Struggling with Success: Emotion, Experience and Subjectivity in the Undocumented Youth Movement in Los Angeles
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EMOTION, EXPERIENCE, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH MOVEMENT IN LOS ANGELES
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SUMMARY

Currently, in 2019, undocumented youth activists in the United States have a powerful political voice and a valorized social status. In the early 2000s, this was not the case. Undocumented youths did not exist as a public and political subject. There was great shame, fear, and stigma associated with their undocumented status, and their parents stressed the importance of hiding their status from friends, teachers, and others outside their closest networks. However, in the late 2000s, undocumented youths came out of the shadows of “illegality” and stepped onto the public stage as “undocumented and unafraid.” They became commonly known as the Dreamers because of their mobilization for the federal Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, an immigration reform bill that would provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youths who fit the bill’s criteria. This policy measure concerns a group of approximately 800,000 immigrants who came to the US “illegally” with their parents when they were children and, hence, were raised and schooled in America. Nowadays, the term Dreamers is often used in the country’s institutionalized politics and mainstream media: it is mentioned in Congressional meetings, in newspaper articles, at the Oscars awards ceremony, and even on Dutch news.

Though the Dream Act, despite repeatedly being up for a vote, has never passed the Senate, the undocumented youth movement has had concrete political wins such as the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA, a temporary program that was installed by the Obama administration in 2012, grants undocumented persons who entered the country “illegally” when they were minors temporary protection against detention and deportation and the right to work, travel, study, and drive legally for a renewable period of two years.

The Dreamers’ emergence and success on the political and public stage are truly remarkable because undocumented immigrants often experience feelings of fear, shame, stigma, inferiority, confinement, and loneliness related to their undocumented status. For undocumented youths to be able to come out as undocumented and unafraid and dare to engage in high-risk political actions, such as civil disobedience, they need to go through a process of personal liberation and affective transformation.

Based on longitudinal ethnographic research (2011–2018) on the undocumented youth movement in Los Angeles, this dissertation seeks to understand the political success of the movement as a whole. It looks at how stigmatized and marginalized undocumented youths manage to come out of the shadows as undocumented and unafraid, and work to gain political voice and instigate political reform. In doing so, it considers how the shared subjectivities – or inner life worlds and affective states – of undocumented youths participating in the movement are constituted by power and
practices stemming from both inside and outside the movement. And it particularly looks at the role of emotion work in establishing this collective personal transformation and emancipation and reconstituting the subjectivities of undocumented youths. Finally, it scrutinizes the consequences of the movement’s political success and examines how the movement both enables and limits the social mobility prospects of undocumented youths.

My research shows that the political success of the undocumented youth movement is connected to the strength (or social, cultural-symbolic resonance) of the representational strategy of the Dreamer narrative, the strength (or the training and identity and emotion work that go into the construction) of the Dreamer performance and collective identity, and the strength of the movement’s network of resources, support, and encouragement.

The Dreamer narrative stakes a claim for undocumented youth’s place in the American Dream by appealing to mainstream patriotic American values and stressing the “deservingness” of undocumented youths. Dreamers are supposedly “deserving” of American citizenship rights because (1) they are contributing youth who are the future of America and “the best and the brightest of their generation,” (2) they are typical patriotic and assimilated American youths who completely identify as Americans because they came to the US at a very young age, were raised in American schools and communities, and hold no emotional or cultural ties to their countries of origin, (3) they are not responsible or to blame for their current legal status because they came to the US “not by fault of their own.”

The strength and national cultural-symbolic weight of the Dreamer narrative was crucial for the movement’s political success, but its success also depended on undocumented youths consistently and convincingly presenting themselves and their life stories as Dreamers in disciplined frontstage performances. To accomplish this, they needed to experience and feel their undocumented stories in common ways. For them to act like a coherent group of Dreamers (strength of the performance), they needed to feel like a group of Dreamers, that is, they needed to emotionally identify with other Dreamers (strength of the collective identity). In this dissertation, I show that this process of creating frontstage discipline and unity from diversity depended on preparations and emotion and identity work done in the backstage spaces of the movement. This essential backstage identity work consisted of (1) training activists to become disciplined frontstage performers, (2) converging their feelings through emotion work, and (3) managing their differences and conflicts in the free spaces of the movement.

Through their strong, coherent, and consistent frontstage performances in the public sphere, the Dreamers gradually became known as a strong and virtuous social
and political identity. Because the movement taught undocumented youth to present themselves as powerful and capable personas during disciplined and organized performances in the public sphere, the collective status of undocumented youth was enhanced and the Dreamer identity became synonymous with educated, powerful, assertive, and capable human beings. Consequently, undocumented youths no longer felt like “unworthy illegals” but like a powerful and legitimate political group instead.

My research also shows that the movement helps undocumented youths in becoming undocumented and unafraid by providing them with material and financial resources and emotional and practical support as well as storytelling training and encouragement and know-how for engaging in civil disobedience actions. The movement not only offers a (legal) safety net against detention and deportation but also helps undocumented youths develop the professional activist dispositions and feelings of self-confidence that are needed to present themselves as undocumented and unafraid in the public sphere.

Reshaping subjectivities through emotion work

In this dissertation, I explore how power becomes inscribed in the subjectivities of undocumented youths, both through the legal and discursive practices of authoritative power structures (power and practice outside the movement) as well as through the emancipatory and empowering practices within the movement (power and practice inside the movement). Legal power becomes embodied in the subjectivities of undocumented immigrants as a result of living a life in the shadows of “illegality” and having to deal with the constant threat of detention and deportation. The experience of everyday life as an undocumented immigrant creates existential anxiety and feelings of inability and inferiority. The subjectivities of undocumented immigrants are further shaped by the embodiment or internalization of stigmatizing and hateful discourses that dehumanize and derogatorily position, categorize, and label undocumented immigrants as “illegals,” “criminals,” “aliens,” “rapists,” or “murderers,” and the like. Being confronted with these hateful discourses causes lasting experiences of shame, inferiority, anxiety, pain, and trauma.

The movement then reshapes the subjectivities of undocumented youths through emotionally intensive therapeutic exercises (emotion work) and alternative, politicized narratives in order to intentionally and actively establish collective personal transformation and emancipation and to repair their socially inflicted negative self-images, thereby turning shame into pride and building social and personal resilience. Undocumented activists thus use emotional techniques, such as healing circles and
other therapeutic exercises, to offer consolation and support, to counter and heal some of the pain and trauma of being undocumented, and to create intersubjective convergence (emotional alignment, collective effervescence, and a sense of belonging) among the individual activists. Moreover, through the movement, these stigmatized and marginalized youths distribute alternative politicized discourses on relevant topics, such as the relationship between capitalism and the immigration system, to recast blame for their predicament onto external structures and to provide undocumented youths with narratives that reject and reframe stigmatizing discourses, thereby equipping movement members to engage in contemporary debates on these issues. Their shared subjectivities are thus reshaped through the internalization of experiences of emancipation, empowerment, belonging, and politicization. Though the legal power and violence of the citizenship regime and the stigmatizing power of discourses of hate still have a harmful impact on undocumented youths’ inner life worlds, affective states and experiences of self and self-world relations, the different sources of empowerment work to reconstitute undocumented activists’ shared subjectivities. The movement thus mitigates some of these harmful effects and offers undocumented youth new sources of strength, courage, agency, resilience, and support.

Political success: The good, the bad, and the ugly

However, the political success of the undocumented youth movement also has a darker side. On the one hand, the strength of the Dreamer narrative, performance, and collective identity has led to concrete political-legal gains, such as DACA. On the other hand, DACA came at the cost of an increase in immigration enforcement and the further criminalization (detention and deportation) of undocumented immigrants. This led to a strong critique within the immigrant rights movement concerning the divisiveness of the Dreamer narrative and eventually to the subsequent breakdown and deconstruction of the Dreamers’ collective identity. Dreamers were called out for being selfish in their political strategy and messaging, causing them feelings of shame and guilt. This resulted in many undocumented youths no longer wanting to be identified or labeled as Dreamers. But it also led to more inclusive and radical organizing strategies, with undocumented youths mobilizing for all 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Moreover, through DACA, many undocumented youth activists were able to put their professional and academic qualifications to use by working as professional organizers and consultants for nonprofit organizations involved with different social
justice movements. As these activists matured and became part of other social justice spaces, they also became more reflexive, radical, and inclusive. Consequently, many now actively work to develop, distribute, and enact alternative discourses and political actions that purposefully counter everyday hateful tropes and include and celebrate immigrant, poor, queer, trans, women and people of color identities. They are now consciously fighting against the effects, structures, and interlinkages of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, gentrification, and environmental degradation.

Finally, the political success of the undocumented youth movement led to social mobility benefits, but it also restricted social mobility through the mechanisms of survivor guilt and other social mobility-related issues. The movement functions as a vehicle for upward social mobility because (1) it helps undocumented youths overcome their fear of migration authorities and feel collectively empowered, (2) it enhances the collective status of undocumented youths and transforms highly stigmatized youth into legitimate political subjects (destigmatization), (3) it helps undocumented youth activists acquire professional activist dispositions and skills that are transferable to other domains of social and professional life, and (4) it offers a large and open network of job, internship, and funding opportunities.

Moreover, through DACA, many undocumented youths were able to gain lawful employment and live more mainstream adult lives. The transition from undocumented status to (liminal) legal status, either through DACA or through marriage to a US citizen, and the subsequent transition from being part of the working class to being part of the middle class, translates into new privileges and feelings of joy, as well as new feelings of guilt. I show how this shift in legal status and social position profoundly affects people’s positionalities, subjectivities, and relationships, as it translates into new opportunities, privileges, and feelings of joy and relief, as well as new feelings of survivor guilt, isolation, estrangement, ontological fragmentation, and the obligation to give back to their families and undocumented communities. The legalization and social mobility of previously undocumented youth activists often results in feelings of survivor guilt for having been spared particular ills and misfortune when others were not. Moreover, because participation in the movement made them fully embrace their undocumented identity, undocumented youths still have strong feelings of identification, belonging, and solidarity towards their undocumented community even after they transition to (liminal) legality.

While these experiences of survivor guilt and other social mobility problems are derived from their durably embodied undocumented subjectivities, their mixed-status families and the uneven distribution of legal rights within them, and the immigrant narrative of struggle and sacrifice, they also stem from politicization, pressure, and
social control in the immigrant rights movement. Experiences of survivor guilt also come from being part of a movement that tells them that they should feel guilty and give back to the undocumented community. As a result, some undocumented youths did not even apply for DACA or citizenship status and many activists give significant parts of their income, resources, time, and energy to other undocumented immigrants. In this way, the movement can limit the social mobility prospects of (undocumented) youths active within it.

In sum, the undocumented youth movement has been extremely successful in using emotion work to transform stigmatized and marginalized youths into confident agents with empowered subjectivities and a strong sense of personal and political agency. However, the Dreamer narrative and collective identity created a division between the supposedly “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrant, and DACA actually led to an increase in detention and deportation rates, which created a division within the movement itself. Thus, previously undocumented youth activists experienced feelings of survivor guilt and are now fighting for all 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.

This dissertation conceptualizes the political success of the undocumented youth movement in two divergent ways. First, the movement’s political success consists of undocumented youths successfully mobilizing around the assimilationist narrative and collective identity of the Dreamers, thereby becoming legitimate political actors in mainstream American politics, accomplishing concrete political wins, and experiencing upward social mobility. Second, the movement’s political success consists of offering undocumented youths emotionally intensive rituals and counter-hegemonic resources that aid them in going through an emotional and cognitive transformation and liberation process in which their subjectivities are reconstituted, their shame is turned into pride, and they are able to experience their political agency as undocumented and unafraid.