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Bradley Forenza

Montclair State University, forenzab@mail.montclair.edu

Carolina Mendonca

Montclair State University

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Dream Big: Exploring Empowering Processes of DREAM Act Advocacy in a Focal State

Brad Forenza and Carolina Mendonca

Montclair State University

ABSTRACT

This original, qualitative research analyzed in-depth interviews with five undocumented, college-age, Latino DREAM Act advocates in a single state. An organizational empowerment framework was utilized to explore processes allied with such advocacy. Four emergent themes transcended the data inductively: (1) Challenging Social Injustice, which pertains to participant motivations for involvement; (2) Inherent Connection, which pertains to the unique personal experiences among DREAM-ers; (3) Combatting Internalized Stigma, which pertains to overcoming the shame or embarrassment of an undocumented identity; and (4) Civic Literacy, which pertains to political proficiencies that participants acquired throughout their DREAM Act involvement. Implications are discussed.

KEY WORDS

Organizational empowerment; DREAM Act; legal issues; post-secondary education; qualitative research; youth development

Literature review

Background

There are approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2011). Roughly 5.5 million children reside in households with an undocumented individual (Kim, 2013) and 1.7 million children are undocumented themselves (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Ellis & Chen, 2013). An undocumented immigrant is defined as having been born outside of the United States and having not been granted permanent residency, long-term residency, or a work permit (Nienhuser, 2013). Divisive, political rhetoric often frames these individuals as prone to violence and the exploitation of community resources, such as public benefits and job opportunities (Gonzalez, Stein, Prandoni, Eades, & Magalhaes, 2015; Levin, 2013). Undocumented individuals from myriad countries live in the United States, though the pervasive stereotype of an “illegal immigrant” is largely conceptualized as Latino (Saldivar, 2015).

Latinos are the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States (Levin, 2013). In fact, the United States ranks third—behind Mexico and Colombia—as the country with the largest Latino population (Valdez, 2011). According to Gonzalez et al. (2015), one-third of U.S. Latinos are undocumented. Lack of citizenship or residency status poses unique acculturation challenges to both undocumented parents and children alike (see Ishizawa, 2015). Discrimination is common. While parents must concern themselves with finding food, shelter, and work, the undocumented child’s mental health needs may be at risk (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). If appropriate coping skills are not developed, adjustment issues will arise (Ellis & Chen, 2013).

Because of its implication that undocumented individuals are de-facto criminals, the term “illegal immigrant” is assumed to stigmatize undocumented Latinos (Perez et al., 2010; Storlie & Jach, 2012). Stigma happens when an individual feels—or is made to feel—like his or her identity is somehow discredited or sub-par (Goffman, 1963). The stigmatized immigrant is prone to psychological stress

and shame (Ellis & Chen, 2013). For example, Jefferies (2014) detailed the inescapable stress that many undocumented students feel (fear of deportation) in their formative, high school years. In the Perception of Undocumented Status and Possible Selves Among Latino/a Youth study, participants used words such as “crushed, disappointing, hard, struggle, and discouraged” to describe perceptions of what lie ahead for other undocumented youth (Gonzalez et al., 2015, p. 1205). These perceptions may be exacerbated when the stigmatized identities of otherwise diligent and applied undocumented students interface with potentially racist educational systems (see Taylor & Fernandez-Bergersen, 2015).

In the 1982 Supreme Court case of *Plyler v. Doe*, the Court ruled that all children—regardless of immigration status—had a right to free, public education from kindergarten through twelfth grade (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982). Approximately 65,000 undocumented students earn high school diplomas annually (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Kim, 2013); thereafter, approximately 7,000–13,000 (or 11–20%) pursue post-secondary education (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Post-secondary education is abundantly necessary in the competitive U.S. workforce, as it proves to be a springboard to desirable employment, higher lifetime income, and a host of positive outcomes (Liu, 2011). Yet many U.S. Latinos perceive post-secondary education as unaffordable (Berg & Tollefson, 2014; Sanchez, Usinger, & Thornton, 2015). For undocumented Latinos, college affordability—compounded by residency status—is a paramount concern. In a study of Mexican-Americans and undocumented Mexicans, Covarrubias and Lara (2014) found that Mexican-Americans pursued post-secondary education at noticeably higher rates when compared to their undocumented contemporaries. According to Nienhuser (2013), the disempowering realization that an undocumented young person may not be able to pursue post-secondary education can happen as early as seventh grade, when young people start contemplating what they might do after high school. As middle school and high school commence—and undocumented students interface with school administrators who historically lack capacity to extend targeted information to them (see Erisman & Looney, 2007; Gonzalez, 2015)—these disempowering realizations become impenetrable.

Because post-secondary affordability is a perennial concern for undocumented students—and because out-of-state tuition costs can exceed in-state costs by 140%—In-state Resident Tuition (IRT) policies have proven useful for making in-state college tuition affordable and accessible to undocumented students (Potochnick, 2014). Potochnick (2014) reports that IRT policies have increased the enrollment rates of undocumented students in college, while also reducing the high school dropout rate among the same population. In spite of this welcome, inclusive IRT trend, the National Council of State Legislatures (2014) reports that some states (Arizona, Georgia, and Indiana) have expressly barred undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition, while other states (Alabama and South Carolina) have unilaterally prohibited undocumented students from attending public institutions of higher education. At the federal level, Congress has failed to pass the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. If passed, the federal DREAM Act would extend conditional residency to undocumented young people as they serve in the U.S. military or obtain *at least* an associate’s degree (Batalova & McHugh, 2010; Ortega, 2011).

Educational assistance and residency status is a controversial intersection for federal lawmakers (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014; Nienhuser, 2013). In the absence of a federal DREAM Act, token states have enacted permissive local policies. California and Texas were the first to enact IRT laws in 2001; since then, at least 16 states—including the focal state for this research—have followed suit (NCSL, 2014). Local IRT policies/local DREAM Acts are assumed positive for the culture and economy of the enabling state, but also empowering for the undocumented youth that benefit from them. While some outcomes-oriented research has examined local IRT/DREAM Act performance (see Potochnick, 2014), less research has examined the empowering processes that undocumented young people may experience when advocating for such a change on their own behalf, and on behalf of other undocumented students.

Theoretical framework

Empowerment—gaining control of, or affecting change in, the socio-political environment—refers to one’s behavioral, relational, cognitive (interactional), and emotional (intrapersonal) interactions with macro forces (Christens, 2012; Speer, 2000; Zimmerman, Israel, Schultz, & Checkoway, 1992). Scholastically, this type of empowerment—empowerment as an individual outcome—is referred to as “psychological empowerment.” Yet the empowerment literature assumes that there are individual processes that one encounters en route to psychological empowerment. Specifically, organizational empowerment refers to “organizational efforts that generate psychological empowerment among members and organizational effectiveness needed for goal achievement” (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 130). Intra-organizational empowerment, which happens in a focal organization, associational membership, organized movement, political campaign, etc., is comprised of four dimensions: shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership. In their seminal article, Maton and Salem (1995) operationalize these dimensions as follows: shared beliefs refers to group-based belief systems that support members in achieving individual goals; opportunity role structure refers to the ability of individual members to fill organizational niches; social support refers to the social bonds within an organization; and leadership refers to the direct action of an organizational leader, or that leader’s indirect effect on the organization.

Numerous dimensions of oppression (see Windsor, Benoit, & Dunlap, 2010) impose themselves on undocumented youth. As these youth contemplate their post-secondary education and other life prospects, they will inevitably place themselves in a broader societal context (see Erikson, 1968). Research (see Freire, 1973) assumes that undocumented youth will inevitably question systemic injustices like post-secondary accessibility and affordability, a developmental turning point known as critical consciousness. Critical consciousness encourages individuals to understand, analyze, and take action against oppressive, disempowering forces. Confronting a problem in the socio-political environment is assumed to yield a host of positive outcomes, including civic literacy and social capital (Putnam, 2000); though, in the highest order, activism can yield psychological empowerment (see Forenza & Germak, 2015). Less is known, however, about the processes that an individual—specifically an undocumented young person—will experience en route to psychological empowerment. This research utilized an organizational empowerment framework to answer the question: What are the empowering processes of DREAM Act advocacy among undocumented students in a focal state?

Methods

Research setting and sample

“DREAM Big” (a pseudonym) was an activist organization advocating for in-state college tuition and financial aid benefits for undocumented students in a single Northeastern state. Throughout the focal state’s 2012–2013 legislative session, DREAM Big was successful at navigating a local version of the DREAM Act through the state’s Democratically controlled legislature and onto the desk of its Republican governor. The statewide act was signed into law in December 2013 and was implemented almost immediately (in January 2014), allowing in-state tuition rates for undocumented students. Soon thereafter, DREAM Big disbanded and a new movement-based organization (“Immigration Liberation,” also a pseudonym) was formed.

In an effort to explore the potentially empowering processes of DREAM Big membership among college-age youth, the co-investigator of this project attended a conference in the summer of 2015 hosted by Immigration Liberation. There, the co-investigator distributed recruitment flyers inviting college-age DREAM Act advocates into the study (a convenience sample). Per the recruitment flyer, research participants had to be at least 18 years old and able to participate in an English-only interview. Most importantly, research participants had to have been undocumented, DREAM Big volunteer advocates (as opposed to paid staff members). Those willing to

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample ($N = 5$).

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	4	80.0
	Female	1	20.0
Country of Origin	Peru	3	60.0
	Mexico	2	40.0
Age Bracket	20–26	5	100.0

participate responded to the co-investigator via contact information provided on the recruitment flyer. Six participants responded in the affirmative, though one ultimately did not meet sampling criteria. Saturation was reached. Demographic characteristics of the final sample ($N = 5$) are described in Table 1.

Per Table 1, the five research participants were from two countries: Peru and Mexico. At the time of the interview, one participant had received citizenship; the rest were still undocumented. Also, at the time of interview, participants were between the ages of 20 and 26 (mean: 23.2; median: 23.0). Since interviews were conducted almost two years after the statewide DREAM Act was signed into law, we assume these participants were roughly two years younger at the time of their volunteer advocacy (mean: 21.2; median: 21.0). Finally, participants were mostly male ($n = 4$); they all still lived in the focal state.

Data collection and analysis

The research team was not affiliated with either the DREAM Big or the Immigration Liberation organizations. Instead, the research team is affiliated with a university in the focal state. After a full IRB review, approval was obtained. Data were collected throughout the summer and fall of 2015. In an effort to illicit rich, narrative data among a small sample—and in an effort to explore the depth of empowering processes encountered through DREAM Act volunteerism and DREAM Big membership—qualitative methods were employed. Specifically, open-ended, qualitative interviewing techniques were utilized. This approach to data collection is useful for exploring perceptions of process among smaller samples (Patton, 2001).

The research questionnaire was organized according to the four dimensions of intra-organizational empowerment (shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership). It was created in concert with an empowerment expert unaffiliated with the research project, and included questions like: “What connects you to other DREAM-ers?” (shared beliefs); “What, specifically, did you do to advance the DREAM Act in your state?” (opportunity role structure); “Tell me about your relationships with other DREAM-ers” (social support); and “How would someone else describe your contributions to the passage of your state’s DREAM Act?” (leadership). All five participants were interviewed at a single point in time (cross-sectional research) at the location of their choice. All five participants received \$20 remuneration for their 60-minute interview.

Per full IRB review—and because of the sensitive nature of undocumented statuses—in-depth interviews were not audio or video recorded. Instead, the co-investigator conducted interviews and transcribed responses on her laptop computer in real time. Then, she repeated the transcription back to participants, which functioned as a form of member check (see Koelsch, 2013). Responses were subsequently organized by question in an Excel spreadsheet. There, the PI and co-investigator independently conducted the first round of thematic analysis and a-priori coding. Repeated concepts were noted when they were expressed by a majority ($n = 4$) of the sample. The PI and co-investigator then met to discuss preliminary findings and to conduct deeper analysis, whereby preliminary concepts (for example, challenges associated with DREAM Act advocacy) were parceled into categorical “themes” (i.e., overcoming internalized stigma). These themes, which emerged from the data inductively, comprise the findings of this research.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the investigators must interpret participant experiences through their own subjective realities. As such, reflexivity calls on the investigators to be “attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective” (Patton, 2001, p. 65). Since the qualitative investigator is part of the research instrument, reflexivity calls on him or her to disclose personal biases. As such, it is important to note that the PI is a former political aide, having worked for the chair of the focal state’s legislative Latino caucus. In that capacity, he interfaced regularly with DREAM Big organization, as DREAM Big and its membership worked to facilitate passage of the statewide DREAM Act. The PI is currently a qualitative methodologist with an expertise in civil society, youth development, and empowerment theory. The co-investigator is an undergraduate student with a personal and scholastic interest in immigration policy, youth organizing, and liberation psychology. As such, this research may classify as heuristic inquiry, which “brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher” (Patton, 2001, p. 107).

Results

Results are organized according to the explicated dimensions of intra-organizational empowerment: shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership. Findings—vis-à-vis four emergent themes, which transcended the data inductively (without prompt)—support and extend our current understanding of intra-organizational empowerment as it relates to this population (undocumented, college-age DREAM Act advocates—all of whom happen to be from Latin American countries—in a Northeastern state). The emergent themes are: (1) *Challenging Social Injustice*; (2) *Inherent Connection with other Advocates*; (3) *Combatting Internalized Stigma*; (4) *Civic Literacy*. The themes are described more in the following.

Shared beliefs

Participants in this sample independently discussed a number of ways in which they saw the world similarly to other DREAM Act advocates. For example, the general belief that immigration was a “broken” system in the United States was a universal ($N = 5$) sentiment. As one participant stated, “Immigration is a huge issue in America and it is breaking many families apart.” To quote another: “I am not so worried about myself as I am about my mother, because she can’t drive and can be exploited in her job.” Tandem to these beliefs was the sentiment among all participants ($N = 5$) that American politicians were not willing or capable to address immigration on a systemic level. As two participants offered:

The immigrant community is not a priority for any political party, and the immigrant community as a whole is being used as a political soccer ball... the Republican Party is not appealing to our community and the Democratic Party takes us for granted.

When it comes to politicians, I do not feel connected to them. All they want is a vote from people... They always worry about other topics and they ignore all the undocumented people... (Politicians) are people you can’t depend on, because they change their minds after they’re in office.

One particularly colorful quote illustrates the dichotomous views that politicians tend to hold about immigrants:

We have seen politicians try to divide the people with the narrative of bad versus good immigrant. If you have a D-U-I, you are bad and need to be deported. If you have been here for 10 years with no record, than you’re a good immigrant. You are pitting the community against each other... In the youth, if the person has straight A’s and not able to go to school because of legal reasons, we are “wasting a great mind.” When the student is average, they don’t deserve to go to school... Our biggest challenge is that we buy into what politicians say about us.

Universally, these beliefs about politicians and the American immigration system were informed by personal experiences encountered by the youthful sample itself. Because they were undocumented, all participants ($N = 5$) discussed instances of being oppressed or discriminated against in their respective educational settings. “In high school, my guidance counsellor wasn’t able to help answer my questions because she wasn’t prepared for the issues I was facing,” said one participant. “My best friends were really smart, but couldn’t study where they wanted to, because they came from poor immigrant families. Their potential was limited, and that was frustrating,” said another. Other common experiences among participants included participants not being able to attend certain colleges, even though they felt qualified to attend ($n = 3$), and having to leave college altogether or drop to part-time status due to (lack of) financial aid ($n = 3$). One participant illustrated the latter issue when he explained:

In my sophomore year (of college), I became the president of the Association for Latin American students. I was re-elected my junior year, but my parents and I were out of money. I had to either take a year off or become a part-time student. Because I would not be able to continue with my schooling, I would not be able to stay president of my organization.

Interestingly, the young man quoted above wound up “going public” with his story of being an undocumented student without financial aid. This led to his eventual involvement in DREAM Big, in pursuit of a statewide tuition equity policy. Shared beliefs refer to group-based belief systems that should support individual members in achieving personal goals (Maton & Salem, 1995). Tuition equity was a personal goal for all research participants ($N = 5$). As an emergent theme, however, what led all participants ($N = 5$) to become DREAM Big members was the desire to challenge what they perceived to be a social injustice. This first emergent theme—*Challenging Social Injustice*—is best illustrated by the participants in the following:

I had received a scholarship (to college) and I had to give it back (because of my undocumented status). I had to drop out of school and had nothing to do or anywhere to go... I wanted to become politically active because I was undocumented and... that [political activity] gave me hope that one day I would go back to school.

I have a brother and a sister who are undocumented... They are the people who influenced me to be who I am today [a volunteer immigration reform advocate]. In the country’s eyes, they shouldn’t be here. But in my eyes, they should have the same opportunities as everyone else.

These quotes illustrate a desire to change the status quo on behalf of a disenfranchised population (undocumented youth in educational settings). Maton and Salem (1995) state that group-based belief systems must be inspiring of growth, strengths-based, and located beyond the self. To this end, while DREAM Big members may have initially joined the DREAM Act movement due to their own, personal circumstances (e.g., regaining a scholarship), their efforts—in time—became rooted in a desire to help the entire community of undocumented youth (e.g., pursuing equality of opportunity). As one participant stated, “It stopped being about me going back to school and became about others.” This shared belief—this commitment to advocating for all undocumented youth—was illustrated by all participants ($N = 5$).

Opportunity role structure

Opportunity role structures provide niches in an organization, which members are intended to fill. These niches allow members to develop, grow, and participate. Civil society initiatives (such as DREAM Big) are characterized by a voluntary division of labor, whereby voluntary members have specific functions to perform (see Putnam, 2000). Participants were asked how they personally helped DREAM Big advance the statewide DREAM Act. All participants ($N = 5$) identified specific ways in which they helped the organization achieve its goals. Two individuals explicated macro-level advocacy on behalf of the DREAM Act movement, as illustrated by this quote:

I was a campaign manager, so most things were filtered to me. I was able to facilitate conversations about direct actions and social media. My role was to keep everything connected and to make sure everyone knew what everyone else was doing. ... I was involved in 100% of the legislative meetings, phone calls, and media events.

While the aforementioned quote pertains to campaign management and the lobbying of state officials, most participants ($n = 3$) filled DREAM Big niches on the micro-level. One participant discussed facilitating the continuous translation of information about the DREAM Act movement from English into another language. Two participants discussed performing outreach functions with undocumented high school students and their parents.

Social support

In terms of macro- or micro-advocacy, all participants ($N = 5$) discussed the importance of coalition building with non-members and allied organizations. “We had allies that weren’t part of [DREAM Big], but we could work on projects with them,” said one participant. To quote another:

There were lots of faith-based groups, legislators, people, and other groups that helped in their own communities. Some churches had their bishops talk to legislators. ... The labor unions were great, and at one point I was able to work for one. They gave [DREAM Big] meeting spaces, access to lawmakers, and meetings with decision makers.

This type of social support, while distinct from intra-organizational empowerment, is reflective of bridging social capital. According to Putnam (2000), bridging social capital is a framework that describes the inherent value of extra-organizational social networks. Participants in this study unanimously recognized the utility of coalition building as central to DREAM Big’s success. Nevertheless, from an organizational empowerment perspective, social support should contribute to a DREAM Big member’s overall quality of life; it refers more to intra-network bonds. To this end, participants were unanimous ($N = 5$) in recognizing an *Inherent Connection with other Advocates*. Herein lies a second emergent theme from the study.

Participants discussed their DREAM Big relationships using phrases like “We’re a family,” and “We love each other.” The most palpable quotes, however, identify the unspoken experiences of living as an undocumented youth in the United States:

The relationships were at a personal level. When speaking with (other DREAM-ers) you can talk about your status, parents’ status, and parents under-the-table jobs. Many of your friends don’t know who you are. They only know the “you” that they see on social media. You assume that all your friends are here legally. ... With any Dreamer that I met, I opened up really easily. Having the status issue in common, it is easier to become friends. This makes you more connected to them and their families. ... Dreamers have parents who work long hours and we can connect on a deeper level.

A lot of my closest friends were and are undocumented or have DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals]. Many, I worked with on the federal and state DREAM Act and deportation fights. We connected on our cultural identity. Being undocumented is a culture of its own, because you are affected by what your parents and politicians say about you and to you.

The “unspoken experiences” mentioned previously may be reflective of an internalized stigma that, if not for organizations like DREAM Big, participants would still experience. Almost all participants ($n = 4$) discussed this stigma, either in overt or implied terms, as illustrated in the following:

[Before DREAM Big], I was not used to speaking about my legal status. I once met this girl who was shouting “I am undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic” and I was like, “Whoa, chill.” It was a bit much for me. ... [But now], my main role is being the emcee and chant leader for civil actions. I am the girl chanting “Undocumented and unafraid.”

When you are out advocating for Dreamers, you see, you are fearless. Just holding a poster or signing a petition, you are putting yourself out there. When people see you getting involved they assume you are undocumented. I

graduated in the top 10 of my class... (but) I would lie to my peers and counsellors about my status because I was fearful.

Through their DREAM Act advocacy and the social support afforded by the DREAM Big organization, participants in this study are assumed to have *Combatted Internalized Stigma* (a third emergent theme).

The social support afforded to participants by DREAM Big membership is also tandem to bonding social capital (AKA the inherent value of intra-network ties). Several participants ($n = 3$) implicitly illustrated ways in which their membership in DREAM Big benefited fellow DREAM-ers. As one young woman offered:

When I meet other Dreamers, I try to engage them and talk about county colleges and scholarships available to us. I try to help them and connect them with the right people so they can get those supports. I try to [educate them] because the laws are not doing that, and it's up to us to bring each other up to speed.

This ability to make a difference is also reflective of organizational empowerment's leadership dimension (discussed more in the following).

Leadership

Maton and Salem (1995) note that the leadership dimension of organizational empowerment may facilitate individual empowerment through (1) the direct action of a leader; or (2) a leader's indirect effect on organizational members. Leaving a legacy is central to this dimension. The most tangible and overt legacy of one's DREAM Big advocacy is undoubtedly the passage of the focal state's DREAM Act. All participants ($N = 5$) similarly described DREAM Big's ability to force a dialog on immigration and its ability to force residents of the focal state to challenge their assumptions of what undocumented individuals are capable of, instead of what their deficits might be.

A final emergent theme pertains to *Civic Literacy*, whereby all participants ($N = 5$) gained a more thorough understanding of political processes, and how undocumented and/or immigrant populations are treated in policy arenas. Demonstration of civic literacy was evident in quotes like these: "We have to start looking at our community as being powerful. Our contributions through labor and economics make this country run. Collectively, we can stop this country from running"; "What I learned about the political process is that it takes so much (time) to make change... politicians are slow"; "I learned that I would never want to run for elected office. No one wants to see how the sausage is made. I saw it and it's not pretty. There are a lot of factors, special interests, and money in politics."

In spite of their mixed feelings about politics and political processes, all participants ($N = 5$) indicated a desire to continue their advocacy on behalf of undocumented youth. As one participant stated:

I think (advocacy) is something that is part of me, and I do it day-by-day. It might not be at the federal level, but I am involved on my campus and around my state advocating for undocumented students. The only reason I wouldn't continue to advocate so rigorously is that I don't want to think about it every day. That is a form of self-care, because [the oppression of undocumented individuals] is happening with your family and your parents every day. I don't think it is possible to ever truly stop advocating.

This desire to continue advocating is, in part, responsible for the creation of Immigration Liberation, the organization from which this sample was recruited. The desire to continue advocating is also illustrative of Kieffer's (1984) assertion that empowerment is a developmental process that unfolds over time. To this end, the true legacy of this sample may reveal itself with time. In the interim, however—and perhaps the greatest indicator of civic literacy—is the revelation among all participants ($N = 5$) of a generalized political awakening. As one said:

The way I grew up, I was made to believe that I should not question authority and I should just follow the system. That event [passage of the statewide DREAM Act] made me realize that everything isn't linear and I *can* question the system.

Psychological empowerment—as mentioned earlier—is an individual outcome and a multi-dimensional construct, but at its core is one’s desire to effect systemic change through advocacy in the sociopolitical environment (Zimmerman, 1995). To the extent that these five participants were part of an organizational initiative (DREAM Big) that effected systemic change (in state resident tuition), we assume that they encountered several empowering processes, vis-à-vis intra-organizational empowerment. As illustrated by the quote earlier, there is perhaps no greater legacy than the imparted belief that an undocumented young person can, in fact, make change in the systems that impact them.

Discussion

This research applied an organizational empowerment framework to explore processes of DREAM Act advocacy in a focal state. Four emergent themes transcended the data inductively (without prompt): (1) Challenging Social Injustice, which pertains to participant motivations for their DREAM Act involvement; (2) Inherent Connection with other Advocates, which pertains to the unique personal experiences among DREAM-ers; (3) Combatting Internalized Stigma, which pertains to overcoming the shame or embarrassment of an undocumented identity; and (4) Civic Literacy, which pertains to political proficiencies that participants acquired throughout their DREAM Act advocacy.

Implications for policy, practice, and future research

Implications for policy

Policymakers will benefit from this in-depth exploration of DREAM Act advocacy in myriad ways. First—through participant voice—policymakers can discern what obstacles (e.g., lack of scholarship availability, inability to maintain full-time status, etc.) undocumented Latinos face in pursuit of post-secondary education. Policymakers—especially those in states that have not yet adopted a local DREAM Act—can also benefit from understanding the extent to which undocumented Latinos desire to pursue post-secondary education to better themselves, and—by proxy—their local workplaces and economies. Lastly, policymakers will appreciate the fourth emergent theme of this research, civic literacy. In this study, civic literacy was brought about through DREAM Act advocacy. The cultivation of civic literacy among study participants may, in time, correlate itself with other hallmarks of active citizenry (e.g., voting, recycling, being a leader in one’s community, etc.), even though the population at hand lacks citizenship.

Implications for practice

Secondary educational practitioners must actively educate themselves about what resources and supports may be available to undocumented youth who desire post-secondary attendance. Similarly, post-secondary educators and administrators must institute programs to attract and retain the population; this may include advertising targeted supports and services to incoming students and high school guidance counsellors. Per the “inherent connection” finding of this research, secondary and post-secondary educators must work to bond and connect undocumented populations through the facilitation of informal, social support groups, which may function as a protective factor. Most importantly, all educational practitioners must work to create and maintain stigma-free educational communities, as they relate to issues of residency.

Implications for future research

This research contributes generally to a large body of literature on processes allied with positive youth development. This research contributes specifically to a growing body of strengths-based literature on undocumented youth and what they capable of, as opposed to what they are lacking. Future research must examine the empowering processes of DREAM Act advocacy with larger,

heterogeneous samples. Additionally, scholars will benefit from quantitative approaches that test theory (e.g., empowerment) as it relates to this type of civic engagement. Per the “inherent connection” findings of this research, future scholarship may wish to further explain the bonding (intra-group) social capital of undocumented youth with the bridging social capital of inter-group dynamics, as protective factors for the population. Future research should also examine the myriad dimensions of stigma, shame, and oppression that are experienced by this otherwise strengths-based population.

Limitations

Like all qualitative research, this study is context-bound and its findings should not be generalized beyond the small sample ($N = 5$) specified earlier. Similarly, the investigators concede that the sample is homogenous: it is mostly male ($n = 4$) and exclusively Latino, even though undocumented college students in the United States are both male and female, and come from myriad regions across the globe (not just Latin America). Per full IRB review—and out of respect for the privacy of undocumented individuals—the investigators were prohibited from audio or video recording participant interviews. Consequently, they had to rely on real-time transcription using a laptop computer, which was less preferred. Finally, the organization from which this sample was recruited (Immigration Liberation, a pseudonym), is an offshoot of DREAM Big (also a pseudonym), which is—in fact—the disbanded organization responsible for facilitating the passage of the focal state’s DREAM Act. As such, it is unlikely that the recruitment flyer reached all members of the disbanded group. In spite of these limitations, the investigators believe that this formative, strengths-based research makes an important contribution to our understanding of undocumented (specifically Latino) youth, and the empowering processes they encounter in their pursuit of sociopolitical change.

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