embedded. Despite their efforts to intentionally create a subculture that values expressivity, members were vying with hegemonic forces that are hard to resist (Davis 2002; Swidler 1986). As Davis (2002: 25) puts it, “In their efforts to transform values and institutions, movements struggle against preexisting cultural and institutional narratives and the structures of meaning and power they convey.” In the cultural world outside the undocumented youth movement, showing vulnerability is associated with conventional femininity and can elicit attributions of weakness (Kimmel 1996; Messner 2009; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Although members believed it was important to show audiences how much it hurt to be undocumented, they did not want to appear weak. This created a storytelling dilemma, reflecting the difficulty groups face in trying to challenge normative meanings, ideas, and beliefs. In a broad sense, then, my research shows how dominant cultural influences can seep into, compete with, and overpower a movement’s subculture (Swidler 1986).

Because I had access to backstage spaces where members worked through these dilemmas, I was also able to show how people navigate and reconcile competing or
contradictory cultural pressures in a social movement context. While scholars have examined these processes in other institutional settings, such as the workplace and the courts (Dunn 2002; Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996), my research shows how they are resolved in yet another social arena. In the undocumented youth movement, men could not and did not always seek to avoid showing vulnerability by simply letting the women do it. Sometimes they believed it was important and necessary for them to show pain, too. Under these circumstances, they devised distancing strategies that allowed them to assert strength (and manly virtue) while showing vulnerability. Like male trial attorneys and salesmen who redefined potentially emasculating demands for emotional labor as masculinity contests (Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996), men in the backstage areas of the movement treated expressivity as a means to an end, joked about painful experiences, and otherwise signaled that they were not really the sensitive (or feminine) people suggested by their public emotional displays. In these ways, they could leverage cultural beliefs about men as naturally strong, competent, and brave to show a bit of vulnerability without sacrificing their masculine selves (Sattel 1976).

Men were able to use these strategies because the cultural resources in their “tool kits” are different from those in women’s (Swidler 1986). By showing how women used different language, gestures, and identity codes to deflect attributions of weakness, I expand our understanding of how cultural resources are unequally valued and distributed – even in movements for change. Because vulnerability is associated with both weakness and conventional femininity, women in the movement faced unique challenges in claiming strong, agentic identities through their storytelling performances. If they showed too much vulnerability, they could reinforce the cultural link between womanhood and weakness; not
showing enough could make them seem unwomanly. Like female victims of stalking and domestic violence (Dunn, 2002, 2005, 2010), women in the movement were in an “emotional double bind” (Shields 2005: 9). Like men, they engaged in emotion work by redefining expressions of vulnerability as unique opportunities to show feminine (i.e., emotional) strength. They also chose storytelling strategies that straddled the gender divide. By “borrowing” expressive tools – language, gestures, and identity codes – typically used by men to assert dominance, women were able to masculinize their often tearful, feminine performances and thereby deflect attributions of weakness. But this strategy is viable only because strength is associated with conventional masculinity (but not femininity) in the broader culture. Because femininity is defined in opposition to masculinity – it’s everything masculinity is not – women in the movement had few cultural tools with which to simultaneously display proper womanhood and strength.

Ultimately, it was this gender sorting and labeling of cultural resources that created the expressive storytelling dilemma in which both men and women in the movement were caught. The fact that womanhood and vulnerability are culturally linked, associated with weakness, and devalued led them to devise strategies that distanced their storied selves from both. That their efforts reinforced the narrow gender scripts for emotional expressivity that caused them problems in the first place reveals one of the limits of storytelling (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Polletta 2006). Without challenging the gendered (race, classed, and so on) system of beliefs that supports an unequal distribution of meaning-making resources (Fine 2002; Polletta and Lee 2006), activists who seek to use expressive storytelling in their
campaigns for social change will be working with a “political tool” that not only serves the interests of some members better than others, but also inadvertently reproduces inequality.
CHAPTER 3
SIGNIFYING AMERICANNESS: IDENTITY WORK BY DREAM ACTIVISTS

The young people at the heart of this study faced identity problems because of their membership in stigmatized groups and their status as legal outsiders to American society. As undocumented immigrants, they were subject to demeaning stereotypes that cast them as poorly-educated and often criminals, and as mooches on the U.S. social service system (Chavez 2008; Marrow 2011). As predominately ethnic and racial minorities, their visible differences from the dominant white group made them vulnerable to racism in their daily lives (see, e.g., Feagin and Cobas 2014). And their parents’ typical status as low-wage workers placed them economically in the working class (see, e.g., Portes and Rumbaut 2006). When they began school in the United States, they often struggled to make friends, a difficulty many attributed to their lack of fluency in English. However, by the time they graduated from high school, most were excelling academically and had achieved a sense of belonging among their middle-class, native-born (and often white) peers (see also Bettie 2003; cf. Wilkins 2008). These more advantaged students typically filled the ranks of the college-preparatory tracks they managed to access – often with the help of a teacher or administrator who took notice of them. Feeling accepted in a high-status peer group and being recognized for their academic accomplishments helped deflect some of the stigma they experienced as members of multiple subordinated groups. It also allowed them to see themselves as upwardly-mobile young Americans who were “making it,” despite the obstacles.
As they began to enter early adulthood, however, legal barriers – to receiving driver’s licenses, federal financial aid for college, and middle-class employment – made it hard for them to continue imagining a life unconstrained by the statuses they occupied. For most of them, their immigration status seemed to be the primary obstacle. Because of that one thing, they couldn’t attend the college “of [their] choice,” “live up to [their] full potential,” or “use [their] degree” to obtain (middle-class) jobs “in [their] field.” As many of them explained, the meaning of being undocumented changed. Yasmin put it well. After describing how she integrated easily into a “caucasian” peer group, maintained a 4.0 GPA, had a perfect attendance record since the first grade, and became an officer in multiple school clubs, she said:

It’s kind of like most DREAMers’ stories. We don’t really realize, wow, you know, I’m undocumented. You know, like, oh, holy crap [laughs]. I already knew that I was, I mean, but it doesn’t really hit you and you really don’t understand. You know, you realize the implications of it when you’re in high school and everybody’s, well, most students are talking about going to college and where they got accepted and where they’re going to.

Instead of being just another obstacle she would have to avoid on her path to American respectability, Yasmin’s immigration status had become an impenetrable barrier that threw her wholly off-course. To be undocumented – she and these other young people started to believe – was to be irreconcilably non-American.

Many of them said that, before joining the movement, they often thought about giving up and moving elsewhere. Farah told me in an interview that she had looked into Canada’s immigration requirements after failing to obtain a professional job following her college graduation:
I qualified. You know, I had a degree. I spoke English. I was young. Like, all these things were points for me, you know? I had about a year’s experience by that time, had about a year’s experience in work – it was restaurants, but it was work. And I felt like I had a good chance of getting my immigrant’s visa, so I was ready to apply. [Repeats, enunciating each word]. I was ready to apply.

Martin similarly said he’d thought about swimming to Canada after seeing how close it was during a visit to Detroit. As he explained in an interview, “I’m tired of all this oppression kind of stuff. I can’t even get a job because I don’t have a social security.” These kinds of stories were common. Feeling shut-out of opportunities to integrate into the American middle class, undocumented youth sometimes wondered if they might fare better in their efforts to become Canadians – or Cubans, Mexicans, Jordanians, and so on.

The problems these young people encountered in trying to claim full inclusion in middle-class American society were both political and cultural. At a fundamental level, the barriers were legal, tied to their classification as undocumented immigrants. That classification was the result of political decisions by government officials who could just as well create a legal status for them (De Genova 2002, 2004; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Ngai 2004). By determining who and under what conditions people may naturalize, the country’s system of immigration laws not only constructs categories of legal (and illegal) membership. It also confers (and withholds) political and civic rights (Bosniak 2007; Cebulko 2014; Coutin 2000; Menjivar 2006). Undocumented youth seeking benefits, protections, and rights in U.S. society thus faced a formidable barrier: the rigid, legal boundary of the category “American.”
DREAMers’ legal exclusion was also rooted in and justified by the low social value undocumented immigrants have in the broader society. As members of a devalued group, undocumented immigrants are constructed by media, nativist groups, and politicians as not just legally ineligible for citizenship rights, but also as undeserving of those rights (Chavez 2008; see also Loseke 2007: 668, on the role of “institutional identity narratives” in justifying exclusionary policies). In short, the boundaries of the category “American” were not just legal, they were also cultural. Like other marginalized groups seeking rights and full inclusion in U.S. society (see, e.g., Collins 1990; J. Gamson 1989), undocumented youth faced the added challenge of countering negative perceptions and increasing their moral worthiness in the eyes of the dominant group.

As Steensland (2006) asserts, struggles for rights are simultaneously struggles for respect and social honor (see also Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). Accordingly, they are also struggles for identity. As previous research has shown, groups that lack the structural or political power to resolve their grievances often use expressive means, including the construction and deployment of identity, to challenge their marginalization (Bernstein and Olsen 2009; J. Gamson 1989; Howard 2000; V. Taylor and Whittier 1992). Indeed, the promise of a positive, shared identity often motivates social movement participation (Polletta and Jasper 2001), and can be an explicit goal of movements (Polletta 2006), such as those aimed at challenging stigma and social exclusion (Bernstein and de la Cruz 2009; Broad 2002; Rupp and V. Taylor 2003). Moreover, expressions of identity can be used by activists to demonstrate similarity with the dominant group (Yukich 2013), to educate others about their particular struggles (Crawley and Broad 2004), or to critique the values, practices, and
institutions of the broader culture (Bernstein 1997; J. Gamson 1989; V. Taylor and Raeburn 1995).

This last line of research is grounded in symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical understandings of identities as socially constructed, emergent, and negotiated in face-to-face interaction. From this perspective, identities are not fixed entities; rather, we draw on different cultural resources to create virtual selves and signify that we are (essentially) certain kinds of people (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Identities, then, act as “indexes of the self,” or signs that evoke meaning as people respond to each other’s presentations of self (115). Because identities are also interactional achievements (Brissett and Edgley 1990), we can work on them as individuals or in groups. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996: 115) describe identity work as “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others” (see also Snow and Anderson 1987). It involves both the collective development of identities “as widely understood signs with a set of rules and conventions for their use” and their use by individuals to craft images of themselves in interaction (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 115). As Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) assert, “To call this meaning-making activity work is to call attention to it as involving purposes, strategies, and, sometimes, the overcoming of resistance” (115). This suggests that even the most rigidly crafted identities can be cracked – and membership in them negotiated – through creative identity work.

For marginalized groups that have little political power, low social status, and few material resources, storytelling may be an especially valuable strategy for identity work (Polletta and Lee 2006; Snow and Anderson 1987). Stories give us a way of accessing,
interpreting, and conveying meanings, including self-meanings (Davis 2002; Polletta et al. 2011). Thus, when we tell stories about ourselves, we signal that we are certain kinds of people (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Self-narrative enables us to situate and explain our lives and behaviors, create positive self-images, and repair stigmatized ones (Davis 2000; Jackson 2007; Loseke 2007; Mason-Schrock 1996; Plummer 1995; Stein 1997). In the context of a social movement, storytelling can also form the basis of a collective identity (Polletta 2006), for instance, by creating feelings of commitment and solidarity among people with disparate experiences (Hunt and Benford 1994, 2004) and by bridging sometimes contentious differences (Smith 2007). Stories that challenge the symbolic or legal boundaries of exclusive, but valued, identities can also expose and undermine the systems of inequality on which they are based (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; see also Tilly 2002 on “boundary stories”).

This chapter explores efforts by members of the undocumented youth movement – or the DREAM Act Movement, as it was called when it gained momentum in 2010 – to lay claim to one such identity – “American” – and in doing so, argue for full inclusion in U.S. society. The undocumented youth movement, with its emphasis on personal storytelling, provides a rich opportunity to examine how members of a subordinated group use key ideological and cultural markers of the dominant group to shift the boundary and thereby challenge their structural/legal exclusion. Attending to these processes in the context of a social movement also allows us to see how identity can sometimes serve inadvertently as a wedge that divides members of marginalized groups and undermines their broader solidarity.
SIGNIFYING AMERICANNESS

Despite the seemingly inflexible, legalistic way that “American” is conventionally defined in the U.S. (as a native-born or naturalized citizen), the undocumented youth I studied adopted a fluid interpretation that made room for people like them. In what follows, I outline three main identity work strategies they used to shift the boundary of and signify membership in the category “American.” As I will show, this involved efforts to construct American as a subjective feeling and moral identity, a status that can be earned, and a quality that one demonstrates – especially through political engagement in American society. After outlining these strategies, I will discuss the special dilemma DREAMers faced around issues of class. I will then examine the intended and unintended consequences of their identity work and suggest the implications of their strategies for challenging the broader system of inequality that marginalizes all undocumented immigrants.

Americanness as a Subjective Feeling

In 1922, Japanese immigrant Takao Ozawa challenged U.S. naturalization laws that prohibited non-whites from becoming citizens. In the Supreme Court case, he argued that race should not matter for citizenship; rather, one’s beliefs and subjective sense of being American should. As he asserted, “In name I am not an American, but at heart I am a true American.” In the documentary film “Race: The Power of an Illusion,” historian Mai Ngai said of Ozawa’s case, “He did everything right. He learned English. He had a lifestyle that was American. He went to Christian church on Sunday. He dressed as a Westerner. He
brought up his children as Americans. He did everything he was supposed to do.” Even so, Ozawa lost.

Ozawa’s claim to being truly American despite his legal status reflects a distinction that social identity scholars make between categories people merely acknowledge and those they embrace as personally meaningful and integrate into their self-concepts (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004; Deaux 2006; Tajfel 1981). In their study of immigrants to the Netherlands, Verkuyten and de Wolf (2002) describe this as the difference between “being” an ethnic minority and “feeling” like a member of a particular ethnic group. Being is the simple recognition of an ethnic label; feeling indicates inner acceptance. As one of their study participants explained, “On the outside I’m Chinese, but inside of me I feel Dutch” (382; see also Killian and Johnson 2006).

Similarly, members of the undocumented youth movement maintained that although they were not American in the legal sense, they felt American. Like Ozawa, they portrayed themselves as unjustly denied a chance to assimilate. They, too, “did everything right” but ran into the same wall he did – this country’s system of immigration categories and exclusionary laws. And like him, many of them responded by trying to reconfigure “American” as something they could embody through their beliefs, actions, and sense of national loyalty – a strategy that diverted attention from the strict, legal prescriptions for attaining citizenship. As Lili explained in a story she told at a “mock graduation” ceremony in front of other undocumented youth and their allies: “I was born in Mexico, but I built my life here. My goals and dreams belong to this country…. We are human beings, working for a better future for our families, our community and the United States of America, the place
we call home.” Everything that was essential to Lili’s identity – her goals, dreams, and sense of home – she described as American, not Mexican. In an interview, another woman from Mexico similarly asserted, “I guess it’s true how they say ‘home is where the heart is.’ My heart is just not there [Mexico]. It’s just not. And it’s not that it’s a bad place. It’s just not there because I wasn’t raised there, you know?” Yet another woman said of her native Mexico, “That’s not home…. That’s not the country I would die for…. That’s not the country I want to see my children grow up in.” DREAMers’ subjective identification with America, they claimed, is what should matter most in determining who was and was not American.

Andy elaborated this idea in an interview:

I always felt American because of the things that I always did, because, like, I always participated – like, I played football and stuff like that. And, like, we, our team went to State two times, and they won state championship. And, like, I played tennis. And… I’m pretty sure I had more than, like, 200 hours of community service because I helped out with the church so much. And I went to so many missions. Like, I went to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and helped out rebuilding houses. And, like, I helped at church. Like, I helped out with Spanish-speaking – helped them out in tutoring with people that wanted to learn English.

Andy’s involvement in certain activities, he suggested, showed that he already was American in many ways. He participated and achieved in sports, including football, the quintessential American sport. He went on mission trips and participated in his (Christian) church. He helped rebuild a hurricane-ravaged American city and taught immigrants English (the language of “real” Americans). Doing these things, he implies, showed his commitment to and identification with America. In Ngai’s words, “He did everything right,” and he should be able to naturalize.
Patricio similarly treated “American” as a flexible category that could and should be expanded to include people like him and other members of the movement who identified culturally with the U.S. In an interview, he explained that when he tells his story in public, he tries to highlight the cultural experiences he shares with other members of his generation:

I’ll try to emphasize more, “Well, I went to the same school as anybody would and I saw the same TV shows and cartoons as anybody else. You know, I grew up in the same – hearing the same pop culture and seeing the same pop culture as anybody else here – you know, what a 90s kid would see.”

Patricio was engaging in what Bernstein (1997) calls “identity deployment,” or the expression of identity by social activists “such that the terrain of conflict becomes the individual person so that the values, categories, and practices of individuals become subject to debate” (537). If Patricio was just like “anybody else here,” a typical “90s kid” who is thoroughly assimilated into (white, middle-class) American culture, why, then, was he not allowed to legally assimilate? Portraying themselves as like members of the dominant group also enabled DREAMers like Patricio to critique the cultural values and practices that placed them outside its boundaries without appearing to reject the group outright. Patricio went on to explain that he often asked audiences to challenge rigid, legal definitions of who was and was not “American,” definitions that excluded people like him. He said:

When I say, “What does ‘an American’ mean to me?”, I’ll usually bring up, like, somebody who believes in these American values – somebody who would believe in [long pause] the pursuit of happiness, somebody that actually, that has a dream and that has a goal and wants to do something to help other people…. You know, that’s what an American means to me. And what I’m hoping for when I say that, is that people would no longer – they’ll still see that undocumented immigrant, that undocumented student, but they’ll see past that and they’ll see this is somebody who, you know, technically through immigration law doesn’t have a Social Security number, this person still loves this country, still considers this country as their home. And this
person, you know, wants to do something and wants to contribute and wants to help out their community. I’m hoping that people would see, that they’d hear that message and they basically look in the mirror and they see that, you know, the small differences aside, immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and non-immigrants alike are much more alike in the quote-unquote “American” sense than they might appear to be.

In this example, Patricio made an explicit claim to being American, but his presentation of self was also an implicit critique of America’s exclusionary system of immigration laws and categories. Echoing Ozawa’s assertion that what should matter most for citizenship is what’s in a person’s heart, Patricio suggested that one’s values, ambitions, and love of country should be used to decide who was and wasn’t American, rather than some “technical” criteria. A social security number, he argued, doesn’t make one an American.

*Casting “American” as a Moral Identity*

By naming particular subjectivities as signs of American virtue, members of the movement also constructed American as a “moral identity” (Katz 1975; Kleinman 1996). According to Kleinman (1996: 5), a moral identity is any “identity that people invest with moral significance; our belief in ourselves as good people depends on whether we think our actions and reactions are consistent with that identity.” When people claim a moral identity for themselves, they assert that they are virtuous people. As we’ve seen, members of the movement regularly did this by suggesting they embody an array of positive qualities that they labeled “American.”

But activists can also use, or deploy (Bernstein 1997), moral identities strategically to support movement goals by appealing to audience members’ desires to see *themselves* as
good people. In the above example, Patricio not only calls on listeners to see him as a good American, but also to apply this conceptualization to themselves and to act in ways that are consistent with that identity (Kleinman 1996). The implied “moral” line of action for those identifying as good Americans, in the way that Patricio constructs them, is to support his appeal (as an American-at-heart) to become legally American. Three undocumented women who were being interviewed for a newspaper article adopted a similar strategy. They each began by describing their accomplishments in school, fluency in English, and gradual assimilation into (white, middle-class) American culture. They then emphasized how they had come to truly identify with America after having been embraced by Americans whom they depicted as especially generous and kind. As Freya told the reporter, “I feel in love with this country because of the love I received here.” She went on to explain how an American woman had taken in her family when they first arrived and treated them “as her own family and supported us.” That experience, she asserted, made her love America and Americans. The other women echoed that sentiment, pointing to teachers whose special attention gave them “a lot of love and care” for this country, as one tearfully put it. By characterizing these acts of kindness as typical of Americans, these women, like Patricio, constructed “American” as a moral identity and cast Americans as especially virtuous people who welcome and support newcomers. And good Americans, they suggested, demonstrate their benevolence by supporting DREAMers’ bids for full inclusion in U.S. society.

Treating Americanness as a subjective sense of identification and a moral identity rather than an impersonal label parceled out to anyone who happened to be born or naturalized in the U.S. enabled members of the movement to not only claim an American
identity, but to show that they are “model” Americans (see, e.g., Yukich 2013). Their willingness to give back to their communities, their desire to make something of themselves, their love of football and the American people – those things are the essence of what it means to be American, they suggest. And those things make them who they are: “true American[s].” Focusing on subjective identification with American culture allowed members of the movement to position themselves as American in a way that’s hard to dispute: in their hearts. This construction also let them dodge the question of legality, which, for their nativist opponents, was the only question that mattered.

**Americanness as Earned**

Members of the undocumented youth movement were also high-achieving and ambitious. Most were exceptional students who took challenging college-preparatory course loads in high school, had high GPAs and standardized test scores, graduated near the top of their classes, and received numerous acceptance letters from colleges and universities. When they shared their stories at public rallies, with the media, and in private interviews, they often highlighted these marks of achievement. Indeed, they routinely attended speak-outs dressed in caps and gowns – conventional symbols of (young) middle-class achievement and respectability in the U.S. This image of the achiever was evident in the way Fabio presented his story at a rally organized by a civil rights advocacy group. He started by explaining that his high school guidance counselor told him she was not sure if he would be able to attend college as an undocumented immigrant. He then said:

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15 Yukich (2013) outlines what she calls a “model movement strategy,” in which members of a movement lift up exemplary cases that defy stereotypes and can, thus, represent positively the rest of the group.
I decided to apply to college anyways – to seven universities. And I got accepted to almost all of them. And I proved to myself that I have what it takes to do it. I graduated with a 3.999 – an “A” GPA [lots of loud clapping and cheering]. But because of the high cost, I was forced to go to a community college… that I was glad to go [to]. I wanted an education. I was really glad also that I finished two years of community college – paying out-of-state tuition. Because even though living here… since I was in middle school, I wasn’t able to get financial aid or to be eligible for in-state tuition because I am undocumented.

Fabio depicted himself both as exemplifying the values of perseverance, hard work, and individual achievement, and as a victim of what many members of the movement called a “broken” immigration system. For them, it was broken because it criminalized and denied nearly all undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. It also made no exceptions for people like them, those who had demonstrated their commitment to core American values, who were already accomplished (by conventional white, middle-class standards), and who were striving (like other good Americans) to make even more of themselves. Fabio depicted all of that effort with no reward as unjust, a betrayal of another core American principle: meritocracy.

Many DREAMers further portrayed themselves as having learned to value achievement because they were raised in American communities and educated in American schools. Their experiences in this country, they claimed, made them American. Lili told a reporter that when she arrived in the United States as a teenager she only wanted “to eat every single day of the week.” She said she didn’t care about education at the time, but that her experiences in U.S. schools transformed her. After noting that she had recently completed her bachelor’s degree in biology and wanted to pursue a doctorate, she continued, “It was here, with the help of my teachers, that I succeeded so well in math and science. My teachers
would say to me, ‘Oh, you’re so smart. You should join honors or AP.’ And they helped change my schedule. It was American society that made me think I could do great things.”

Because her experiences in this country changed her in such a fundamental way, Lili suggested it was unfair to deny her the chance to finish her transformation into a full-fledged, legal American. Cynthia expressed a similar sentiment when she shared her story with a Congressional staffer:

I grew up in a little town called [rural American community]. And I went to elementary school there and high school and middle school, and some of my community college was done there, as well. And I grew up as an American kid. I grew up, you know, tutored by white folks, who taught me English. I was one of like three second grade Hispanic kids, including myself. And so, I grew up, you know, thinking about studies. I totally assimilated. And I went on to high school and found the AP courses and college classes and joined this club and that club and was the drum major for marching band. And, you know, I was shooting for all the extracurricular requirements to get to college and, you know, the right courses. And I did. I achieved it. And I got accepted to [state university], the school of my choice. And I was really excited to get my acceptance letter, except the part that said, “Congratulations, you’ve been academically accepted, but you need an international visa.” And, right then and there, um [her face begins to flush and her eyes fill with tears.], I knew I didn’t have a visa. So, all the hard work that I put in to that was basically useless.

Like Lili, Cynthia portrayed herself as having learned from her interactions with other Americans to embrace American culture – its language, the value of education, and striving to improve oneself. Those experiences made her American, she suggested; so, it was wrong for the country to refuse to accept her as one of its own.

Cynthia’s self-portrayal also reflected other elements that were common in DREAMers’ accounts of being or becoming American. Although she was born in Mexico, she started off by saying she grew up in a small town in America. While she may not have
intended to invoke a racialized image, Leitner (2012) asserts that in the U.S., small town life and rurality have historically been linked with “specifically white social and moral values” (829), such as those epitomized in the public radio program “Prairie Home Companion.” She suggests that for non-white immigrants who increasingly call these communities home, claiming belonging is often “conditional on immigrants conforming to white American values and norms” (828). Chou and Feagin (2008: 123) similarly argue that, “How whites view a group’s identity often shapes what happens to its members in such societal areas, especially in regard to access to white-controlled resources and opportunities.” Indeed, Cynthia portrayed herself as not just highly-accomplished, but as culturally assimilated into white, middle-class society. As she told the staffer, she learned English from the “white folks” and adopted a middle-class orientation that values achievement and striving. Having thus far successfully conformed to the norms, values, and expectations of the dominant group made Cynthia, in her words, “an American kid.” And that, she suggested, should count for something.

“Rising] above It”

Like Cynthia, other members of the movement often pointed to their ability to navigate white, middle-class dominated social institutions as signs of their true American spirit. Carrie, for instance, told me in an interview that she had grown up in a working-class, minority neighborhood: “Immigrant population, minorities, you know? Mexican immigrants, African Americans.” She’d done well in high school. So when she began looking at colleges, her friends encouraged her to apply to the highly-selective University of Chicago. She told
me, “I remember a couple of my friends were like, ‘If you do get in, you can always write about the story of the girl from the wrong side of the tracks who got into the University of Chicago.’… Like, you know, how cool it would be if an undocumented student got into it.” She did get in, on a full scholarship, and ultimately graduated from the school. Although she also described her struggle to fit in with the predominately white, upper-middle-class student body and the resentment she felt when she couldn’t apply for elite internships and fellowships because of her immigration status, she nonetheless embraced her own Horatio Alger-like story. As she told me, she was the girl “who came from the working class, who came from the south side of Chicago, who came from Chicago public schools” and went on to graduate from one the nation’s highest-ranked universities.

Other members of the movement often told similar stories of achieving unexpected success through sheer faith in their abilities, unwavering determination, and a refusal to back down from challenges. Although DREAMers sometimes recognized that they benefited from uncommon circumstances (Carrie said it was “great” for her that her parents supported her financially in high school so that she could focus solely on her studies), they tended to downplay their importance. Anabel, for instance, offered an astute analysis of the material and structural inequalities facing different groups of undocumented youth. In an interview, she explained:

A lot of the leaders in the [movement], they’ve all had college educations. They’ve all come from in-state tuition – not all, but most of them have come from in-state tuition states, and if not, they’ve come from families that have been able to – families and communities…. that will do, I don’t know, like, church dinners that will benefit your schooling. And I think a lot of them have come from communities and homes that have been able to help them out a lot.
Having experienced this kind of support herself and having graduated from a university in one such state, Anabel repeatedly described herself to me as “privileged.” She went on to say that one of the things that kept her motivated and involved in the movement was the potential to reach other undocumented youth who faced many more obstacles but “still have that will, that desire to learn from it or to, I guess, rise above it.” Even though she admits she didn’t have to “rise above” a lot herself, she still embraced the bootstrapping tale and imposed it on others.

When members of the movement told these stories about themselves or applied them to other undocumented immigrants who struggled in different ways, they were laying claim to a classic American narrative that prescribes dogged perseverance in the face of difficulties. This enabled them not only to portray themselves as American, but also to argue for different criteria for citizenship status. Merely being born in the United States, they suggested, wasn’t an accomplishment. Why, then, did it automatically confer citizenship? The fact that they persisted in their efforts to “become somebody,” as Yasmin put it, and to “rise above” the obstacles they encountered, made them true Americans.

*Real Americans Pay Taxes*

Reflecting similar ideas about Americanness as something one can earn through hard work and determination, members of the movement often pointed out that they paid taxes in the United States. In an interview, Patricio asserted, “My dad pays property taxes. My dad pays income taxes. He pays everything. You know, he pays everything that you would classify under what a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident has to pay.” Farah similarly wrote
in a blog post, “I was told that it’s immigrants like me who suck the welfare system without paying for it, but my family has paid and filed for taxes every year for the last seventeen years. And my parents and I don’t get anything from the welfare system.” By depicting themselves as taxpayers, members of the movement offered an explicit counter-narrative to the stereotype of immigrants as non-contributing drains on the American social service system (Capetillo-Ponce 2008; Chavez 2008). At the same time, they laid claim to a valued moral status – that of the hard-working, beleaguered taxpayer who has earned the right to have her/his concerns heard.

Indeed, members of the movement often defended their activism by pointing to their status as U.S. taxpayers. They asserted publicly and in interviews that they regularly paid income tax by using an individual tax identification number (ITIN) issued to them by the Internal Revenue Service. At a public rally, an undocumented woman held up what looked like a Social Security card and proclaimed: “This is my ITIN number…. We’re given an ITIN number. That has happened since 1996. We are paying taxes. A government agency facilitates this. We are constituents, and we do have rights!” Her group even organized a “No Taxation without Representation” rally. Its press release asserted:

Recently, members of [our team] confronted [our Senator] about her vow to “protect taxpayers,” which includes undocumented immigrants. Her response was that she only meant “legal taxpayers.” At this event, we are asserting that there is nothing illegal about paying taxes, and our elected representatives have a responsibility to defend all of their constituents.

By presenting themselves in this way, they were not just claiming status as Americans, but as good Americans who do their part by working and paying their taxes. Thus, they were not seeking special treatment, but fair treatment. Their identity work drew on an important
cultural rule about fairness in the U.S. – the idea that if you work hard, follow the rules, and pay your taxes, you’re entitled to something in return. You’ve earned it. Indeed, participating in the political process itself is a claim to citizenship, a point I will elaborate in the next section.

Casting Americanness as something that can be earned – whether through hard work, determination, or paying taxes – enables members of the movement to present themselves as like Americans in important ways. It shifts the meaning of “American” from an impersonal legal classification into a flexible identity that one can choose to embody (or not). By presenting Americanness as something that can be accomplished through individual actions, members of the movement created room for themselves in a seemingly closed social category.

*Americanness as Something You Do*

Identity theorists argue that to be accepted as a member of certain groups, it is not enough to simply call oneself a member. People must also *act like* members, showing through their behaviors that they understand the expectations for members of that group (Stets and Burke 2000; Stryker and Burke 2001). Likewise, in his work on impression management, Goffman (1967: 42) argued that, “If a person wishes to sustain a particular image of himself [or herself] and trust his [or her] feelings to it, he [or she] must work hard for the credits that will buy this self-enhancement” (see, e.g., Kaufman 2003). In addition to subjectively identifying as American, members of the undocumented youth movement often treated Americanness as something that they could embody and demonstrate through their
actions, especially their political participation. They regularly depicted their willingness to speak out and fight for justice as one of the truest expressions of Americanness. At a public rally, Victor told the crowd that he was speaking out now “because I do not want to betray myself, my family, and the values of democracy, freedom, and justice that this country has taught me over and over.” Victor presented his activism as a testament to his American character – his willingness to fight, like a good American, to defend the “American” values he embraced. In an interview, Kristy similarly explained that when she spoke with other undocumented youth, she reminded them that they were acting like Americans when they fought against injustice. As she put it:

What’s more American than being confident enough to speak, to, you know, have demands, right? That is, you know, and organizing, too, and being involved in just the whole political process. That’s what I see as – what affirms my right to be here – just the change, the positive change that I’m trying to do.

For Kristy, working to make the country a fairer place made her and other undocumented activists real Americans – perhaps “more American” than apathetic, politically disengaged natives. Carrie, another undocumented activist, pointed out in an interview that members of the movement weren’t “just whining” and “crying and complaining” about their problems. They were “doing something” about them.

Indeed, members often characterized their activism as the embodiment of a deep-seated American tradition of fighting for justice. During a bench trial for a group of undocumented activists arrested for trespassing in an act of civil disobedience, the prosecutor prefaced his closing remarks by saying he could think of nothing “more American” than lobbying one’s representative for political change. Despite losing, the activists were giddy
after the trial. Some excitedly declared that they had “won” because they had accomplished their goals of sharing their stories in a U.S. District Court and of getting the prosecutors and judge to adopt their language and refer to them as “lobbyists.” But, Rita specifically pointed to the prosecutor’s comments, declaring: “He called us American!” In an interview, she elaborated:

> There were moments when I knew that we weren’t going to necessarily win… but knowing that we were so much stronger in our convictions and knowing that they told us we were American in every way. And we were doing the most American thing by lobbying our senators. And when [the judge] said she wasn’t going to do anything to stop us from lobbying for our cause, and we’re not banned from Capitol Hill anymore – those were the moments that just reaffirmed our convictions and our truth that we are doing what we think is just and what we know is just.

For Rita and the other undocumented defendants, having convictions and fighting for them, even if they didn’t win, was the essence of being American. Real Americans, they suggest, are active. They have a can-do attitude, and they get involved. In this case, being taken seriously by members of a powerful legitimating institution and its representatives affirmed, in Rita’s words, that they were “American in every way.”

In a similar way, members of the movement also cultivated support from high-status, powerful citizen-advocates who viewed their activism as an (admirable) expression of civic engagement with American society. For instance, during preparations for the civil disobedience action that led to the court case described above, movement leaders brought in two civil rights attorneys to advise in the event that they were arrested. One of them told the

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16 As I will explain in detail in the next chapter, DREAMers were generally wary of the influence of adult citizen-advocates in the immigration reform movement. However, their social marginalization and limited economic means led DREAMers to foster relationships with key allies who could both affirm their claims to being real Americans and connect them to important resources, such as pro bono legal defense, when they engaged in risky forms of protest.
activists that the U.S. Constitution covers “all persons, not all citizens.” As a result, she said, DREAMers had an “absolute right to exercise political rights.” She later added, “Never make civil strategy decisions based on the law or legal potentialities. It needs to be based on your own personal convictions…. There’s nothing to be afraid of – at all. Go ahead and do the organizing for the rest of the community.” These affirmations from high-status citizen-advocates assured the DREAMers that their activism demonstrated admirable commitment to and engagement with American civic society. That is, their participation in the U.S. political system acted as a signifier of their Americanness.

Finally, members of the movement selectively associated themselves with other respected American activists. One group, for instance, actively courted support from civil rights leader (and U.S. Representative) John Lewis, who ultimately agreed to speak on their behalf at a public rally. The same group also met with Constance Curry, a white ally to the civil rights movement, who gave them a book she’d written about that period, inscribing it, “Peace and justice. Stay in the struggle.” One of the undocumented members of the group told me he had Curry’s personal phone number and was working to persuade her to do civil disobedience with them. By presenting themselves as close to and in alliance with other renowned American activists, undocumented youth claimed membership “in the struggle” – the broader, American struggle.

THE CLASS DILEMMA

In their efforts to gain public support for the creation of an exemption from immigration laws, DREAMers used a rhetoric that invoked class. By extolling the values of
meritocracy, hard work, and individual achievement, members of the movement suggested that they embraced core American values. Moreover, they demonstrated through their fluency in American-accented English, impressive achievements in school, and active interest and engagement in U.S. politics that they were already culturally integrated into (white, middle-class) American society. For most DREAMers, their socialization in middle- and upper-middle-class American peer groups gave them the cultural capital necessary to claim similarity with their class-privileged, American-born peers. Demonstrating this cultural assimilation into American society was central to their efforts to win support for full, legal inclusion.

But DREAMers’ identity work also brought with it unwanted baggage. Using this class-based rhetoric in their presentations of self tended to demean their less class-privileged fellow immigrants and reinforced a distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants (Bloemraad, Voss, and Lee 2011; Yukich 2013). If Americanness is something that can be earned by demonstrating conformity to white, middle-class expectations, then immigrants who don’t conform must be choosing not to assimilate (Chou and Feagin 2008). Moreover, by accommodating these exclusive constructions of Americanness, DREAMers made it hard for other undocumented immigrants who could not as easily navigate exclusive U.S. institutions and overcome racism and vulnerability to hyper-exploitation in low-wage jobs to present themselves as real Americans.

That’s not to say members of the movement intended to create the impression that they, more than others, deserved special consideration. Indeed, some members vehemently rejected the implication that they were special, and openly challenged what they perceived to
be elitist movement messages. Freya, for instance, sent an email to other members of her

group after a brainstorming session on “messaging.” As she told them:

I have a hard time with this language: “The DREAM Act adheres to our
American tradition of keeping the best and the brightest minds in the United
States.” I do not agree with our messaging implying that us DREAMers
deserve to be more in the U.S. than another immigrant who does not have an
education or is not “bright.”

Her group agreed, and they didn’t use that message. However, these occasional calls to tone
down elitist movement rhetoric did not alter in any fundamental way their strategic focus on
presenting themselves as exceptional people who (especially) deserved a chance to assimilate
fully into American society.

That DREAMers, as a group, used a strategy that inadvertently reinforced and
legitimated class hierarchy is not surprising. As members of a subordinated group, they had
limited options for claiming positive identities. In an interview, Paolo, an openly gay,
undocumented, dark-skinned Latino, poignantly described the bind he felt like he was in:

Every time I go on TV, every time I speak about the issue, I feel like I need to
say, “Oh look, I’m the greatest thing that ever happened.” When number one,
I’m not superman. Number two, I’m just a human being. And number three, I
just don’t – I shouldn’t have to go and tell people that I am the best thing that
ever happened in the world to be able to have the same rights as everyone
else. You know – I think there is – there is something about being a human
being that people should just understand. And I think that right now, that is
my greatest struggle: feeling the pressure to be the best, because if I’m not the
best, I don’t have any chances in this society – and at the same time feeling
like, well, you know, sometimes I don’t want to be the best. Sometimes I just
want to be regular, and knowing that if I’m just regular, I would never get
anywhere. I’d have even less chances of succeeding, you know?

Like Freya, Paolo sometimes felt uncomfortable presenting himself as exceptional. Unlike
her, he did not focus on the impacts of his class-based rhetoric on other undocumented
immigrants. Instead, he emphasized the feelings of inauthenticity his presentation of self
sometimes generated for him. Even though he didn’t always feel exceptional, he believed he
needed to present himself in that way to compensate for stigmas attached to the other statuses
he occupied. As a member of multiple devalued groups, he perceived few other options for
gaining acceptance and achieving success in the U.S.

This is a common problem for members of marginalized groups. In their analysis of
the difficulties Asian Americans face in juggling their desire to fit into American society with
their resistance to embracing the “model minority” stereotype that positions them above other
racial groups, Chou and Feagin (2008: 19) asserted:

The white racial frame [in the U.S.] ensures that those at the bottom of the
racial order are repeatedly denigrated. In this situation fighting for one’s
dignity will sometimes mean that another individual or group will be pushed
down and set up for failure. Vying for position in a preexisting racial order
creates volatility and conflict. Groups of color are frequently pitted against
each other for the title as “top subordinate,” while whites as a group remain at
the top.

Undocumented youth are in a similarly untenable situation. As members of multiple
stigmatized and subordinated groups, their options for eliciting respect and acquiring legal
rights are limited. They could openly and directly challenge exclusionary laws and
demeaning stereotypes, perhaps by joining forces with other undocumented immigrants and
advocacy groups. Or they could accommodate oppression and seek acceptance from
dominants. Given their facility in navigating middle-class, white American society and using
its cultural emblems to represent themselves, it’s not surprising that they chose the latter
strategy.
The desire to escape oppression often leads members of subordinated groups to distance themselves from the very groups to which they belong. Pyke and Johnson (2003), for instance, found that second-generation Asian American women claimed they were not really Asian because they defied commonly held stereotypes of Asian women as quiet, passive, and subservient. Killian and Johnson (2006) similarly found that North African immigrant women in France dis-identified with the label “immigrant,” suggesting that their upper-middle-class cultural capital and linguistic fluency made them more like the native-born French than their North African immigrant peers. Rejecting membership in devalued social categories can protect feelings of self-esteem and may enable people to escape negative imputations of character. However, their resistance to identifying as members of subordinate groups also reinforces a social hierarchy that places the native-born above immigrants – and especially above undocumented immigrants – and conceives of the latter groups in negative ways.

Schwalbe and his colleagues (2000: 425) describe this strategy as “defensive othering” (see also McCall 2003, on “Not-Me” identity processes). Unlike “oppressive othering,” whereby a dominant group marks another group as inferior for the purposes of excluding or exploiting them, defensive othering is an adaptive response to oppression that subordinates use to elevate themselves above members of their own group. They assert, in effect, “There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me” (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 425). By positioning themselves as culturally and ideologically closer to white, middle-class Americans, DREAMers hoped to deflect stigma and convince lawmakers to exempt them from exclusionary immigration laws. Their identity work allowed them to
distance themselves from demeaning stereotypes of undocumented immigrants by showing that they were nothing like them. But without challenging the fundamental assumptions about deservingness that underlay these stereotypes, they left intact the idea that some people do not deserve the same rights and opportunities as others.

**SUCCESSES AND FAILURES**

Although members of the undocumented youth movement were not ultimately successful in persuading Congress to pass the DREAM Act, they have garnered mostly positive attention from the mainstream media and some politicians. Their stories and actions have been featured regularly in the *New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times*, and many local and regional newspapers. They have been invited to share their stories on CNN and MSNBC. In addition, several state-level DREAM Acts have been enacted recently, enabling undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at public universities or to receive state-funded financial aid. And on June 15, 2012, President Barrack Obama used his executive powers to establish Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a discretionary initiative granting DREAM Act-eligible youth a temporary reprieve from deportation and enabling them to work legally in the U.S. That same year, an undocumented youth activist was also invited to speak at the Democratic National Convention. To date, DREAM Act-eligible youth have been the only subgroup of undocumented immigrants to win an official reprieve from deportation and to be unambiguously recognized by a national political party as deserving of a path to citizenship. This suggests the effectiveness of their

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17 As of June 2014, eighteen states offer in-state tuition to undocumented students attending public universities (Linton 2014).
efforts to distinguish themselves from other undocumented immigrants. In other words, their identity work worked, at least in a limited way.

In addition, public opinion polls taken since the DREAMers began their campaign in 2010 have consistently found majority support for the DREAM Act. An Opinion Research Corporation poll taken in June 2010, during the height of DREAMers’ activism, found 69% of respondents favored the DREAM Act, with 51% “strongly” favoring it. A Gallup poll taken in December of the same year found 54% support for the bill, and more recent polls find similar levels of support for DACA (Tarrance Group 2012; Brookings 2013).

Anecdotally, three of my transcriptionists also emailed unsolicited words of support for the DREAMers after listening to their stories. One wrote, “The stories touched my heart.” Another said that one of the interviews sounded like a “really good book on tape.” Yet another told me that hearing the DREAMers’ stories made her rethink her own experiences as a Polish immigrant to the U.S. Whenever I discussed my project with my predominately middle-class citizen-peers, these kinds of sympathetic responses to DREAMers and their stories were common.

As a recruitment strategy, storytelling also appeared to be relatively effective, especially among undocumented youth who identified culturally as middle class. As noted previously, before joining the movement, the youth activists often felt marginalized by their undocumented status. Identifying as a “DREAMer,” many of them told me, was appealing because it offered a way of transforming the meaning of their status. As Kristy explained in an interview:
I thought it was really great actually, the term DREAMer, because I had grown up hearing that I was illegal, and so, it just was a relief, to have this – to have an identity that wasn’t a criminal, right? It was someone who just wants a future, and that’s exactly what came with it. So, I felt really empowered by the term DREAMer…. And I also liked wearing the caps and gowns because I thought it was a meaningful symbol.

And, as Zak put it, to be a DREAMer was to be “rich in your dreams,” someone who “never giv[es] up.” It was to be seen as “students [who] who deserve to come here,” Nayeli added, “because they’re doing good with their communities and they’re doing good with their parents and they’re good people who want to get an education.” Identifying as a DREAMer, these young people explained, enabled them to claim respect and think of themselves positively. Given the typically vitriolic public discourse around undocumented immigration, achieving this was a feat in itself. The sheer number of “DREAM teams” that have sprung up across the country to support undocumented youth activism in the last few years serves, perhaps, as a testament to movement leaders’ ability to channel young people’s frustrations and desires for positive, alternative identities into collective action.18

Despite these movement successes, DREAMers’ presentations of self appeared to create some blind spots for members, particularly in their efforts to recruit working-class youth into the movement. During public storytelling events, DREAMers often asserted that they were giving voice to thousands of other undocumented youth who were still “in the shadows,” too afraid or depressed to advocate for themselves. They were putting a “face” (their faces) on the problem of undocumented immigration. However, thinking about their stories in these ways – as representative of all undocumented youth – obscured important

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18 Since 2010, dozens of local groups comprised of undocumented youth and their allies and two national networks have emerged to support undocumented youth activism.
differences among them. It made it seem as if they were all equally high-achieving and assimilated into (white, middle-class) American culture – or that they would be if given the chance.

Nearly everyone I spoke with in the movement intended to pursue the college path to citizenship if the DREAM Act passed. While this was not unrealistic for those who had already completed their bachelor’s degrees (often under special circumstances\(^\text{19}\)) or lived in states that offered in-state tuition, this was not the situation for most undocumented youth. A recent analysis by the Migration Policy Institute found that of the 2.1 million undocumented youth who would meet the basic qualifying criteria for the DREAM Act that year, fewer than half (825,000) would be able to complete the educational (or military service) requirements (Batalova and McHugh 2010). In most cases, the barriers would be economic.

As members of working-class immigrant families, undocumented youth, as a group, would struggle to afford college without in-state tuition or federal financial aid (neither of which are stipulated under the DREAM Act). In North Carolina, for instance, undocumented youth are charged out-of-state tuition, which can be four times higher than the in-state rate. Even DREAMers who might consider the military option likely would face competing pressures to help support their low-wage, undocumented family members – either by getting a job themselves or by caring for younger siblings while parents worked (Batalova and McHugh 2010). Working-class women also contend with gendered care-giving expectations that impede the pursuit of education (Batalova and McHugh 2010: 6). But DREAMers’ overwhelmingly homogeneous middle-class presentations of self glossed over these

\(^{19}\) Several DREAMers told me that they had “sponsors” who paid for their college education or that they received private scholarships that enabled them to complete their schooling.
inequalities, making it seem as if the only obstacle to undocumented youths’ full assimilation into mainstream (white, middle-class) American society was their legal status.

In a different way, the homogenizing effect of their storytelling identity work may have also made it difficult for DREAMers to imagine how undocumented youth outside the movement – especially those who did not share their middle-class cultural capital – perceived them. This was evident in an interview with Diego, one of the few members of the movement who identified economically and culturally as working class.\(^{20}\) He was invited to a recruitment meeting organized by DREAMers in my state. I also attended the meeting and noticed that he seemed uncomfortable and disengaged much of the time. At one point, he even got into a brief but testy exchange with one of the organizers when he said that he never felt stigmatized by his undocumented status and was not afraid to share it with anyone. Because the identity “DREAMer” connoted, in part, liberation from feelings of stigma and fear, having an undocumented youth say he couldn’t relate to that fundamental premise was threatening to other group members. In an interview, I asked Diego about that meeting. He explained:

I think that at that time I was really angry that I was in a room of very privileged kids. I feel like I was in a very, like, “Well, you didn’t have to wake up every day at 5:30 in the morning and go to work in the field,” or, “You didn’t have to do this. You had to go to school, and you’re crying because you want to go to school?” I think that’s the attitude that I had. And I was like, “Come on, please! You’re actually going to have meetings about a DREAM

\(^{20}\) Most members of the movement identified economically as working class because they tended to have low-wage, unstable jobs. Culturally, however, they typically perceived themselves to be middle-class. Diego, on the other hand, talked proudly about making a living by picking galax (a small green leaf used in floral arrangements) alongside his parents and other undocumented immigrants. While many members of the movement sought more professional jobs during the time of my research (e.g., as paid organizers, translators, or administrative assistants on short-term contracts), Diego continued to pick galax when he was not actively involved in movement activities.
Act? And you’re actually going to sit here and cry when your parents have to go through so much more shit than you do?” Even now, thinking about it, I’m like, I still, I still feel that anger. I was just very like the kid who had never, ever been to [a big city] and all these kids with their fancy clothes – I had no sympathy at all for DREAMers. I felt like they were a bunch of little whiney, white-wannabe kids.

Diego didn’t like the DREAMers when he first met them. He saw them as pretentious and “out of touch with the reality of a lot of other youths’ lives.” Although he ultimately befriended a group member and began participating in some movement activities, he told me that he never identified as a DREAMer. As he saw it, the movement was for “very privileged” undocumented youth who wanted to go to college, a goal that seemed out of reach for him. He couldn’t afford college and his grades weren’t that good. As a result, he was reluctant to participate in storytelling events, seeing his personal story as “irrelevant” to the goals of the movement. As he explained: “I just felt like it was nothing about my experience; it was just about passing the DREAM Act,” a bill that didn’t seem to offer anything of value to working-class youth like himself. “Like, I was not a great student and I totally hate the DREAMer 4.0 GPA image,” he said. “Maybe you got good grades, but you maybe had the time to. Maybe you were not taking care of your family or working. I hate those kids who talk about how they never worked a day in their lives. What? We don’t deserve anything?”

Because he perceived the movement to be built around the class interests of college-educated or college-bound undocumented immigrants, it was hard for

21 Diego also identified openly as bisexual. Because of the U.S. military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, he would not have been eligible to pursue the military option under the DREAM Act when I began my study. That policy was officially repealed in late 2010. However, he told me that he was not interested in joining the military even if it promised a path to citizenship.
Diego to muster much enthusiasm for it or to see himself as a full-fledged member when he did participate.

Although my research has focused primarily on youth who identified as middle-class and perceived themselves to be movement-insiders, Diego’s perspective is telling. As a working-class immigrant, he was turned off by the DREAMers’ middle-class, white-racialized presentations of self. Although DREAMers presented their stories as typical and representative of those of other undocumented youth, Diego felt thoroughly disconnected from and unrepresented by the movement. If that response is common among working-class youth, it suggests that the identity work DREAMers used to deflect stigma and distance themselves from demeaning stereotypes inadvertently created barriers to building solidarity with other, less class-privileged youth. It also suggests that DREAMers’ assertions that other undocumented youth didn’t join the movement because they were too afraid or depressed may be wrong (at least sometimes). As Diego explained, he was neither of those things. What turned him off was his perception of the movement as exclusive – reflecting and promoting the interests of an elite, class-privileged group of undocumented immigrants.22

DREAMers’ stories of achievement and assimilation into white, middle-class American culture, thus, ironically recreated the same exclusionary boundaries around the movement that they sought to challenge in the broader society. Moreover, by emphasizing

22 Although I did not interview enough working-class immigrants to establish a pattern, there’s some evidence that Diego was not alone in his response to the movement. In late 2010, a group of undocumented youth organized by the American Friends Service Committee, a pacifist religious group, created a website called Suenos, with the aim of “inject[ing] the realities and perspectives of the missing 67 percent into the immigrant’s rights movement and the national dialogue.” As they explained, most undocumented youth lack the grades and economic resources to pursue college and would only benefit from the DREAM Act through military service, an option they opposed on moral grounds. As they put it, “Our goal is to raise those/our underprivileged migrant youth voices to expand the debate and the legislative possibilities.”
their qualifications for the DREAM Act along the college path, DREAMers’ identity work also obscured the fact that many, if not most, undocumented youth would not be able to pursue that option (Batalova and McHugh 2010). For those who lacked the economic resources and academic qualifications to attend college, the DREAM Act offered only one other path to citizenship: military service. So, while class-privileged youth had two options, others had only one.

In a similar way, DREAMers’ presentations of self also generated backlash from other advocacy groups who saw their strategy as divisive and as undermining their efforts to win broader legislative reforms that would benefit many more people than the DREAM Act. By presenting themselves as model Americans, these groups warned, undocumented youth made everyone else look bad – and undeserving – by comparison. Indeed, DREAMers’ identity work appeared to legitimate inequality by downplaying the effects of racism and class oppression on the ability of most undocumented immigrants to present themselves as similarly good candidates for citizenship. By using middle-class cultural capital to demonstrate their worthiness for a legal exemption, DREAMers may have been effective in winning limited support for limited reforms. Yet the very success of their middle-class presentations of self may have inadvertently created challenges for working-class and poor immigrants in making an equally compelling case for broader reform.

CONCLUSION

In their multi-institutional politics model, Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) argue that the power to oppress does not lie with the state alone. Marginalized groups are
simultaneously oppressed by multiple social institutions, each of which is “constituted by classificatory systems and practices that concretize these systems” (83; see also Snow 2004). This suggests that social change efforts that target the cultural dimensions of power can also destabilize the legal justifications for the policies themselves (see, e.g., J. Gamson 1989). Undocumented youth activists’ identity work aimed to accomplish just that. By presenting themselves as culturally similar to white, middle-class Americans, they suggested that the rigid, legal boundaries that exclude them from that category don’t make sense. In this way, they were seeking policy change through cultural change.

In her ethnographic study of the New Sanctuary Movement, Yukich (2013: 303) found that pro-immigrant activists engaged in a type of frame transformation process she called the “model movement strategy.” This strategy involves lifting up “model” cases to challenge negative stereotypes associated with the group as a whole. She showed how movement leaders selected representatives who could demonstrate that they were like their target audience – white, middle-class, religious Americans – in essential ways. For them, this meant being able to signal that they were heterosexual, law-abiding, hard-working, and polite community members. In addition to carefully selecting and casting these critical public roles, movement members also scripted their public messages to align with dominant cultural and religious values. In this sense, the identity work of the undocumented youth activists was similar to the model movement strategy Yukich outlined.

DREAMers, like the activists Yukich studied, believed that by using models they could shift dominant-group perceptions and thereby effect progressive change. Indeed, their identity work aimed to show that they were not just model immigrants but model Americans.
Their construction of a flexible American identity that could be established through claims of American-defined values, behaviors, and subjective feelings allowed them to transcend legal technicalities. By showing how they embodied the essence of Americanness through their achievements, determination, and commitment to American society, they challenged the notion that undocumented immigrants are poorly-educated, low-skilled, noncontributing welfare mooches who refuse to assimilate.

But their goal was not just to gain acceptance from the dominant group for their claim to being subjectively American. Their identity work was aimed squarely at securing the rights that go along with membership in that legally-restricted category. As one of the movement leaders told the crowd (of mostly undocumented youth and their allies) at the first large-scale coming out rally, “We are not here asking for acceptance. We are asking for change. We’re asking for a chance to be able to contribute fully to our communities and our societies. We are asking for legalization.” DREAMers thus sought to show through their presentations of self that the criteria used to bestow the rights and benefits of American citizenship were wrong. The law, as it was applied, was unfair, they suggested, because it excluded people like them who were as American as their native-born peers, and it should therefore be changed.

In their analysis of collective identity in social movements, Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992: 111) discuss the creation and maintenance of boundaries as a key process. For them, boundaries refer to “the social, psychological, and physical structures that establish differences between a challenging group and dominant groups.” In social movements, boundary work can be thought of as activities “that reinforce collective definitions through
we-they distinctions, which are often marked by differences in physical appearance, dress, speech, demeanor, and other behaviors” (Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994: 20; see also Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 126-127). I discussed previously how DREAMers’ identity work unintentionally marginalized working-class youth like Diego, who perceived their experiences and stories to be “irrelevant” to the movement. DREAMers’ narrative identity work, in other words, was simultaneously boundary work that had the effect of creating an “us/them” distinction that excluded less class-privileged undocumented immigrants.

My research also suggests that members of social movements not only do boundary work internally, with the aim of creating and maintaining a shared sense of “we-ness.” They also use markers of identity to expand the boundaries of a seemingly closed group. One way DREAMers did this was by telling stories that demonstrated that while they might fall outside the legal boundaries of “American,” they fell squarely within its cultural and ideological boundaries. By emphasizing their high levels of achievement in school, fluency in American-accented English, and relative ease navigating white, middle-class American institutions, DREAMers signaled that they should be seen as insiders rather than outsiders in (middle-class, white) American culture. Like native-born Americans, they embraced the achievement ideology and saw America as the “land of opportunity,” a place where one succeeds or fails on one’s merits. As numerous scholars have shown (MacLeod 1995; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Wellman 1993), belief in meritocracy is core to Americans’ sense of themselves. By adopting the dominant ideology, DREAMers portrayed themselves as just like Americans – respectable, worthwhile, and deserving.
However, DREAMers’ storytelling strategy was also assimilationist. It was by demonstrating that they met white, middle-class expectations and fit into white, middle-class culture that they claimed inclusion in the category “American.” In fact, the wording of the DREAM Act itself compelled them to give (white) middle-class presentations of self. To qualify under the bill, they had to demonstrate, among other things, that they possessed “good moral character.” By incorporating (white) middle-class-defined markers of Americanness in their public stories, they were able to construct themselves as good, moral people and distance themselves from the negative stereotypes with which undocumented immigrants were often associated (Schwalbe et al. 2000). It was this middle-class (white) version of Americanness that they presented in their public stories, reinforcing the notion that those immigrants who are most deserving of a chance to become fully American are those who assimilate.

Finally, the storytelling strategy DREAMers adopted focused attention on the personal character, achievements, and merits of individual undocumented youth. This was intended to counter the depersonalizing effects of stereotyping by anti-immigrant nativists and to show that undocumented immigrants were not all the same. However, by emphasizing individual deservingness, DREAMers’ identity work directed Americans to focus only on the question of whether a small group of elite immigrants deserved an exemption from existing laws rather than raising questions about the entire system of exclusionary categories and laws. From this narrow perspective, it appears that our “broken” immigration system

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23 Under current immigration laws, there are three main ways of immigrating legally to the U.S.: (1) as political asylees or refugees (rare and difficult status to acquire); (2) via an employer-sponsorship (typically offered only to those with highly-valued, upper-middle-class skills); and (3) through family sponsorship as the spouse,
requires only a minor tweaking to fix what’s wrong. This ultimately lets citizens off the hook for maintaining a system that routinely disenfranchises millions of immigrants, subjecting them to abuse and hyper-exploitation. It also lets them (and DREAMers) avoid an analysis of power that might lead them to conclude that the immigration system was not broken but, in fact, worked quite well to serve the interests of political and economic elites (De Genova 2002, 2004; Ngai 2004). Storytelling could be used to foster this kind of awareness and build solidarity between middle- and working-class immigrants (and perhaps citizens), but it will probably take more than stories of moral goodness and deservingness – or different stories, anyway – to shift these underlying power dynamics.

24 The Department of Homeland Security estimates that 11.5 million undocumented immigrants resided in the United States in 2011. Overall, undocumented immigration to the U.S. has increased steadily since the 1980s, peaking at approximately 12 million in 2007 (Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker 2012).
CHAPTER 4

“SHIFTING THE POWER”: COMPENSATORY REFramING OF THE IMMIGRATION REFORM MOVEMENT

Facilitator (addressing the group): Do you have a voice in the movement?

Female DREAMer: Before you guys did the sit-in in Arizona, I didn’t feel like I had a voice – at all. And through that, I felt like [long pause as she begins to cry], and through that, I felt like I screamed. Within my organization, I do feel I have a voice. And when it comes to everywhere else besides this space, I know I’m at least acknowledged. Even if what I want might not be accepted, I know I’m at least acknowledged. And I think that’s the first step for this movement: it’s knowing, and knowing for sure, that all of us as a collective – even though at the national level, we might not be accepted, we might not change stuff – at least we’re acknowledged. And I want to thank you guys for doing that [loud clapping from the entire room].

—fieldnotes from a convening of DREAMers and their allies to discuss the formation of a new national network of youth activists

Politics is serious business. In mainstream U.S. culture, it is seen as the proper activity of adults (especially white, middle- to upper-class, male, citizen adults). The fact that social movements organized by and for young people are labeled youth movements is evidence that even efforts toward political change are normalized as “adult” activities in U.S. society (Gordon 2007, 2010). Perceived as “citizens-in-the-making but not yet ‘finished’ citizens” (Gordon 2007: 636), young people seeking entrée into these adult-defined spaces risk being ignored, dismissed, talked down to, and treated as tokens rather than full-fledged contributors (Bent 2013; Gordon and Taft 2011; Taft 2011; Taft and Gordon 2013; see also Cahill 1990, on adults’ surveillance and restriction of children’s access to public spaces, and

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25 The young woman was addressing undocumented youth activists who organized the first civil disobedience action by DREAMers in the movement. They staged it in Senator John McCain’s Tucson, Arizona, office in May 2010, and called on him to support the passage of the DREAM Act.
Goffman 1963: 84, on children’s “nonperson treatment” in those settings). Moreover, given their perceptions of how adult power is wielded to subordinate young people in these groups, youth activists are often skeptical that they can even make the kinds of changes they want in these adult-dominated spaces (Gordon 2007; Taft and Gordon 2013). For some, the only option is to form their own groups and foster political empowerment and visibility within them (Gordon 2007).

Although DREAMers were typically young adults in their twenties, they self-identified as *youth* activists (and students) and labeled their efforts a *youth* movement. Like other youth activists, they struggled to assert moral authority and be taken seriously as agents of change in the contemporary immigrant rights movement. However, unlike other youth activists who are citizens of the countries in which they engage in political struggle, DREAMers’ status as undocumented immigrants compounded their marginalization in the political arena. Until recently, (adult) citizen-advocates and politicians dominated the public discourse and policy debates around immigration reform (Nicholls 2013). Undocumented immigrants were not seen as having political agency in their own right because of their vulnerability to being deported if immigration authorities discovered their status. Accordingly, (adult) citizen-advocates typically took the lead in calling for change on their behalf.

In the process, citizen-advocates assumed primary control over how the problem of immigration was framed. For social movement scholars, frames are the interpretive schemas movement participants create and use to mobilize support (Benford and Snow 2000; W. Gamson 1988; Snow 2004; see also Goffman 1974, on “frame analysis”). Put differently,
they are the “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns” of social movement groups (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). As a process, framing can be thought of as the symbolic work activists do to diagnose the problem at hand, devise a solution, and move others to take supportive action (Benford and Snow 2000: 614; Snow 2004). It is through framing that social activists identify who has what stake in the problem, who are the victims, and who is to blame (W. Gamson 1992; Hunt and Benford 1994).

In their roles as spokespersons for undocumented immigrants, citizen-advocates have generally framed the “immigration problem” as a moral crisis rooted in an outdated and punitive immigration system that hurts everyone. An influential advocacy group asserted on its webpage: “Detention and deportation… needlessly tear families and communities apart,” while “harmful policies and actions… expose immigrant workers to abuse and exploitation.” This adult, citizen-advocate framing of the immigration problem as pervasive, multi-faceted, and touching everyone makes no room for the particular problems, concerns, and priorities of undocumented youth. Indeed, it treats undocumented immigrants as an undifferentiated group. In devising solutions, most advocacy groups have called for far-reaching solutions that would provide a path to citizenship for all undocumented immigrants. Reflecting this framing of the problem, U.S. Representative Luis Gutierrez introduced a comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) bill in the last weeks of 2009. By late spring 2010, most political observers declared it “impractical,” “too liberal,” and destined to fail.26

26 As previously noted, the last time Congress passed sweeping immigration reform with a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already residing in the U.S. was over twenty-five years ago, when President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. In the years since,
Undocumented youth who observed this latest (failed) campaign for CIR wondered if there might be a better way to approach the “immigration problem.” “CIR is dead,” they grumbled to each other. But the DREAM Act wasn’t— not yet, anyway. The DREAM Act was a much narrower bill that would provide relief only to undocumented young people who were brought to the U.S. as children and grew up in U.S. society, but who could not fully integrate because of their legal status. Since it was first introduced in Congress in 2001, the DREAM Act has had bipartisan support. As undocumented youth saw it, it was an uncomplicated bill that had already been re-introduced that legislative session. It just hadn’t been voted on yet. DREAMers believed it could pass as a “stand alone” bill if everyone advocating for yet another version of CIR threw their collective weight behind it. It could be the “first step toward comprehensive immigration reform,” they told each other and the citizen-advocates who would listen. “Our community” is in “need of a win,” DREAMers wrote in an open letter to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. The DREAM Act could give them that. Why couldn’t these citizen-advocates see it that way? Were they even listening? The fact that a specific piece of legislation with which DREAMers identified had been proposed gave them a legitimacy hook. This was a federal bill designed just for them. As they saw it, that gave them a personal stake in the policy debates around immigration reform and, thus, a legitimate right to speak on the issue and be heard. But in the spring of 2010, they felt marginalized on the national political stage. No one seemed to be taking their ideas, priorities, and efforts to assert political agency seriously. Instead, policymakers, the

the number of immigrants living and working in the U.S. without legal status has increased. Opponents of expanded immigration often point to IRCA as evidence that any bill that includes “amnesty” for existing undocumented immigrants won’t work.
media, and even other undocumented immigrants appeared to be giving more attention and credence to the perspectives of the higher status citizen-advocates who continued to push for CIR. As DREAMers saw it, they were vying with these established “leaders” for power and influence in the framing of the policy debates around immigration reform. As long as citizen-advocates maintained a privileged position in those debates, DREAMers’ priorities (passing the DREAM Act) would be subordinated. And, as a group of young activists, they would have a hard time seeing themselves as respectable and respected political agents in their own right.

This chapter examines efforts by DREAMers to reframe the debates around immigration reform in a way that enabled them to elevate themselves to positions of moral leadership. I start by discussing how DREAMers framed the problem they faced as young undocumented immigrants seeking status vis-à-vis more established adult citizen-advocates in the broader immigration reform movement. Next I discuss the frameworks DREAMers’ developed to: (1) subvert the power and influence of citizen-advocates by altercasting them as illegitimate authorities on issues of immigration reform; (2) cultivate a sense of efficacy, power, and “entitlement” (as one of them put it) to speak with authority on immigration reform; and (3) control the power and influence of allies in their own groups. I conclude by discussing the implications of their compensatory re-framing efforts for maintaining momentum for change, especially among groups that are marginalized in broad movements for change.
Something interesting happened when I asked undocumented youth how they got involved in political activism around the DREAM Act. While most told stories about growing increasingly frustrated with the limits their undocumented status imposed on their lives, some also told stories about growing increasingly frustrated with the limits citizen-advocates imposed on their efforts to assert political agency. And they proceeded to explain why they created their own groups. Just as Francesca Polletta (1998) found in her analysis of the stories of “spontaneity” told by participants in the sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement, I discovered that the stories undocumented youth told about starting their own groups were patterned.

What did DREAMers’ “stories of origin” (Polletta 1998: 426) have in common? Most emphasized experiences of disempowerment, disappointment, and subordination in their interactions with adult citizen-advocates. Ana, one of the movement leaders, told me that when she first got involved in organizing, she was working with representatives from different advocacy groups\(^{27}\) to try to stop the deportation of an undocumented college student. She said that during a press conference, one of the advocates proclaimed that the young man in question would “make a great soldier for this country” and went on to highlight the DREAM Act’s military provision. As Ana depicted it, she and the other undocumented youth working on the campaign were unsettled by this because they had not

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\(^{27}\) I use “advocacy group” as DREAMers’ did, to refer to adult, citizen-led, non-profit organizations that advocated for immigration reform. As I will explain, they made a concerted effort to distinguish their own youth-led groups from these organizations.
been consulted beforehand. “I mean, no one ran that messaging past us,” Ana said. “No one asked [him] or myself – I mean, [him] specifically, right? No one asked him whether he would be okay with [them] saying that.” She said that the young man opposed U.S. imperialism and had no interest in joining the military. Although she said they acknowledged that it was probably “good messaging,” they wanted to at least be consulted on it. But as young, inexperienced organizers, she said that it seemed risky to challenge the older advocates. “I felt like I had no power, right? I felt like I was asking for favors.” And they didn’t want to lose the support they had, especially given the high stakes. “I mean, I felt like it was not my position to question the messaging from the people that were supporting us because his life was at stake.”

Although the group was ultimately successful in stopping the man’s deportation, Ana characterized the experience of working with adult citizen-advocates as disempowering. Other undocumented youth told stories depicting advocacy groups as too “top-down” and directive. For instance, Kristy said that when she worked with an advocacy group, undocumented youth were asked to share their stories with the media but only after the advocates approved the content. In an interview, she described the experience: “It feels like being a pawn, and I don’t like that.” Cynthia told a story of being over-ruled by a citizen-advocate when she protested a new policy banning reporters (including one of her trusted friends) from participating in the group. She described the interaction in an interview:

She’s just like, “Well, Cynthia, I don’t think you have a call on this one.” And I was just, like – my jaw dropped. And I just didn’t know what to say. And I was like, “Okay. I’m probably one of the most affected people working on this right now, but I don’t have a call on this?”
As she explained it, that experience showed Cynthia “the way people worked and the way politics even works within these movements and who makes the decisions and who calls the shots.” In citizen-led advocacy groups, DREAMers suggested, they were always vulnerable to being disempowered, controlled, and subordinated.

By depicting their experiences with adult, citizen-led, advocacy initiatives in these ways, undocumented youth suggested they had no choice but to start their own groups, “led by undocumented people,” as Ana put it. “We had a responsibility,” Fabio explained, “to gather members” and create new groups in which undocumented youth were no longer “invisible.” But how would they do that? Where would they fit in the broader immigration reform movement?

Creating Stories of “Us” and “Them”

As these young people constructed their new groups, it was important to them that they differentiate themselves from the citizen-led advocacy groups. This was not straightforward, in part, because of the make-up of their new groups. When undocumented youth started their own groups, they often invited their close friends (and sometimes, partners) – typically college-aged, middle- and upper-middle-class citizens – to join them (albeit in support roles, as I will elaborate later). “DREAM teams,” as many of them were called, had both undocumented immigrants and citizens among their members – just like the citizen-advocacy groups. So, what was a DREAM team and how was it different from the citizen-advocacy groups?
In backstage movement spaces, undocumented youth activists and their allies used collective storytelling to frame their groups as distinct from those led by citizen-advocates. As social movement scholars assert, framing is a means by which to constitute new collective actors and clarify who is “us” and who is “them” (W. Gamson 1992). We can see how this process unfolded in a conference call between members of the group I studied. About five months after the group formed, members decided that they needed to revisit their mission statement. As one of them explained on the call, they were starting to get more attention from community groups, so they needed to “make it clear to everybody what we are and who we are.” After all, their mission statement was “one of the faces of our organization,” another added. They decided to go through it line by line. As William Gamson (1992) asserts, “Collective action frames are not merely aggregates of individual attitudes and perceptions, but also the outcome of negotiating shared meaning” (111). After an ally read the opening sentence that asserted the group’s commitment to “making an immigrant rights movement” in their state, Ivan, a new undocumented member asked what that meant and how other advocacy groups might perceive it. Matthew, an ally, responded:

If we’re saying that we’re going to create an immigrant rights movement, and they’re already working on immigrant rights things, then it kind of creates this perceived invalidation of other work.

Freya, a DREAMer, said she understood his point but countered, “How about ‘immigrant rights movement’ but something led by the people who are most affected?” She explained:

I just want to differentiate how different [our group] is from other organizations, right? Because, we’re not paid – like, the undocumented people who are affected by this issue who are helping lead this movement. We’re not just having advocates tell us what to do. So, maybe we can mention
somewhere along there, like, “volunteer” or “community-led” immigrant rights movement.

Fabio, another DREAMer, added: “I would like to add at the very beginning… it’s actually the *community* leading these efforts.” Cynthia, another DREAMer, said:

I personally like “community-led” because it leaves it open. Community is not just immigrants. It’s everybody. So, that also makes it inclusive. And also, I just wanted to point out, going back to what Freya was saying about where [our group] is different – and we don’t want to exclude or forget the work that has been done – but, I think that one of the reasons that other organizations consider us and look up to us for leadership on certain things like the DREAM Act is because we have proven with our actions, not just our words, that we mean business… because we did a [direct action] for [nearly two weeks].

Despite allotting only ten minutes on the agenda to revising their mission statement, the group ultimately discussed it for over thirty-five minutes. At one point, Ivan suggested they keep the mission statement short and create a website “with a section on how this team formed and some of these things can be addressed there.” He understood that this conversation was not just about a mission statement. Rather, through collaborative storytelling, they were constructing a story of “us” and establishing their collective stakes in the broader immigration reform debates.

Social psychologists argue that any claim to identity is simultaneously an assertion of difference (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). As this example demonstrates, members of DREAM teams frequently defined their own groups in opposition to citizen-advocacy groups: *we* are led by the people most affected (*they* are led by privileged folks); *we* are led by the community (*they* are led by outsiders to the community); *we* are volunteers (*they* are paid); *we* make our own decisions (*they* tell people what to do); *we* take action (*they* just talk). Through social comparison, members of DREAM teams constructed their groups as
different from those led by citizen-advocates. This was important because it enabled DREAMers to articulate a distinct, youth-defined political agenda and assert moral authority in the broader immigration reform movement.

**ALTERCASTING CITIZEN-ADVOCATES AS ILLEGITIMATE AUTHORITIES ON IMMIGRATION REFORM**

In their mission statements, training materials, press releases, and public presentations, local and national groups used remarkably consistent language: DREAM teams were “undocumented youth-led” (“led by those directly affected”), and their members were “unpaid volunteers” (“volunteer leaders”) who were willing to “take action” (“walk the walk,” “escalate”). Citizen-advocacy groups, they implied, were none of these things. In the context of this movement, these assertions of difference were not neutral. DREAMers wanted to be taken seriously as political agents in their own right. They also wanted their political priorities to be acknowledged and supported by the broader movement. Through this altercasting strategy, DREAMers aimed to diminish citizen-advocates’ influence in the policy debates and create room to amplify their own political voices. Accordingly, they used these markers of difference to cast advocates as illegitimate authorities on immigration reform.

*Framing Citizenship Privilege as a Deficit*

According to DREAMers, having the protections of citizenship meant that advocates could not understand the experiences of undocumented youth – those “directly affected” by
immigration policies. How, then, could citizen-advocates be trusted to represent them and their interests? As an ally (and movement insider) asserted when asked if she “had a voice” in the movement during a convening to discuss the formation of a new undocumented youth network responded, “No… you can never really make a decision for somebody else’s situation if you’re not in the same situation that they are in. You can never fully understand that if you’re not in their shoes.” A DREAMer (and movement leader) similarly said in an interview, “For me, movements and stuff should always be represented by the folks that are most affected by them. And if it’s not, then it’s time for them – time for those people to die out.” DREAMers also suggested that since citizens could never be deported for their activism, their efforts toward change didn’t mean the same thing as those of undocumented youth. As the latter frequently asserted (often in their public stories), simply by “coming out” as undocumented, they were “putting [their] lives on the line” and “risking it all.” For that reason, they implied, their efforts toward change should carry more moral weight than those of citizen-advocates. Cynthia made this point in an email to her group:

We are the first ones to be affected if this bill [the DREAM Act] passes. Just because we’ve made a name for ourselves, doesn’t mean we’re like other organizations. We’re not like the bunch; let’s make sure that’s always straight. While they “advocate,” we risk getting deported.

Cynthia’s comments were in response to a question from another group member about whether or not they should explain to their local advocacy groups why they were withdrawing from a national immigrant rights network (to which several of them belonged). Although they ultimately agreed to do so, Cynthia used the question as an opportunity to remind her group that they were different from “the bunch.” They could always be deported
for doing the same as things citizen-advocates. Their willingness to do so anyway demonstrated that they were more committed, more courageous, and thus more legitimate spokespersons for immigration reform.

Just as DREAMers portrayed “citizenship status” as a disqualifying factor for those who would seek to lead on issues of immigration reform, they depicted being undocumented as something that conferred status and made one an especially credible authority in the broader movement. As an example, Thomas, an undocumented young man that many DREAMers told me was a leader (at least in the undocumented youth movement), said in an interview that he was not yet ready to pursue legalization, though several attorneys said he had an “easy” case. Consider his explanation:

Emily: Is there a point where you think you might consider it?

Thomas: Yeah, if I’m done organizing.

Emily: So why not now?

Thomas: I don’t know. I just feel self-conscious about it. If I do that, then I’m just going to be – not to say in a bad way – I’m just going to be another ally in terms of like – you know? Yeah, I don’t know….

Emily: So you’re thinking that it would affect your ability to organize as effectively?

Thomas: Yeah, I mean it would because we do look down upon folks – like Marc [an ally] – he’s got papers now. So, like, “Who are you?” kind of thing.

As this acknowledged leader attested, members of the movement constructed “undocumented” as a marker of moral legitimacy in the immigration reform movement. To be undocumented, they suggested, was to be qualified to speak and lead on issues impacting
undocumented immigrants. To have “papers,” or to be a citizen, was to lack that fundamental qualification.

*Questioning the Motives of Paid Advocates*

DREAMers and their allies similarly cast citizens who worked for advocacy organizations as untrustworthy because they were paid. In social movements, money often has important symbolic value. It can “pollute” a cause (Jasper 2004) or be used to construct a moral identity (Kleinman 1996). In the undocumented youth movement, DREAMers treated money in both ways. As it related to citizen-advocates, money made their motives suspect: did they do this work because they really cared about undocumented immigrants, or because they were *paid* to care? One of the undocumented movement leaders asserted in an interview that many citizen-led advocacy groups recently began doing “Education Not Deportation” (END) campaigns28 because they were getting paid to do them. He explained:

> They’ve got to the point where now it’s, “Oh, let’s do it.” And everybody’s getting money for it. [A national immigration law group] got money to do END cases; [an advocacy group] got money to do END cases; [another advocacy group] got money to do END cases. We haven’t got money, yet. But, all of them have gotten money, which is why they’re doing them.

If these groups truly cared about undocumented youth, he suggested, they would do these campaigns without pay. In an interview, a DREAMer told me she became involved in the movement after attending a training organized by a national advocacy group. She said that she was inspired when she heard people sharing their stories. I asked if they were

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28 END campaigns are focused lobbying efforts aimed at getting a DREAMer who has been detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement released. These campaigns involve flooding immigration officials and local congressional representatives with emails, faxes, and phone calls supporting the young person’s release.
undocumented, and she responded: “It was all people who at one point had been undocumented, but weren’t anymore. They were paid organizers.” Her tone was disparaging. This kind of response to citizen-advocates who worked for non-profits was common. Like this woman, members of the movement depicted paid citizen-advocates as untrustworthy, motivated more by money than a sincere interest in addressing their problems. At the same time, they portrayed themselves as “real and genuine,” as this woman later put it, because they were not paid. Their personal stake in the issue, rather than money, they suggested, is what drove them. Notably, although I never asked DREAMers in interviews if they were paid, many of them made a point of telling me that they were “volunteers.” Because of the meaning they constructed around money in the movement, it was important to them to make this distinction even in private conversations with sympathetic audiences and among themselves.

Constructing Advocates as Passive and Ineffective

Finally, DREAMers asserted that the immigration reform movement had stagnated under the (failed) leadership of these citizen-led advocacy groups. “We’re tired of waiting” I heard again and again in DREAMers’ public stories. The DREAM Act had been “on the table forever,” Farah pointed out in an interview, and yet it still hadn’t passed. What were the “people on top” doing? Mina asked. “After a while you didn’t hear anything about the DREAM Act,” she told me. “You didn’t hear anything about immigration reform.” “Nothing was happening,” another asserted. DREAMers blamed this political impasse on the advocacy groups whom they cast as inherently conservative in their tactics. Ana described an early
conversation she had with other undocumented youth about how they intended to operate
differently:

> We talked about how we also wanted to make sure to *do* something. We
> wanted, I guess, like, tangible solutions…. I had been involved in
> organizations where the focus was on education, right? The focus was on,
> like, creating change through educating the community, which is amazing and
great. But that also felt like that didn’t change my immigration status. And it
didn’t change the laws. And that didn’t stop my friend from getting deported.
> And so we also wanted very practical solutions. Like, how do we organize and
> make sure that we’re not *just* doing educational seminars, but that we’re really
> trying to affect the law?

We can see in Ana’s comments how DREAMers framed citizen-led advocacy groups as
ineffective at generating “tangible solutions” for the problems undocumented immigrants
faced. Advocacy groups’ reliance on funders for their organizational survival, DREAMers
argued, limited their willingness to take the kind of radical action necessary to bring about
real change. It also made the groups more “beholden to a foundation and its rules” than to
undocumented immigrants. By contrast, DREAMers’ financial autonomy and willingness to
“risk anything” for their “community,” as one of them put it in a Youth Empowerment
Summit, made them more reliable and effective leaders in the fight for immigration reform.

In these storied portrayals, DREAMers cast advocates – with their citizenship
privileges, comfortable paychecks, and safe tactics – as out of touch with the real lives and
struggles of undocumented immigrants. Why, then, were they given so much respect and
deference in the movement for immigration reform? In what DREAMers perceived to be a
contested political arena, they altercast citizen-advocates as illegitimate authorities on
immigration reform as a way of clearing out public discursive space so that they could
construct themselves as the true leaders.
FRAMING UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH AS LEGITIMATE LEADERS

To claim moral leadership in the immigration reform movement it was not enough for DREAMers to cast advocacy groups as deficient. Movement leaders also needed to persuade other undocumented youth to see and present themselves as political agents in their own right. Because DREAMers believed that other undocumented youth were inactive due to fear, depression, and feelings of powerlessness, a critical task for movement leaders was to instill in newcomers a sense of efficacy and what Ana, a movement leader, referred to as a sense of “entitlement of being a part of this country.” As she explained:

One of the big differences between me and my parents is that my parents don’t feel like they should have the right to vote in the United States, right? Because, I don’t know, they don’t consider the United States their own country. They feel like they should vote in Mexico, and so they’re fighting for the right to vote in Mexico. But for some strange reason, I feel like I should have the right to vote here [laughs].

How, though, would movement leaders inspire other undocumented youth to both feel this same sense of “entitlement” and act on it?

Constructing Youth Activists as Accomplished Leaders

A primary way movement leaders sought to achieve this was by telling stories in which they cast themselves and other undocumented youth in the movement as already effective and accomplished leaders. This strategy was especially common during recruitment and storytelling training events. In the training manual given to participants of a Youth Empowerment Summit (aimed at recruiting new members and teaching them to tell their stories in politically effective ways), organizers wrote:
In 2006, we made our problem the nation’s problem by mobilizing millions to fill the streets across America. In 2007 we built on that success by fighting for legislative reform. And in 2008, when that was not enough, we turned out to the polls and helped elect President Barack Obama. Youth in Pennsylvania had a special role in electing President Obama; many traveled to other states and were successful in turning traditionally red states into blue states.

…. We have earned the right to be heard, and we will not be silent.

By portraying (unprecedented) levels of activism by immigrants in 2006 and 2007 as the work of undocumented youth and by informing participants of DREAMers’ role in Obama’s campaign, group leaders established that undocumented youth were already making things happen in the political arena. DREAMers, they asserted, had “earned the right to be heard.” They would “not be silent.” Their language was assertive and defiant. It was the language of leaders – or of those who wanted to be perceived as leaders. During the same event, Marc, a movement ally, and Thomas, a DREAMer (and movement leader), led a session on “strategy.” After explaining how DREAMers could leverage things they had (e.g., access to Latina/o voters) to get things they wanted from politicians (e.g., vocal support for the DREAM Act), a male participant asked how they could exert influence if they had nothing to leverage. The facilitators responded by describing the group’s past successes using direct action:

Marc: When we talk about direct action and civil disobedience, we don’t necessarily need leverage, because no politician likes to look bad… So it’s not about leverage, it’s about, “You’ve got to do what we say, or we’re going to fuck with you.”

Most analysts attribute high levels of activism by undocumented immigrants in 2006 and 2007 to proposals by anti-immigrant lawmakers to designate “unauthorized presence” a felony, which was countered by the introduction of a “Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act” by pro-reform lawmakers in the U.S. House of Representatives (see, e.g., Gonzales 2008; Johnson and Hing 2007; Voss and Bloemraad 2011).
Thomas: And we have a track record of doing it, so they are actually scared. We have more business cards from special agents and officers than you can imagine.

The room erupted in laughter, applause, and loud whooping. One man called out “Yeah!”

Thomas finished by saying, “Now that you guys are all so jaded [voice drops to a whisper], we will provide legal services.” He was jokingly inviting them to take part in aggressive direct action. We can see in this exchange how more experienced organizers framed undocumented youth activists (and their allies) as effective agents of social change – capable of “scaring” powerful (adult) politicians (see also Gordon 2010). By joining with them, the leaders suggested, other undocumented youth could achieve the same status and experience the same feelings of empowerment and control.

*Aligning with Respected Activists from the Past*

Movement leaders also drew on stories about activists from earlier social movements to frame their activism as the continuation of an ongoing struggle for justice and civil rights. As Polletta (2006: 169) has argued, “Groups can gain moral authority and political capital by linking themselves to celebrated revolutionaries, dissidents, and freedom fighters.” By making these connections, movement leaders implied that DREAMers were not mere activists; like their earlier counterparts, they were moral crusaders. During a coming-out rally, Freya, a DREAMer, introduced the event by calling out to the crowd of mostly undocumented youth and their allies:

We want to honor and bring inspiration from the Greensboro Four, the courageous Greensboro Four, who, on February 1st, 1960, sat-in at the lunch counter at Woolworth’s a couple of blocks from here. We want to honor them
because back then, they were also saying that they were no longer afraid, that
they were no longer ashamed, that they couldn’t afford to stay silent anymore
[loud cheers]. And that was in 1960, and they were fighting segregation back
then. And today, we are fighting the same thing. The struggle continues, right?

In this example, Freya specifically references youth activists from the Civil Rights
Movement who were taking the initiative, who were “tired” of waiting for the older
generation to solve their problems for them. Like them, she suggests, young people need to
take action.

Other movement leaders alluded to the legacy of gay rights leader Harvey Milk. Still
others referenced, more generally, the work of the young civil rights activists involved in the
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). During a panel discussion on
immigration reform, for instance, a DREAMer told the audience of mostly allies and some
undocumented youth that when she got discouraged, she turned to these stories from the past
to steady her resolve. As she told them:

For me, it really helps to go and read history and what happened, like, for
example, in the 60s and what a lot of these students did. And seeing that this
has happened before, and seeing that the youth came together. And youth
organized – SNCC – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, they
came together. And now it’s like, wow, this is exactly what we’re doing.

During Youth Empowerment Summits, workshop presenters showed photographs of these
earlier activists leading marches or other protests. By connecting DREAMers’ current
political struggles with those of past generations, movement leaders invoked a powerful
historical precedent for their own efforts toward change. DREAMers were not engaged in an
isolated, frivolous, or hopeless fight, they suggested. Rather, they were taking part in a long
campaign for justice that put them in the company of freedom fighters throughout history. By
characterizing their activism as like that of prior generations, movement leaders hoped to inspire in other undocumented youth a sense of purpose and empowerment that would enable them to see themselves as legitimate political agents entitled to lead the fight for immigration reform.

For some movement leaders, making these connections to past movements was also a way of shifting the balance of power in the broader immigration reform movement. When the DREAM Act failed to pass the Senate in late 2010, some of the movement leaders suggested that it was actually a blessing in disguise because it revealed a “void” in leadership in the broader immigration reform movement. As scholars note, movement leaders often use framing to turn disappointments, setbacks, and outright failures into political opportunities and thereby maintain movement support and momentum for change (W. Gamson and Meyer 1996). None of the citizen-advocates, DREAMers asserted, was offering direction for what to do next or how to pursue immigration reform in a political climate where even a narrowly drafted bill like the DREAM Act couldn’t pass. As DREAMers portrayed it, this created an opportunity for them to demonstrate their own capacity to lead.

To that end, movement leaders began organizing direct actions aimed at mobilizing undocumented youth in states where anti-immigrant laws were being passed. Members of the local group I was studying helped organize and plan the “messaging” (i.e., framing) for these actions. Because they were planning to stage this particular event in a southeastern state, they discussed the pros and cons of explicitly linking their struggles as undocumented immigrants with those of black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. Would they be inappropriately “inserting [them]selves into that legacy,” as one of them put it, if they framed
Ivan believed that immigrants’ fight for civil rights was misunderstood by movement outsiders (and some insiders) as something new. He suggested that DREAMers now had the perfect opportunity to “test” a different characterization, one that construed their struggles as part of an ongoing movement for change. Cynthia agreed. If they could get people to accept their framing, they would be demonstrating their bona fides as leaders in the movement, effectively “shifting the power” away from the citizen-advocates. To make sure their message was not understood as an improper overstepping of boundaries, another member of the group suggested they cultivate relationships with veteran activists from the Civil Rights Movement who could deliver the message with them – symbolically sanctioning their frame and tying together their stories of struggle.

Casting Storytelling as a Powerful, Proprietary Tool of DREAMers

Finally, in their efforts to persuade other undocumented youth to see themselves as capable leaders with a stake in the broader immigration debates and a right to be heard,
DREAMers framed storytelling as a uniquely “powerful tool for change,” as a movement leader told youth at one of the first coming-out rallies in the movement. DREAMers’ stories, movement leaders assured recruits and newcomers, had the power to change minds and change laws. This message was also reiterated in their movement materials. The opening line of a “coming out” guide that movement leaders posted on their national website asserts: “Your story told in your own voice is by far the most powerful tool you have.” Another began by quoting well-known leaders in the movement: “By Coming Out we take back our right of speech that for years others have been trying to control and oppress…. By Coming Out, we are taking control of the same fears that are going to exist no matter what.” And as the training manual given to participants in a Youth Empowerment Summit told them: “One of our most powerful tools to fight for our rights and that of our families are our stories.”

Finally, during a conference call between U.S. Senator Richard Durbin’s office and undocumented youth from around the country, Ella, one of the more experienced DREAMers told the others on the call:

One of the most powerful tools we have is being able to tell our stories, being able to be open about our status. And I think that coming out as undocumented is one of the most powerful and empowering things that undocumented youth have done – that we have done.

I heard this message again and again throughout the period of my research. “Stories have power.” Storytelling is “empowering.” DREAMers who come out and share their stories are powerful. They’re their “own heroes.” For a group of young people who felt a pervasive sense of marginalization in U.S. society and even within the (adult) citizen-led advocacy groups involved in the broader immigrant rights movement, this was a compelling message.
Even Diego, an undocumented young man who dis-identified with what he perceived to be elitist tendencies in the movement, told me that DREAMers’ stories were engaging, so much so that they kept him interested despite his reservations. As he explained in an interview:

I just kept getting fascinated by youth coming out and sharing their stories and the impact that it had on other folks… It was just like, you know, youth are really – this is serious. This means something to people. It means something to me. And I started falling in love with what I was doing and what I was learning. And I wanted to learn more and I wanted to learn more…. Even though everything was around the DREAM Act, I started to understand that it was more than just the DREAM Act. It was a baby movement starting to develop around just, you know, the basic right to be human.

Stories, Diego and other DREAMers were repeatedly told and came to believe through their personal experiences, had the unique power to engage and move people.

In addition to portraying storytelling as powerful, DREAMers also insisted it was a tactic that they had the sole right to use. One of the undocumented youth activists conveyed this in a story she told about her reaction to hearing Americans say “We are all Egypt” to declare their solidarity with Egyptian revolutionaries in early 2011. How could they possibly understand the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty Egyptians were experiencing? she wondered.

This reminded her of how disempowering it was to have (adult) citizen-advocates purporting to understand the experiences of undocumented youth. In an open letter posted on her group’s website, she asserted:

I need to tell my story, my struggle, to show just how heavy the burden is on my back. But when you tell it then suddenly you own it, and everybody else can own it and if everybody has a piece of it then what’s the movement’s

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30 When he first met the DREAMers, Diego saw them as pretentious, class-privileged young people whose college ambitions and desires for professional jobs were out of touch with the reality of most other undocumented youth.
meaning? Suddenly being undocumented is not such a roadblock if everybody’s feeling it. But you’ve never felt it, so what gives you the right to tell it?

Our stories are our voice, our tools, our reality, our proof to others and ourselves that we are really alive.

In a different online opinion piece, a group of DREAMers put it more bluntly, writing in capital letters: WE DO NOT WANT IMMIGRATION RIGHTS ‘ADVOCATES’ SPEAKING FOR US ANY LONGER. WE DEMAND THE RIGHT TO REPRESENT OURSELVES! Similarly, in the above-mentioned conference call with Senator Durbin’s office, Ella went on to tell the other DREAMers: “I think it’s very important that we stop letting other people tell our stories. We have a voice and we can tell the stories ourselves. And we can do that better than anybody else.” As these examples demonstrate, DREAMers often portrayed their stories as an extension of themselves. That gave them, and them alone, the right to tell them – and to use them to pursue political change. Schwalbe and his colleagues (2000) argue that one way dominant groups maintain their power is by controlling the discourse, or ways of talking and writing, about other groups and social issues. By insisting on their right to represent themselves through storytelling, DREAMers were challenging the power and influence of the other advocacy groups in the broader immigrant rights movement. They were also opening up discursive space for themselves and other undocumented youth to claim leadership.

By portraying storytelling as a powerful tool for change and as one that DREAMers had the sole right to use, movement leaders were also able to assign moral responsibility to other undocumented youth to “step up” and take action for themselves, their family
members, and their communities. Cynthia put it plainly during a different coming-out rally.

After sharing her story, she told DREAMers:

> We, the undocumented youth of [her state], have to come out, because no one is going to do it for us. No one is going to speak about our struggle like we can. Nobody feels it like [long pause as she begins to cry] – nobody feels the shame, nobody feels the pain, nobody feels the uncertainty like we do. We have to come out. It is our responsibility.

In their private organizing spaces, on conference calls, in blog posts, and at rallies like this, DREAMers repeatedly insisted that they had to come out, share their stories, and assume leadership in the immigration reform movement. Framed in this way, not only were DREAMers capable of speaking with authority on issues impacting undocumented immigrants, they were morally obligated to do so.

> Under different circumstances, having members of privileged groups advocate for progressive change for a disadvantaged group would likely be seen as positive. However, in a political context characterized by inequalities in status and a struggle for respect, speaking for others can be experienced as oppressive and as a denial of political agency. By framing themselves as righteously entitled to speak for themselves and to share their own stories, undocumented youth (and their allies) both revealed and challenged this “underside of advocacy” (Polletta 2006: 95).

**CONTROLLING ALLIES’ PARTICIPATION**

In a different way, claiming proprietary control over storytelling in the undocumented youth movement had the advantage of giving DREAMers a way of managing the power, influence, and participation of allies in their own groups. As previously noted, many
DREAM teams were co-founded by or had a number of allies in them. These were movement insiders who occupied a contradictory position in the movement. As citizens, they had the same status privileges that DREAMers insisted were discrediting for members of citizen-advocacy groups. But as trusted allies (and often close friends or partners of DREAMers), they assumed pivotal roles on their teams and in the broader movement. They helped with logistics, such as fundraising, providing transportation for unlicensed DREAMers, and media relations. They also worked alongside DREAMers to devise movement tactics, messaging, and recruitment strategies. And they leveraged their social connections to churches, universities, and civic organizations to create opportunities for DREAMers to share their stories. Why did DREAMers who were so distrustful of members of citizen-led advocacy groups allow other citizens to play intimate roles in the movement?

The allies in the group I studied had joined early on (within three weeks of the group’s first meeting). They collaborated with DREAMers in creating the group’s mission statement, training materials, press releases, and other movement documents. These all foregrounded the leadership role of undocumented youth and the support role of allies. And during recruitment events, allies used these materials to co-facilitate sessions that encouraged other undocumented youth to see themselves as leaders and to see their personal stories as powerful tools they could use to create change. Allies, in other words, helped create these frames, and they used them both to distinguish themselves from other citizen-advocates and to maintain in-group status in the undocumented youth movement. Like DREAMers, allies portrayed stories as powerful tools for social change and DREAMers as the rightful wielders of those tools. In an interview, Kai, an ally, explained:
I had talked and talked and talked so many times to people, just other Americans, other white people really, about the importance of immigration reform, the victimization that was happening, things like that. But I always hit this wall of sympathy…. It was kind of a barrier that, coming from me, the message just wasn’t as effective…. It was much more effective when the people themselves were there and they would just speak directly to someone and then that challenge – that potential challenge – had to look them in the face. It made everything much more human and much more direct. Skipped out a lot of the conversation and talking points and got to the heart of the matter.

Like DREAMers, Kai insisted that stories told in the first person have more power than those told secondhand. Because he believed that allies could not tell stories that were as effective as those of DREAMers, he accepted that they had a limited role to play in the movement’s front stage spaces. The other allies in the group agreed and never challenged DREAMers’ control over the public arena. It wasn’t that allies never told their stories. They did, but only when DREAMers invited or explicitly asked them to do so. Allies were also expected to begin by acknowledging their citizenship (and sometimes race and class) privileges and to qualify their stories by saying “as an ally.” This enabled them to talk about their personal experiences without appearing to be representing undocumented youth. It also demonstrated acceptance of DREAMers’ claim to being the rightful spokespersons on issues related to immigration and immigration reform.

In similar ways, allies also routinely deferred to undocumented youth during other presentations. For instance, during a workshop co-facilitated by an ally and a DREAMer, the ally began his part by asserting that he felt “kind of awkward standing up here.” On another occasion, an ally who was the only speaker at an event in which two other undocumented members were present said she told them afterwards, “I didn’t really want to talk, because
you guys need to talk.” And during a meeting of a new national undocumented youth network, one of the allies from my group explained his “yes” answer to the question, “Do you have a voice in the movement?” As he told them, “Something that I think allies really need to do is recognize that your leadership development – like, your personal leadership development is not the priority. And it really requires a certain level of being deferential.” An ally from a different group said, “If we want this to be an undocumented youth-led movement, obviously as allies we try not to use our voice and [to] let undocumented students speak for themselves.” Still another said, “I kind of envision my role as, like, it doesn’t really matter if I have a voice or not. It’s more like, you tell me where you’re going and I’m going to help support you. I don’t want to be the person that’s at the forefront.” Allies who were accepted as movement insiders ceded control over public spaces to DREAMers and showed them deference in those spaces. By doing so, they were reinforcing the idea that DREAMers were the rightful leaders on immigration reform.

The only time I witnessed DREAMers challenge an ally occurred when an ally in a different DREAM team declared himself the leader of his group. A DREAMer called him out on his Facebook page, writing:

Sometimes being a leader means stepping back more than stepping up. Being humble is a huge part of being a leader. Huge. Furthermore, you’re a paid organizer. Check your privilege.

She went on to post a link to an essay by Charlene A. Carruthers called “Let the Oppressed Speak for Themselves.” When the ally objected to being called privileged, other DREAMers posted links to more essays on privilege. What was this ally’s offense? He’d actually broken two rules. As an ally, he encroached on DREAMers’ public turf by calling himself a leader,
and he refused to show deference to undocumented youth when he was challenged. As a result, DREAMers policed his behavior by placing him in the same category as other members of citizen-led advocacy groups, branding him a “paid organizer” with citizenship privilege. DREAMers thus applied the same frame they used to discredit citizen-advocates as illegitimate leaders in the broader movement. Most of the time, though, allies who were accepted as movement insiders wholly supported and promoted DREAMers’ claims to being the public face of the undocumented youth movement.

In backstage spaces, however, DREAMers had a harder time asserting authority and control vis-à-vis their allies. The frames youth activists developed to manage public discursive spaces in the broader movement didn’t distinguish “us” and “them” as clearly behind the scenes. And members’ extensive use of storytelling in those spaces complicated things because of the association of storytelling with democratic, egalitarian practice. While DREAMers and allies agreed that strategic storytelling on the front stage should be done only by undocumented immigrants, there was less certainty about whether allies could (or should) participate in storytelling in backstage spaces. This confusion arose during a conference call to plan a recruitment event. One of the DREAMers on the call suggested that instead of just having undocumented youth share their stories, allies could share theirs as well. Angie, an ally, enthusiastically agreed and suggested they could even prepare two stories! One would focus on how they got involved in the movement; the other would emphasize how they felt when they first heard their undocumented peers’ stories. After a few minutes of excited discussion, Ivan, a DREAMer who had been previously quiet, challenged this proposal, asserting:
We want to make sure that it is the undocumented, the community, that is empowered, like these students – the ones who are undocumented, because we really want them to become the leaders. And I know it kind of sounds like it can exclude people. But if there is a way that we can think of that doesn’t exclude people but at the same time empowers these youth to really let them know that because they are undocumented, they have huge power that somebody who is a citizen doesn’t necessarily have. And I think that touches on the fact of that legitimacy thing, right? Like, a lot of us who are undocumented, in the past, were like, “Am I really supposed to be doing this? Should I even be doing this? Does anybody even care?” That kind of thing… I just think that if we’re creating a safe space for undocumented youth, maybe it should be sort of concentrated on the undocumented students and really empowering that voice. I’m just afraid that if we’re bringing in that ally perspective this early on, that some of their [DREAMers’] stories and, like, call to action for them, will be washed out. And I’m afraid that some of these students will be, “I’m not – like, I do have a voice, but I would rather give it to somebody who is a U.S. citizen.” I’m just worried that that would play in somehow.

After a moment, Cynthia, another DREAMer, said she agreed: “We want to, utmost and foremost, consider the undocumented youth and their voices because they’re vulnerable.”

She and Ivan appeared to be drawing on frames members of the movement used in public spaces to claim the proprietary right of DREAMers to speak for themselves and share their own stories. Cynthia asked what the rest of the group thought. Matthew, a different ally, pushed back slightly. “To make sure we’re putting undocumented youths’ stories to the forefront,” he suggested, DREAMers could simply tell their stories first and allies could tell theirs later if there was time. Angie was blunter. She said excluding allies from storytelling would alienate the citizens who accompanied undocumented youth to the event and would make it seem like they had no role at all to play in the movement. As she told them:

I don’t want to be like, “You have papers, so you don’t really matter. You don’t get to have a voice.” If we’re going to have a lot of documented people there, I don’t want them to be like, “Well, why did I come?”
Excluding allies from storytelling in these backstage spaces, Angie implied, was wrong. It was undemocratic and would make citizens who wanted to be part of the movement feel unwelcome. She contested the idea that the frames that gave DREAMers higher status and more rights than allies in public storytelling spaces applied in these private movement spaces. Principles of equality, she suggested, should operate in these spaces.

To all of this, Ivan responded by suggesting they have a conversation at a later date about the roles and responsibilities of allies in the movement, and conceded the point. The group agreed that everyone would share their stories. To my knowledge, the group never had the kind of explicit conversation Ivan recommended – at least not during the period of my research. However, this kind of typically low-key power struggle over how allies should participate in the movement was common in these backstage conversations. One of the undocumented leaders of a different group similarly told me that she and one of her group’s allies had attended a conference where only the undocumented youth were allowed to vote and make decisions about how they moved forward. On the drive home, she asked him what he thought about implementing a similar policy in their own group. He told her pointedly that he would leave if they did that because he wouldn’t feel like he had “any stake in the group.” She told me that she didn’t want to lose him as part of the group and decided against even bringing it up at their next group meeting. As she put it, “It was one of those reminders that everyone needs a voice, right?”
CONCLUSION

When it came to the issue of immigration reform, (adult) citizen-advocates assumed key positions of leadership. For undocumented youth, the problem with this arrangement was that it made no room for them to assert and gain support for their own political priorities (which were, in fact, different from those of the adult citizen-advocates who dominated national debates). It also made it difficult for youth to see themselves as respectable political agents in their own right. As DREAMers asserted in interviews, blog posts, and public stories, to speak for others was to deny them the political agency they were seeking in trying to speak for themselves.

From the perspective of undocumented youth, (adult) citizen-advocates were dominating the political arena, controlling the framing of the “immigration problem” at the national level, and making it impossible to gain an audience for alternative perspectives and frames. My analysis shows how undocumented youth activists and their allies tried to reframe the immigration reform movement to establish their own stake in it and assert their right to speak with authority. Feeling overshadowed by the higher-status and more influential citizen-advocates on the national political stage, they sought to create their own political stage where they could cast themselves as leaders. Their efforts aimed at constituting themselves as a new, powerful collective actor with a vested interest in the immigration reform debates.

Like the youth activists Gordon (2007) studied (see also Taft and Gordon 2013), DREAMers and their allies withdrew from these adult, citizen-dominated spaces and created their own youth-led spaces – DREAM teams – where they could both articulate new frames
and cultivate a sense of political agency within them. In their efforts to cast themselves as moral leaders with a legitimate stake in the immigration debates, DREAMers and their allies altercast citizen-advocates as passive, out-of-touch, untrustworthy – and, thus, illegitimate – authorities on issues of immigration reform. At the same time, movement leaders worked to generate in other undocumented youth feelings of efficacy, empowerment, and “entitlement” to speak with authority on these issues. Their stories, told in the first person, they insisted, had the unique power to bring about social change. As activist-storytellers, undocumented youth were not only capable of asserting moral leadership, they argued; they were obligated to do so. By portraying storytelling in these ways – as a powerful and proprietary resource undocumented youth could use to make change – DREAMers were also able to manage the participation of allies in their own groups. This was important for maintaining their claim to being the proper public face of the immigration reform movement.

Scholars who study factionalism in social movements find that as groups vie for political influence, framing is often a site of contention (Benford 1993; Schwartz 2002). “Frame disputes” (Goffman 1974) typically arise as those with less status and influence seek to displace or diminish the power of the more dominant group. As Benford (1993: 678) asserts, these conflicts often manifest as struggles over meaning and competing versions of reality: What is the nature of the problem? What is the solution? What is the best way to represent it to others? My analysis suggests that there are other important meanings involved. When groups have unequal standing in these contests, lower-status groups are not fighting simply for political influence or dominance. As my research shows, they are sometimes fighting for respect and recognition.
The young people in my study felt “invisible” and “silenced” in their interactions in adult, citizen-led advocacy groups. As a young undocumented woman at a gathering for a new undocumented youth activist network put it to the group, “What use is having a voice when you can’t use it?” DREAMers felt ignored in a political arena in which they claimed a personal stake. As this woman told them, “We have to create the spaces for voices to be heard… so people aren’t constantly fighting, so it’s not always like, ‘I have to break through so somebody hears.’” Through framing, DREAMers and their allies created a discursive space where their voices mattered most, where they were the moral leaders on issues that concerned them.

In her analysis of public discourse during the highly publicized rape trial of American boxer Mike Tyson, Aaronette White (1999) discovered that black feminists were in a framing contest (Ryan 1991) with nonfeminist black men and women. Members of the latter (more influential) group drew on frames that cast black men as longstanding victims of racist oppression, while the feminists perceived the issue to be primarily about the sexist treatment of women. Like the young activists I studied, the marginalized black feminists in White’s study decided to organize separately. For them, part of the problem would be finding ways of framing the issue that circumvented the sometimes antagonistic responses they received from nonfeminists, one of whom accused them of “compromising Black men’s upward mobility and embarrassing the Black community” (White 1999: 82).

Unlike the participants White studied, the undocumented young people in my study rarely experienced open hostility from citizen-advocates. And yet, my research suggests that it is sometimes necessary for marginalized groups to withdraw from seemingly supportive
groups in order to articulate a new perspective, develop alternative frames, and build a sense of political efficacy. Under conditions of inequality – even within movements for change – it may not be possible to maintain cultures of solidarity once subordinated groups notice their subordination. Indeed, perceptions of inequality and disrespect are likely to get in the way of any effort toward change. By forming their own groups and finding ways of collaborating with allies that didn’t feel oppressive, DREAMers were able to develop a youth-defined political vision and challenge the dominance of adult, citizen-advocates’ perspectives on immigration reform. In addition to creating space for new movement frames, factionalism, in this case, was also a means of maintaining momentum for change among a group that felt marginalized in the broader movement (see also Schwartz 2002).
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE PLACE OF STORYTELLING IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Activists don’t always have all the tools they need in their “cultural toolkits” to bring about the changes they seek (Swidler 1986). But, as my research found, they can create new ones. I began this project with a broad interest in how undocumented youth activists were using storytelling in their efforts toward change. As I found, they were seeking to change policies by changing the culture. They were using an expressive and evocative tactic to do so. What kinds of stories were they telling and how were they telling them? I wondered. I also learned from my early discussions with DREAMers that storytelling in the context of a social movement was work. It was strategic action aimed at bringing about particular social and political changes. What, then, was going on behind the scenes? How were these performances crafted? How were activists persuaded to enact them? What were the consequences? Through observing in the front- and back-stage spaces in the movement, in-depth interviews, and content analysis of movement materials, this dissertation answers these questions. In what follows, I briefly summarize my analysis, and then discuss how it contributes to and extends our understanding of storytelling in social movements. I conclude by assessing limitations in my analysis and identifying areas for future research.

SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS

In chapter two, I examined the backstage processes by which DREAMers crafted emotionally expressive stories and uncovered inequalities based on gender. Because members of the movement believed the best stories showed audiences what it felt like to be
undocumented, this explicitly expressive tactic caused problems for men who had to overcome dominant cultural expectations that they control their emotions. At the same time, it created binds for women who worried about being perceived as weak if they showed too much vulnerability. I argued that members of the movement were caught between a dominant gender culture that devalues emotional openness and sensitivity, and a movement subculture that promoted expressive and evocative storytelling as a primary social change tactic. I found that the narrative strategies they developed for managing this dilemma relied on conventional gender beliefs that define masculinity and femininity as emotional opposites. A gendered division of emotional labor emerged. As I demonstrated, men typically expressed anger and indignation over their circumstances, while women showed audiences how much it hurt to be undocumented. Because open displays of vulnerability are associated with weakness (and with women) in the dominant culture, women sought ways of compensating for their feminized storytelling performances. They did so largely by masculinizing their otherwise feminine presentations of self; by, for instance, pumping their fists as they spoke or by proclaiming themselves “unafraid,” “ashamed,” and “unapologetic.” I argued that these adaptations to the gender order, while understandable, ultimately left intact the ideological link between vulnerability and femininity and reinforced the system of beliefs and institutional practices that devalue both.

In chapter three, I examined the identity work DREAMers did to signify “Americanness” and thereby call for full inclusion in U.S. society. Despite the seemingly inflexible, legalistic way that “American” is conventionally defined in the U.S. (as a native-born or naturalized citizen), I found that DREAMers adopted a fluid interpretation that made
room for people like them. They used three main identity work strategies to do so. They constructed “American” as (1) a subjective feeling and moral identity; (2) a status that could be earned; and (3) a quality that one could demonstrate – especially through political engagement in American society. I argued that their identity work implicitly drew on white middle-class markers of Americanness. By showing that they shared the values, norms, and ideologies of the dominant group (i.e., that they had assimilated culturally), they challenged the justification for excluding them from full, legal membership in the category American. At the same time, DREAMers’ class-inflected identity work appeared to legitimate inequality by downplaying the effects of racism and class oppression on the ability of most undocumented immigrants to present themselves as similarly good candidates for citizenship.

In chapter four, I examined efforts by DREAMers to reframe the debates around immigration reform in a way that enabled them to elevate themselves to positions of moral leadership and claim a legitimate stake in the issue. I found that DREAMers’ status as young, undocumented immigrants contributed to feelings of marginalization in the broader immigration reform movement. DREAMers perceived themselves to be in competition with the more established (adult) citizen-advocates in their efforts to assert political agency and win support for their political priorities (passing the DREAM Act). To subvert the power and influence of the citizen-advocates, I found that DREAMers altercast them as illegitimate authorities on immigration reform. At the same time, movement leaders sought to cultivate in other undocumented youth a sense of efficacy, power, and “entitlement” to speak on these matters. To that end, they portrayed undocumented youth as already effective leaders and as like freedom fighters from past movements. They also defined personal storytelling as a
uniquely powerful tool that only undocumented youth could use to bring about change. As I argued, by framing storytelling in this way—as a proprietary tool of DREAMers—undocumented youth were also able to limit the participation of allies in their own groups and thereby maintain their claim to being the proper face of the immigration reform movement.

To summarize, my analysis shows how undocumented youth used stories to win sympathy and support, assert political agency, and challenge their exclusion from full, legal integration in American society. It also demonstrates how narrative strategies aimed at resisting and contesting oppression can nonetheless inadvertently reproduce and maintain other inequalities. In what follows, I discuss how my analysis builds on and expands our theoretical understanding of the social change potentials and liabilities of storytelling in social movements.

STORYTELLING, EMOTIONS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Stories can be persuasive and engaging and, at the same time, dismissed as politically unserious—“just a story” (Polletta et al. 2011). Yet stories and storytelling are integral parts of the policymaking process. As Loseke (2007: 669-670) has noted, stories are regularly used by lawmakers to justify policy decisions and the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities that results from them. The decision by lawmakers to intern Japanese Americans during the second World War was justified in part by stories that characterized Japanese Americans as untrustworthy and disloyal non-Americans (Petonito 1992). Similarly, in the 1990s, stories about “welfare queens”—racial minority women who had too
many babies and refused to take financial responsibility for them – were used by lawmakers to justify new work requirements and lifetime limits on receiving public assistance (Hancock 2004). And in contemporary times, stories about “illegal aliens” who spread disease, steal Americans’ jobs, and abuse the nation’s social service system have been used to justify increasingly restrictive and punitive immigration policies (Chavez 2008).

Despite the importance of storytelling in the political process, those who are most impacted by policy decisions are rarely asked by those who make them to share their personal stories (see, e.g., Hancock 2004). Even when such stories are allowed, policymakers typically select participants whose stories support their particular policy agendas (Loseke 2007). That lawmakers would go to such lengths to censor, control, and influence the stories people tell and how others interpret them suggests the potential of storytelling to both uphold and disrupt the status quo, including normative relations of power. It is this potential that undocumented youth sought to leverage by using storytelling in their efforts toward change.

Yet my research shows that DREAMers largely developed stories that reinforced existing social hierarchies and the systems of beliefs that sustain them. In what follows, I will discuss how broad cultural patterns shape and limit the social change potential of storytelling in social movements and suggest how activist-storytellers can sometimes subvert these processes.

Early in my fieldwork, I was shocked when DREAMers proclaimed themselves “undocumented and unafraid” at public rallies and demonstrations. But I was also moved by their stories. Hearing about their struggles and unjust treatment made me care about them and want to help. After attending several public storytelling events, I realized that my response
was common. DREAMers’ stories, told in the first person, seemed to have a unique capacity to elicit empathy in audiences. Indeed, this is one of the strengths of storytelling (Polletta 2006). Scholars argue that stories told in the context of social movements motivate action “through their appeal to emotion rather than reason, through an affective identification that supersedes logic and evidence” (Polletta 2006: 82).

Yet social movement scholars have had an ambivalent relationship with emotions. Most early research treated protesters as inherently emotional, driven by uncontrollable fear or rage to riot in the streets (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2007). As in other areas of social life, emotions were seen as the opposite of cognitions (Jasper 2011). Emotion-driven behavior was dismissed as nonstrategic, immature, and, above all else, irrational. By the 1960s, however, scholars who had participated in the social movements of that decade began rejecting theories that equated protest activity with irrationality (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). In the years since, rational-choice models, including resource mobilization and political opportunity theories, have dominated theorizing on social movements.

In recent years, scholars have begun turning their attention to cultural aspects of social movements, prompting a renewed interest in the role of emotions (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). Most of this research has focused on specifying typologies of emotions that influence social movement participation (Jasper 2011). Scholars have found that reflexive emotions, such as compassion, tend to motivate participation, while shame inhibits it (Jasper 1998; Kemper 2001). Others have noted the importance of affective bonds for recruiting new members and maintaining solidarity (Lofland 1996; McAdam 1988). Notably
absent in this new line of inquiry is attention to emotion work, despite groundbreaking research on this topic beginning in the 1970s by Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983) and others (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Hochschild and Machung 1989; Leidner 1993; Mills and Kleinman 1988; Pierce 1996; Shott 1979; Thoits 1996). As James Jasper (2011) observed in his recent review of research on emotions in social movements, the sociological insights gleaned from this expansive body of research on emotion work have yet to be applied in a systematic way to studies of social movements (see also Kemper 2001). One of the barriers, he suggested, has been methodological. Scholars interested in emotions in social movements have tended to use surveys and quantitative analyses that preclude an examination of the interactive processes involved in emotion work (Jasper 1998). By adopting ethnographic and in-depth interviewing methodologies, my analysis of the gendered division of emotional labor in the undocumented youth movement expands our understanding of how these processes unfold in the context of a social movement.

**Emotion Work and Inequality**

Polletta (2006: 6) argues that once social movements are underway, “activists have a real stake in using culture strategically, embracing dominant beliefs and conventions of representation where it serves them and refusing them where it does not. It is at the point where they reproduce such conventions in spite of their strategic liabilities that we should be able to see culture operating to constrain activists’ options.” My analysis of the creation and maintenance of a gendered division of emotional labor in the undocumented youth movement offers some insight into how culture shapes and constrains activists’ choices. As I discussed
in chapter two, members of the undocumented youth movement believed their stories, if told in emotionally compelling ways, could dispel stereotypes, win sympathy, and ultimately challenge exclusionary laws. The best stories, they believed, showed audiences what it felt like to be undocumented. Thus, to achieve their movement goals, members had to work on their emotions. But as my analysis showed, this work was not distributed in an equitable way. Women, much more often than men, showed the kind of vulnerability in their public stories that everyone believed was most effective in winning support for the movement. Their willingness to do this enabled men to take a (more comfortable) back seat in storytelling venues where they might otherwise be expected to express vulnerability. Moreover, because the women accepted this responsibility without complaint, no one questioned (or even seemed to notice) men’s less active participation in these events. Ultimately, men got away with doing less emotion work while still benefiting from women’s emotional labor.

In a social movement aimed at bringing about progressive social change, it is hard to make sense of this inequality. The still dominant social movement paradigms that privilege cognitive processes over emotions offer little help (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). However, scholars who study emotion work in other settings provide important insights. Indeed, they find that the gendered pattern of emotional expression that emerged in the undocumented youth movement is common in the broader culture. Across social institutions, members of lower-status groups typically do more emotion work than their higher-status counterparts (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996). They tend to display different kinds of emotions (see, e.g., Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996). And their emotional displays are often “characterized in ways that blunt the challenges they mount”
(Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 1998: 74). In these ways, emotional expression and the feeling rules that allocate different emotions to different groups both mark and reinforce inequalities (Bartky 1990; Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006; Hochschild 1983; Hochschild and Machung 1989; see also Clark 1987).

Women in the undocumented youth movement went along with this arrangement because they thought they were advancing the movement’s goals, and because they viewed painful emotional disclosure as a uniquely feminine expression of power. Women felt good about being able to express the kinds of emotions that were helpful for the movement. It made them feel special. If the women didn’t object, what’s the harm in it? And why should social movement scholars care? As researchers who study emotion work in other social settings have noted, emotion management strategies that make people feel good about themselves can make it harder to recognize and challenge exploitation (Bartky 1990; Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006). For instance, when careworkers tout their unique capacity to nurture others, they might feel better about themselves and their work, but they also become vulnerable to manipulation by employers, who can leverage their feelings to extract additional, uncompensated emotional labor. Employers of nanny-housekeepers, for instance, often interpret workers’ emotional bonds with their children as affirmation that they work for love, not for money (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parrenas 2001; see also Ibarra 2002). It is easy to see how this arrangement can make it difficult for workers to negotiate for better pay and working conditions. In my research, I discovered similar dynamics at work in the undocumented youth movement. Because the women derived a sense of empowerment from their ability to express painful emotions in their public
stories, they did not object to or even seem to notice that they were doing a disproportionate amount of emotion work.

*Implications for Solidarity*

When inequality is not acknowledged, as my analysis in chapter two showed, it enables some groups to get away with doing less than others. As long as no one notices, this might not be a problem for social movement actors. However, as prior research has found, when inequality is discovered, it can create feelings of resentment that can undermine efforts toward progressive change (Robnett 1996; J. Taylor 1998; Thorne 1975; White 1999). In her study of an alternative health organization, Sherryl Kleinman (1996: 90) found that “waking up to inequality” led women staff members who initially saw themselves as social equals with the higher-paid, more respected male practitioners to eventually leave the organization. Similarly, in her analysis of the Draft Resistance Movement, Barrie Thorne (1975: 191) found that women who had initially called themselves “resister-sisters” grew resentful after discovering that they were expected to fill only marginal, gender-stereotyped roles and that “full ethical and political self-definition was granted only to men.” Some of them ultimately left male-dominated groups to form their own women’s collectives. Similarly, Judith Taylor (1998) discovered that women involved in the Irish Women’s Movement responded to sexist treatment by male allies by forming secret subgroups in which they could organize separately from the men (see also White 1999). As these studies show, when people become aware of inequality, distrust and separation are common responses. Energy that could be directed
toward winning shared political goals is redirected toward managing and circumventing the effects of inequality (see, e.g., J. Taylor 1998; Thorne 1975).

If the studies cited above are correct, inequalities in emotion work can threaten commitment and solidarity no less than inequalities in pay, status, or power. But because inequalities in emotion work are hard to see, activists must pay special attention to what I call “moments of resistance” within a movement. As described earlier, there was, for example, a young woman who did not want to share her story at an upcoming rally because she didn’t want to feel “like a victim.” On that occasion, her fellow activists might have asked more questions about why she felt that way. Such a conversation might have led to a deeper, shared understanding of the gendered inequalities in emotion work that I analyzed in chapter two. In a later chapter, to take another example, I described how disagreements over the role of allies in the movement sometimes erupted in brief, low-key power struggles. Rather than simply damping down these flare-ups, activists might have used them to more carefully examine how privilege shaped the experiences of all members of the movement. In these ways, resistance and conflict, and the emotions that accompany them, could be used as starting points for analyses of troublesome internal and external inequalities.

SELF-NARRATIVES AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Marginalized groups seeking social change often try to fashion themselves in ways that they believe will be appealing to those in power (Bernstein 1997; see also Kleinman 1996: 134-135). In their efforts to gain social acceptance and achieve concrete policy reforms, gay and lesbian activists have sometimes downplayed their sexuality, dressed in
conservative (white, middle-class) attire, and emphasized their similarities to heterosexuals (Bernstein 1997; Crawley and Broad 2004). In a similar way, Julian Groves (1996) found that women involved in animal rights activism downplayed their compassion for animals because they believed that their concerns would be taken more seriously if they adopted the impersonal, detached demeanor more often associated with men. And as my research found, undocumented youth often dressed in caps and gowns (symbols of young, middle-class standing) and told stories emphasizing their cultural similarity to white, middle-class Americans in their efforts to win an exemption from immigration laws.

While it remains an open question whether these presentational strategies influence policy decisions, it’s important to note that the ability to craft a persona that might appeal to those in power requires certain kinds of cultural capital. Not just anyone can achieve it. In chapter three, I showed that undocumented youth who grew up in American communities and were socialized in middle- and upper-middle-class peer groups learned the beliefs, values, and practices that marked them as at least middle class. Thus, it was not difficult for them to present themselves as culturally assimilated into that social group in their public stories. However, I suggested that less class-privileged undocumented immigrants would have a harder time pulling off the same act.

In fact, outside the field of social movements, scholars find that children raised by working-class parents learn different values, norms, and beliefs than their middle-class peers (Kohn 1959; Lareau 2003). As a result, they often struggle to navigate middle-class-dominated social institutions, such as schools and workplaces (Lareau 2003). That, in turn, means that they are often excluded from the kinds of experiences and lessons that could
facilitate their upward mobility. In their research on youth subcultures, Bettie (2003) and Eckert (1989) observed that structures like student government that are dominated by middle-class “preps” (Bettie) and “jocks” (Eckert) prepared them for positions in management as they practiced “managing” other students at school. Largely left out of these middle-class power structures, the working-class Latinas in Bettie’s (2003) study rejected academic striving and achievement as a legitimate means of creating positive identity (Bettie 2003). To do well in school, they suggested, was to “act white.” In my research, I explained that very few young people who identified both economically and culturally as working class participated in the undocumented youth movement. One of the few working-class activists I interviewed saw DREAMers as class-privileged “white-wannabes” and limited his participation in the movement. Studies on cultural capital, however, suggest that even if working-class youth were to embrace the movement, they would struggle to give the kind of (white) middle-class performance that movement leaders valued and that had become normative.

In considering the limitations of storytelling for bringing about change, scholars have noted that some storytellers (namely white people and men) are accorded more respect than others (Collins 1990; Polletta 2006). My research extends our understanding of these constraints by shedding light on the role of cultural capital in shaping the ability of groups to develop movement narratives that will appeal to those in power. For social movements seeking to recruit a wide range of participants, inequalities in cultural capital can be significant. Some activists have gotten around similar obstacles by helping less class-privileged participants acquire and practice using new forms of cultural capital.
In her research on the Civil Rights Movement, Belinda Robnett (2002) noted that in the early years of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, activists consciously devised a non-hierarchical organizational structure, encouraged a wide distribution of knowledge among members, and cultivated an equitable exchange of cultural capital between white and black youth, between men and women, and between those who were college-educated and those who were not. Movements can thus expand their membership and political power by helping less advantaged group members acquire the forms of cultural capital that are rewarded by the powerful. Members of the undocumented youth movement, for instance, could help working-class youth develop skill leading campaigns, speaking to community groups, and discussing immigration policy with ease. In order to bolster their middle-class credentials, they could also ensure that working-class members complete their General Educational Development (a qualifying requirement for the DREAM Act), apply for college, and raise the funds to attend classes. In short, they could foster in working-class youth the kind of cultural (and human) capital that would enable them to give the kind of middle-class presentations of self that they believed policymakers valued.

While it is common for members of marginalized groups to seek change by demonstrating similarity to those in power (Bernstein 1997), it is important to acknowledge the drawbacks of such a strategy. As Kleinman (1996: 135) asserts, “Taking on the language and ethos of a culture means that one is taking on the frame of reference of the other group – how the powerful ask questions, which questions they consider important, and which kinds of solutions are possible.” Moreover, activists may become trapped in thinking that the only way to bring about change is to adopt tactics – and storylines – that are sanctioned by elites.
Recall Paolo, whose biggest struggle was “feeling the pressure to be the best, because if I’m not the best, I don’t have any chances in this society…. If I’m just regular, I would never get anywhere.” As an undocumented youth seeking entrée into middle-class American society, he saw no alternative but to use his education, fluency in English, and academic achievements to present himself as a conventionally successful, middle-class American-in-wait. As I argued in chapter three, this strategy was not harmless. My research showed how DREAMers’ use of class-based rhetoric in their presentations of self inadvertently demeaned their less class-privileged fellow immigrants and reinforced a distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants. As Schwalbe (2008: 127) notes, “Some definitions of reality – especially those favored by groups in power – protect exploitive arrangements.” Thus, in seeking ways of appeasing the dominant group, members of social movements may inadvertently reinforce relations of inequality.

Scholars who study storytelling in social movements suggest another alternative: expanding the movement narrative (Polletta 2006: 112). The Moral Mondays Movement that arose in North Carolina in 2013 as progressive groups sought ways of fighting back against conservative policy initiatives offers an example. When the movement first launched, religious leaders from across the state engaged in civil disobedience and served as powerful symbols of moral righteousness. At first, leaders drew on religious doctrine and scripture to call out the immorality of lawmakers. Later, they expanded their rhetoric to include more secular themes, such as the universal human right to education, healthcare, and economic
security. In this way, they broadened the meaning of “morality” such that other groups were invited to see themselves and their interests reflected in the movement.\footnote{Now in its second year, the Moral Monday Movement appears to have reverted to its original, narrow religious framing of morality and fewer people are participating.}

\textit{Ambiguity as a Feature, Not a Bug}

Framing scholars argue that people are persuaded to participate in collective action by the clarity and coherence of a movement’s mobilization frames (Benford and Snow 2000). By contrast, Polletta (2006) contends that it is the interpretive \textit{ambiguity} of stories that makes them effective (see also Polletta and Ho 2006). I would add that ambiguity may also invite participation by people whose lives diverge markedly from those of the dominant group. Because stories can have multiple meanings, contradictions, and unclear moral lessons, they invite audiences to take an active role in interpreting them and filling in the gaps (Polletta 2006). This interactive negotiation of meanings engages audiences and enables them to identify with storytellers. “Effective narratives,” Polletta (2006: 112) suggests, “may juxtapose discordant ideas and emotions in a way that initially prevents an easy identification, forcing [audiences] instead to discover the sense of an unfamiliar connection.”

When messages are not clear, we may dismiss them outright as unimportant and not worth the time to figure out. Alternately, if we perceive them to be important but somehow confusing or disorienting, we may think more deeply about them, ask questions, and even elicit more stories to clarify meanings.

In my research, I discussed Diego, a young undocumented man who perceived his working-class story to be “irrelevant” in a movement organized around the class interests of
college-educated or college-bound youth. I suggested that other working-class youth may feel similarly alienated from the movement because they do not perceive their stories to fit with the dominant narrative of individual achievement and cultural assimilation into white, middle-class American society. It was the sparkling clarity of DREAMers’ stories (rather than their ambiguity) that told Diego his story fell outside the storytelling norms of the movement. He thus limited his participation in storytelling events. DREAMers did not recognize that ambiguity in storytelling might have served them better than formulaic repetition.

When people share a common interest in social change but tell different stories about that interest, it can engage audiences in deeper reflection and conversations about justice and equality. At the same time, activists’ differences from one another and unequal social standing can push social change groups to build broader, and perhaps more durable, solidarity as they grapple with how to tell a coherent “story of us” that acknowledges those differences. In this way, the ambiguity inherent in storytelling can be a resource for social movements.

**BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGE**

Before this movement emerged, undocumented immigrants generally did not participate as undocumented immigrants in the debates around immigration reform. It was too dangerous – or so they believed. Remaining in the shadows and letting others advocate for them was the only way to stay safe – or so they thought. Although DREAMers have not (yet) achieved their political goal of getting the DREAM Act passed, I would argue that their...
collective actions have nonetheless produced important social changes. For one thing, an entire group of undocumented young people no longer advocates for immigration reform “in the third person.” By leveraging their cultural capital and adopting a storytelling strategy, undocumented youth activists have constituted “DREAMers” as political actors with an important stake in the immigration reform movement. They have also used their personal stories to build solidarity with other undocumented youth and their allies. In the process, they have developed a new shared understanding of the injustice of their marginalization in the country in which they were raised and to which they have already contributed in significant ways (e.g., through paying taxes and volunteering). Through collective storytelling, they have also found a way of exerting influence (if limited) over the political debates that concern them.

What does this tell us about the “power of stories” to bring about social change? This was a primary concern of the undocumented youth activists and is a broader question for social movement scholars. As Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) have argued, the power to oppress does not lie with the state alone. Marginalized groups are simultaneously oppressed by multiple social institutions, each of which is “constituted by classificatory systems and practices that concretize these systems” (83). This suggests that change can be brought about in multiple ways: by targeting exclusionary laws and the social representations that support them, and by banishing the feelings of hopelessness that keep groups from mounting challenges. The insertion of new stories and new storytellers into public spaces reflects a change and a challenge to the systems and practices that marginalize groups. Michael Schwalbe (2008) has argued that power ultimately rests on the ability to elicit cooperation.
From this perspective, seemingly powerless groups can alter relations of power by refusing to comply with the usual expectations for members of their group; by, for instance, challenging the norms of silence that have enabled the oppression and exploitation of undocumented immigrants.

Cultural anthropologist Nicholas De Genova (2004: 178) argues that it is deportability rather than deportation per se that oppresses undocumented immigrants and makes them a highly compliant and hyper-exploitable group. Until recently, the fear of being deported (like the fear of being fired for citizen workers) was usually enough to keep undocumented immigrants (and workers) from speaking out and demanding rights. But by building a movement around a strategy of coming out and sharing stories, undocumented youth have removed the power of that threat to keep them silent and complicit in their own subordination. The political and corporate elites who have benefited from undocumented immigrants’ fear of deportation can no longer use that fear to control youth who would qualify for the DREAM Act. DREAMers’ storytelling strategy reflects a profound change in consciousness among members of the movement and has given them a new means of fighting back against oppression. While it is not clear if their strategy would offer the same protective benefits for working-class, adult, undocumented immigrants, DREAMers have demonstrated that silence is not the only option. Creative tactics, along with strong social supports open up other possibilities.
EVALUATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

My study examined how members of a social movement used storytelling in their efforts to bring about social change. My research contributes to our understanding of how expressive social change tactics like storytelling are both enabled and constrained by the dominant culture. As my research demonstrates, movements for change are embedded in particular cultural contexts that include systems of inequality and the normative beliefs that support them. Accordingly, stories told in the pursuit of social change are refracted through categories of difference, including gender and social class, and thus have the potential to reproduce existing inequalities.

My research offers key advantages over previous studies that have analyzed storytelling in social movements. For instance, unlike Polletta’s (2006) examination of archival data on storytelling by young activists involved in the Civil Rights Movement, my research is based on direct observation of the storytelling process (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). The data I collected through participant observation in the front- and back-stage spaces of the undocumented youth movement provide important insight into how stories aimed at bringing about social and political change are constructed, revised, practiced, and performed (Gubrium and Holstein 2008). My fieldwork also allowed me to see how activists work together to infuse their storytelling performances with emotion rather than having to rely on their memory of the process. In addition, my direct observations enabled me to identify storytelling patterns and inconsistencies that are harder to discern in interviews and written accounts.
My interview data complemented my fieldwork by providing insights into how DREAMers thought and felt about storytelling and their involvement in the movement. Although DREAMers talked openly with each other about the importance of telling emotionally-engaging stories in backstage movement spaces, it was in interviews that undocumented women spoke candidly about their uncertainties, frustrations, and anxieties about storytelling, and men revealed their general satisfaction with it. Interviews, in other words, helped uncover inequalities in men’s and women’s experiences enacting the movement’s storytelling strategy. Interviews also provided insight into why members of the movement went along with a strategy that sometimes made them uncomfortable.

While other studies have shown how race and gender shape the construction, performance, and reception of stories, my research suggests how class privilege enters into the storytelling process. Just as American children of middle-class parents have benefited in schools and the workplace from socialization into middle-class values, tastes, and behavioral norms, my research shows how those who lack economic advantages can nonetheless use privileged forms of cultural capital to challenge their subordination. My findings also revealed class-divisions within the undocumented youth community and suggested that class-inflected presentations of self can deepen those divides. However, my analytic focus was on the middle-class performing youth activists. Future research is needed to understand more fully how less class-privileged undocumented youth perceived the movement and the relevance of collective action for improving their lives.

Jasper (2004: 3) has argued that scholars who take a cultural approach to studying social movements “have yet to explore the ways that meanings permeate and shape all action,
or the ways that these meanings are heavily affected by interaction with other players.”

While scholars have noted that storytelling may be an especially potent strategy for marginalized groups that have little political power, low social status, and few material resources (Polletta and Lee 2006; Snow and Anderson 1987; Wilkins 2012), my research showed how stories can be used by members of lower-status groups to elevate themselves in interactions with higher-status others. Indeed, I demonstrated that stories can be used by activists not only to claim status in interactions with movement outsiders, but also vis-à-vis higher-status and more influential advocates in the broader movement. Future research might examine differences and similarities in storytelling by members of different social movement factions.

My research also revealed an unexpected hierarchy of allies in the movement. Like other scholars who have questioned the analytic utility of categorizing movement participants as protagonists, antagonists, constituents, and bystanders (Jasper 2004; Polletta 2006; J. Taylor 1998), I found that categorization schema too limiting and static to capture the dynamic relationships among movement participants. My research suggested that while some allies occupied key positions of influence, others were seen as privileged and out of touch with the experiences of undocumented youth. But these categorizations could change. Even allies who were generally accepted as trusted insiders could be pushed out for violating implicit rules of deference and demeanor. I also found that while undocumented youth claimed proprietary control over the movement’s storytelling strategy, trusted allies were nonetheless expected to share their own stories, but to do so in particular ways and only at the invitation of undocumented youth. Future research on storytelling in social movements
should examine how allies understand and navigate these (sometimes unspoken) rules of storytelling in their efforts to claim status as movement insiders.

I also noted that DREAMers borrowed their “coming-out” narrative frame from the gay and lesbian rights movement. Though I never heard anyone critique the use of this strategy by undocumented youth activists, it is nonetheless important to consider how it has been used in campaigns for LGBT rights and its potential limitations. As scholars have noted, LGBT activists have typically responded to charges of sexual deviance by asserting a genetic basis for their sexuality (see, e.g., Human Rights Campaign 2003; see also Hegarty 2002). Having been “born that way,” gay rights activists say they have no control over their sexuality and thus should not be blamed for violating moral codes (Jayaratne et al. 2006). Morality, by definition, assumes that people freely choose their behaviors; by implication, if people cannot (for some compelling reason) make free choices, they should not be stigmatized. Despite the tactical value of this essentialist argument, scholars find that it does not necessarily increase acceptance by opponents and that it can reinforce beliefs that lesbian and gay people are fundamentally different from (and inferior to) heterosexual people (Hegarty 2002).

In their version of the coming-out narrative, DREAMers likewise depicted themselves as having no control over the decisions that led to their undocumented status. Thus, they contended, they should not be held morally responsible for being “illegal.” The downside of this narrative strategy, as I pointed out earlier, is that it reinforced notions of “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants, a distinction that tended to undermine movement solidarity and reinforce anti-immigrant stereotypes. In the future, scholars should examine
how undocumented youth thought and felt about parallels (and differences) between their coming-out narrative strategy and that of the gay and lesbian rights movement. Scholars should also consider how movements that borrow strategies from earlier movements adapt them for their own purposes and to what extent they critique them or understand their potential to reproduce inequality.

Like all studies, mine is not without limitations. Given my ethnographic approach, I cannot generalize about the experiences of all undocumented youth involved in the movement. Rather, my research offers insight into the process by which a group of activists created, revised, and performed their stories. It also provides a way of understanding the consequences of their particular strategies. As previously noted, my identities both enabled and hindered my research. As an ally-researcher, I had access to many of the backstage spaces where members of the movement worked on their stories. However, I observed that DREAMers viewed even their closest allies as different because of their citizenship status and access to middle-class opportunities that were closed to them. Because I enjoyed such privileges, it’s possible that DREAMers sometimes presented themselves differently to me than they would have to an observer who was also undocumented. It is also possible that DREAMers communicated things to each other that they chose not to share with me. As a result, I may have missed some of the subtle meanings DREAMers attached to themselves, to allies, and to their storytelling.

I also noted that DREAMers were wary of the potential for adult citizen-advocates to eclipse their efforts to assert political agency. The fact that I was ten years older than most members of the movement may have shaped their willingness to speak candidly with me
about certain things. For instance, although some members of the movement confessed in interviews to anxiety and uncertainty about the effectiveness of their storytelling strategy, most did not. They may have worried that doing so would negate their efforts to claim competence and political agency vis-à-vis adult authority. Given the marked power differences between young people and adults in U.S. society, future research on youth-identified movements might benefit from including scholars who are closer in age to those they are studying.

Finally, my analysis revealed a gendered pattern of emotion work in the movement. I discovered this in part by analyzing differences in women’s and men’s expressions of emotion in interviews. Although women tended to talk openly about their feelings of ambivalence, frustration, and reluctance to share their stories, men generally described their experiences with public storytelling as unambiguously positive. It’s possible that this portrayal was in part a pose, an attempt to project an impressive image of competence to a female interviewer. If so, I may not have fully captured the differences in women’s and men’s experiences enacting the movement’s storytelling process. Interviews by a male researcher might have yielded different responses, a possibility that future scholars should consider when examining emotional processes in social movements.

To conclude, as long as inequality and injustice remain pervasive features of our social world, people will strive to change it. My research and that of other scholars suggests that this process will inevitably involve storytelling. Why change-making requires stories is revealed in one young man’s account of what happened when he and his friends began sharing their stories in church:
It’s as if we had opened a window, where the air could come in, kind of like giving them hope, because somebody – because we were doing something. The problem was when nobody was doing anything people thought they couldn’t talk about that stuff.

Storytelling gets people talking to each other, opens doors to mutual understanding, and lays a basis for building trust. Stories, in other words, are more than a way to tell about injustice; they are a way, and perhaps the most important way, to build the solidarity necessary to overcome it.
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