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Parenting in the Context of Deportation Risk

Nearly 5.1 million children younger than age 18 live with at least one undocumented parent, about 7% of the U.S. child population. Between 2010 and 2013, an estimated 300,000 parents of U.S. citizen children were deported. Raising children in the context of deportation risk increases overall parenting stress for undocumented Latino parents. To investigate this and understand the experience of undocumented parenting, the authors interviewed 70 undocumented parents in two Southwest cities from 2012 to 2013. The authors frame their analysis using the lens of the problem of “illegality.” There are three domains of stressors associated with parenting in the context of deportation risk: trapped parenting, threat of family separation, and altered family processes. The authors discuss these findings in the context of the

literature on undocumented families and parenting stress and connect these findings to the current sociopolitical context experienced by Latino families in the United States .

Defined as a denial of access to the entitlements of citizenship, undocumented status means exclusion from participation in the formal economy and regular employment, denial of access to the majority of safety net and health resources, and a continuous threat, if not the actual occurrence, of detention, deportation, and family separation. These exclusions have significant legal and social consequences that are pervasive in most aspects of daily life (De Genova, 2002, 2010), and their impact expands well beyond the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Nearly 5.1 million children younger than the age of 18 live with at least one undocumented parent, about 7% of the total U.S. child population (Capps, Fix, & Zong, 2016). In these mixed-status families, which include members with a combination of undocumented, authorized, and citizen statuses, the fear of detection, threat of deportation, and consequences of undocumented status extend to all members in the system.

Living in the context of extreme exclusion and constant risk of family separation by deportation presents unique obstacles for both parents and children. As Dreby (2012) characterizes it, the burden of deportation (or deportation risk) on children—and by extension

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their families—can be presented as a pyramid with the most extreme outcome of family dissolution at the top down to a broad base of families affected by negative associations of “illegality” and “criminality” with their or their family members’ undocumented status. To add to this literature, the current study uncovers the lived experiences of undocumented parents and their children. We draw on De Genova’s (2002) deconstruction of the problem of “illegality” and research by Dreby (2012, 2015) and Abrego (2016) among others to shed light on how undocumented individuals and their children negotiate their legal status to explore stressors related to parenting for undocumented Latino families.

BACKGROUND

During the past several decades, changes to U.S. immigration policy have expanded the capacity of the U.S. government to detain and deport undocumented people. The passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, 8 U.S.C. § 1101 (2016), although it provided some amnesty to some undocumented people who had been residing in the country undocumented prior to 1982, fundamentally changed the structure of the immigration system by criminalizing the hiring of undocumented people and increasing the capacity of immigration enforcement and internal policing of immigrant communities. The Immigration Reform and Control Act was followed in 1996 by the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, 8 U.S.C. §§ 1221–1232 (2016) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, 28 U.S.C. § 2254 (2016).

These 1996 laws expanded the list of crimes categorized as aggravated felonies, increased the allocation of resources to interior and border enforcement, and severely limited prosecutorial discretion by immigration judges. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act added Section 287(g) Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, 8 U.S.C. §§ 1221–1232 (2016) to the Immigration and Nationality Act, which provided a legal structure for programs such as Secure Communities (changed to the Priority Enforcement Program in 2014) that required local jails to check send identity information to Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE; American Immigration Council, 2014). These changes, in conjunction with the political and economic dynamics of the United States and sending countries, have facilitated a dramatic increase in deportations.

In 2012 and 2013—the years the project data were collected—nearly 1 million individuals were deported from the United States, and an additional 409,051 were returned to their countries of origin even before they gained entrance into the United States (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2016, Table 39). Although the precise number of parents of children living in the United States who have been deported remains unclear, the DHS estimated that roughly 72,000 parents of U.S. citizen children were deported in 2013 alone (ICE, 2014a, 2014b). Latinos, especially those from Mexico and Central American countries, have been disproportionately affected by legal efforts to criminalize undocumented immigrants (Abrego, 2016). More than 90% of individuals removed are from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (DHS, 2016, Table 40). In Texas, the site of the current study, immigration enforcement has reversed course and is now considered to be one of the toughest in the United States. As of March 2017, 13 Texas counties, mostly in rural and suburban areas, applied for the 287(g) partnerships with ICE (del Bosque, 2017).

Despite DHS’s stated priority focus of deportation on immigrants with criminal convictions, the evidence suggests that the majority of apprehended, detained, and deported individuals do not have criminal records (DHS, 2016, Table 41). Mainstream media exacerbates the conflation of undocumented status with criminality by showing images of undocumented (and primarily Latino) immigrants being apprehended and handcuffed by police as they are taken to detention or put on planes for deportation (Abrego, 2016; Chavez, 2013). These images have accompanied false narratives about crime by undocumented people as rapists and drug traffickers and used as evidence to justify the building of a new wall on the southern border and implement new restrictions on immigration. The use of terms such as *illegal alien* and *criminal alien* contribute to the dehumanization of immigrants (De Genova, 2002). The resultant animosity toward Latino immigrants, as well as nonimmigrant Latinos, has been shown to have

a negative effect on family well-being and daily life, regardless of legal status (Abrego, 2016).

The Everyday Context of “Illegality”

Enforcement practices target not only single, undocumented migrants but also long-term immigrants with U.S. citizen children and spouses (Dreby, 2015). Migrants who entered the United States without going through inspection, as many Central American and Mexican migrants do, are ineligible to regularize their status except under extreme hardships. The inability to regularize status, along with increasing enforcement, has trapped families in a constant state of “illegality,” whereby immigrants’ legal status and deportability place them in a perpetual condition of vulnerability (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2014).

The ways in which individuals and their children negotiate their legal status shape the everyday experiences of immigrant families (Abrego, 2016; Dreby, 2012, 2015; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Undocumented status is a denial of the rights and entitlements of citizenship as well as the ability to enter and leave the country freely. This means exclusion from access to many basic resources, including participation in regular or formal employment, access to the majority of safety net and health resources and federal student loans for higher education, and, in many states, the right to a license to drive. In addition, because their residence in the United States is thus “illegal,” undocumented people risk being forced to leave the country without warning if their status becomes an issue in an encounter with law enforcement officials. The combination of circumstances such as the denial of driver’s licenses with the added vulnerability of encounters with law enforcement render even normal everyday tasks, such as taking children to school, high risk (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Individual differences likely influence how undocumented families cope with and manage their lack of legal status (Abrego, 2016; Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2014). Gender differences, in particular the disproportionate number of Latino men targeted for deportation (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013) and the division of labor and tasks in the household, have increased undocumented women’s dependence on their partners and exacerbated difficulties faced by families when the head of household is detained

or deported (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011; Dreby, 2015; Menjívar, 2006). Given their different roles in the family, undocumented status may shape how mothers may parent differently from fathers.

The legal status of the individual family members and the length of time the family has lived in the United States also likely influence how undocumented parents experience “illegality.” Often families are mixed status and one or more member may have an authorized status. Undocumented parents with family members who have an authorized status may have better access to resources than parents in families (Dreby, 2015) in which all members are undocumented, prompting perhaps a greater sense of security and confidence in parenting. In addition, as increased time in the host country leads to greater degrees of integration (Alba & Nee, 2003) undocumented parents who have lived in the United States for longer may be more comfortable with navigating parenting practices commonly practiced in the United States.

The specific sociopolitical context where life takes place has an important role in how individuals experience undocumented status (Dreby, 2015; Hagan, Rodriguez, & Castro, 2011; Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016). For example, San Francisco and Boston are considered by many to be sanctuary cities (although there is no clear legal definition of this term), where local police do not collaborate with federal authorities to identify, detain, and deport undocumented immigrants, whereas other cities such as Phoenix and Raleigh spend substantial resources to do so (Immigrant Legal Resource Center, 2016). Research suggests that local context impacts the lives of immigrants, with individuals in more anti-immigrant places reporting greater discrimination, stigma, and fear (Dreby, 2015; Hagan, Castro, & Rodriguez, 2010).

Children in immigrant families share part of the burden of deportation risk, regardless of their citizenship status. One way of conceptualizing this is using the deportation pyramid developed by Dreby (2012) to depict the multiple ways that immigration enforcement policies affect Latino children and families. This position at the apex of the pyramid covering a smaller total area illustrates that this category both encompasses a smaller total number of children and includes the most heightened consequences, those that result in the long-term or permanent alteration of family structure. Toward the wider pyramid

base, and thus more commonly experienced among Latino immigrant children, are consequences of undocumented status experienced in the shorter and more temporary term, such as economic instability, changes in daily routines, emotional distress caused by potential separation, and the denial of their immigrant heritage (Dreby, 2012). An area that received less attention in Dreby's pyramid is on how immigration enforcement has influenced family processes, in particular how it affects parenting processes, parent-child communication, and parent-child interactions.

Negotiating "Illegality" and Parenting

One area in which everyday stressors may be exacerbated, even without the stress of undocumented status, is that of parenting. Parents may experience stress when the everyday challenges of being a parent exceed their perceived personal and social resources available to deal with those challenges (Abidin, 1992; Belsky, 1984; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). This stress may affect parents' ability to manage their emotions, leading to outcomes such as lower life satisfaction, increased depression and anxiety (Muslow, Caldera, Pursley, Reifman, & Huston, 2002; Williford, Calkins, & Keane, 2007), marital discord, a higher likelihood of separation or divorce (Belsky, 1984), and the use of ineffective parenting strategies, such as harsh discipline or disengagement (Deater-Deckard, 2004). For undocumented parents, the stressors that parents experience as a result of normal parenting strain are compounded by the fact that they are required to perform these typical responsibilities of parenting in the context of deportation risk. Much of the existing research on undocumented status and parenting has focused on the negative effects of immigration enforcement, family separation, and family reunification (Allen, Cisneros, & Tellez, 2015; Brabeck & Sibley, 2016; Gulbas, Zayas, Yoon, Szlyk, Aguilar-Gaxiola, & Natera, 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Menjivar, 2006). Currently, there is little research on whether constructs of parenting stress adequately assess the parenting experiences of undocumented parents and how these experiences may differ by legal status.

There is strong evidence in the family psychology literature of the challenges that family separation and reunification pose to parents

and children in undocumented families (Allen et al., 2010; Brabeck & Sibley, 2016; Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Delva et al., 2013; Gulbas et al., 2016). Family separation most often occurs in one of the following two ways: through stepped migration, the initial migration of the parents with the intention of returning to be with or bring their children later, or through the detention or deportation of a parent whose children remain in the United States. Children left behind in their home country, as well as children who have experienced the deportation of a parent, often experience changes in their psychosocial well-being. For example, children who have experienced separation as a result of parental deportation have demonstrated internalizing and externalizing symptoms, academic problems, social withdrawal, and sleeping problems (Allen et al., 2015; Chaudry et al., 2010; Gulbas et al., 2016). Beyond the normal challenges of intergenerational communication, short- and long-term separations force parents to reestablish parental authority and reconnect with their children during reunification (Abrego, 2016). Similar reactions to the challenges of family separation and reunification have been documented in other populations, such as those who experience parental incarceration (Booker Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009) and military deployment (Creech, Hadley, & Borsari, 2014).

Even among families who have not experienced separation, undocumented status is associated with significantly higher levels of parent-reported and child-reported anxiety and depression (Allen et al., 2015; Brabeck & Sibley, 2016; Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Delva et al., 2013; Gulbas et al., 2016). Parents report fear of government institutions, such as Child Protective Services, and the concern that their detention or deportation will likely result in their loss of custody of their children—a concern substantiated by the findings of Wessler (2011) of high numbers of children in the foster care system whose parents had been deported. Children—regardless of their own documentation status—experience psychological stress from the threat of separation or from hearing stories of families who have experienced deportation (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Dreby, 2012; Gulbas et al., 2016). Youth report distress related to their inability to communicate with friends, negative perceptions of their country of origin, loss of school networks, stressed

relations with parents, and financial struggles (Gulbas et al., 2016).

As a family unit, living with the constant threat of deportation and family separation changes family processes, the way that families relate to one another, including parenting practices and parent–child interactions (Abrego, 2016; Dreby, 2015; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). Although not specific to undocumented families, one area where this occurs that has received attention in the literature, especially as it relates to parenting and the parent–child relationship, is language brokering (Morales & Hanson, 2005; Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, & Little, 2015). Children who bridge language barriers through translation for their parents provide a critical service. Language brokering may increase parent–child closeness and foster a sense of family cohesion (Dorner, Orellana, & Jimenez, 2008). However, it may also come with a cost, such as increasing psychological stress in youth, limiting parents' knowledge about school and peers, and decreasing parental authority in decision making (Martinez, McClure, & Eddy, 2009).

General family processes such as parenting practices and the structure of family relationships are affected by having a parent with undocumented status. For example, research suggests that undocumented parents encourage their children to not draw attention to themselves and avoid potential problems because otherwise they could be reported to ICE (Lykes, Brabeck, & Hunter, 2013). In some cases, fear of the system or difficulty communicating in English creates an inverse power relationship and disrupts parental authority in undocumented families (Dreby, 2015). Although infrequent, Dreby (2015) found that some children were involved in the decision-making tasks that created an inverse power dynamic in the household. In contrast, Brabeck and Sibley (2016) found no differences in the parent–child relationship and parenting practices (e.g., attachment, parent–child communication, discipline practices, and parenting confidence) between undocumented and documented Latino parents. Given the limited research in this area and the divergent findings, questions remain with regard to how “illegality” influences perceptions of parenting, parenting practices, and parental authority.

In an effort to address this gap, we conducted an exploratory study with 70 undocumented parents in two Southwest cities from 2012 to 2013. Using a semistructured interview guide, we explored the following two research questions: What are the stressors related to parenting children in the context of illegality? What is the impact of illegality on family processes? We expected that undocumented parents would report significant life challenges beyond standard parenting stressors and that these challenges would permeate and shape family processes, including parenting–child dynamics and communication.

METHOD

Research Design

The original study was a mixed-method, concurrent parallel design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For this article, we focus on the qualitative findings. Our qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for sensitive topics and populations who are harder to find and recruit (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). In addition, we constructed variables from the qualitative transcripts to allow for analysis along domains such as the experience of family separation and child awareness of parents' undocumented status.

Interview Guide

A semistructured interview guide was used to frame the conversation about parenting and daily life in the United States. Table 1 provides examples of questions from the guide. Interviewers were encouraged to follow topical trajectories and use probes related to the major substantive areas. The interviews began with asking parents about their migration experiences and ended with asking parents about raising a child in the United States. The participants were asked to provide extensive demographic information via a Qualtrics (2017) questionnaire, such as household size and structure, educational attainment, documentation status, and country of origin.

Procedure

We recruited undocumented Latino immigrant parents ($N = 70$) who were older than age 18 and had at least one child younger than age

Table 1. *Sample of the Semistructured Interview Guide*

Topical trajectories	Semistructured questions	Examples of prompts
Family migration experience	Why did you decide to come to the United States?	Family, economic reasons?
	Can you describe how you entered the United States?	With/without a visa? Who did you travel with? Did you leave family behind? Where was your destination?
Living with undocumented status	What is it like to live here without papers?	What does this mean to you?
	How has it impacted your daily life?	Different routes when you drive? Changing school routines and/or prohibiting children from field trips
	What do your children know about your immigration status?	If they know: can you remember the first time you had this conversation with your children? If they do not know: why have you decided not to tell them.
	How is your job or work life?	Relationship with employer; has it happened that you were not paid for your work or were paid less than what you were promised?
Parenting without papers	How has the fact that you are undocumented affected your children?	
	How do you think parents that are U.S. citizens do things differently with their children?	Imagine if you had papers, what would you do differently?
	What difficulties have you faced as a parent helping your children excel in this society?	School, language, church, community
	What do you feel like when you think about the possibility of being deported?	
	What is your plan for taking care of your children if your children if you are detained and deported?	Formal/informal plan? Written plan? Would they stay in the U.S.? How did you come up with your plan? Have you spoken to your children about the plan?

18 living in the United States to participate in interviews from May 2013 to August 2014. Our sample was drawn from two large urban areas in Texas with the assistance of nonprofit agencies in each city. In one city, a nonprofit case manager directly recruited participants, arranged interview times, and provided space for the interviews. In the other, research staff recruited participants at weekly meetings and in waiting areas and scheduled interviews for a later date at the participant's home, an agency, or a researchers' office.

The interviews were conducted by two Spanish–English bilingual research staff and lasted approximately 75 minutes. Extensive efforts were made to protect the participants' confidentiality. Institutional review boards at

the University of Houston and the University of Texas at Austin approved all study protocols and consent forms. Consent was obtained orally; signed documentation of consent was waived to further protect the participants' identities. No questions soliciting identifying information, such as names or addresses, were asked during data collection. Semistructured interviews were audio-recorded and immediately uploaded to a secure server. Members of the research team and a professional transcription service transcribed audio recordings in Spanish.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

More than half of the undocumented parents we interviewed were women ($n = 56, 80\%$). Consistent with national trends, the majority of parents

were from Mexico and had lived in the United States for more than 14 years. The majority (81%) of parents were married or cohabitating, and the mean household size was approximately five. Almost half (46%) had attended formal education until they were 16 years of age or older, and 41.5% reported speaking both English and Spanish at home. Of the parents we interviewed, 90% lived in a mixed-status family, meaning either one of their children or their partner had an authorized status, and about 30% indicated they had suffered a short- or long-term separation from their children. Fewer than 6% of the sample reported a previous deportation. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the 70 undocumented parents we interviewed.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Dedoose software (Sociocultural Research Consultants, LLC, 2016) following the procedures for theoretical thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were coded and analyzed in

Spanish so as not to lose any meaning in translation, and the quotes used to describe themes were only translated in the final version of the article. Once the initial coding was completed, we collated the coded data extracts and considered how these codes fit together to create themes. We refined themes by assessing for internal (with theme cohesion) and external (theme discreteness) heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Memo writing helped ensure that we had accurately organized the data into discrete categories that captured the essence of the narratives.

We applied summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to count the incidences of certain themes of interest, such as child knowledge of parent status and short- and long-term separation. After the themes were identified and fully described, we used the mixed-methods analysis features of Dedoose to further explore the themes by salient characteristics such as gender and family structure. This allowed us to understand the nuances in themes by how undocumented status interacts with factors such as the amount of time a family

Table 2. Demographic and Household Characteristics of Undocumented Parents (N = 70)

Characteristic	n (%)	M (SD)
Female	56 (80.0)	
Age ^a		37.0 (7.43)
Married or cohabiting	57 (81.4)	
Education, age at end		
Younger than 13 years of age	19 (27.1)	
13 to 15 years old	20 (28.6)	
16 years of age or older	31 (44.3)	
Language spoken at home		
English and Spanish	37 (47.1)	
Spanish only	33 (52.9)	
Country of origin		
Mexico	62 (88.6)	
Central America	6 (8.6)	
Spain	1 (1.4)	
Years in U.S.		13.96 (5.69)
Lived in U.S. continuously	59 (84.3)	
Household characteristics		
Household number		5.57 (1.85)
Mixed status family	63 (90.0)	
Detained previously, self	2 (2.9)	
Detained previously, self or partner	3 (4.3)	
Deported previously, self	4 (5.7)	
Ever separated from child, short term	15 (21.4)	
Ever separated from child, long term	8 (11.4)	

^a Out of n = 69, 1 missing on age.

has been in the United States to shape parent and child behaviors and parenting styles.

RESULTS

Based on the qualitative interviews, we found that parents reported feeling trapped, burdened by the constant threat of separation from their children, and discouraged by how their undocumented status affects family processes. We explored how each of these themes manifested in undocumented parents' lives. When possible, we examined how these themes varied by factors such as gender, family legal status, and time lived in the United States. Rather than distract from the content by including a burdensome number of pseudonyms, we differentiate participants by including a research number in parentheses after each quote.

Trapped Parenting

Parenting in the United States without authorized immigration status can be understood as synonymous with being trapped. Parents come to the United States in search of better economic opportunities, family reunification, and physical safety; however, undocumented status limits them to life with significant restrictions and constraints. For citizens and residents with an authorized immigration status, activities that require physical mobility and travel, such as going to work, taking children to school, and driving were experienced as routine. For undocumented parents, however, these activities posed a significant threat.

This situation of clandestine living is often described by scholars as "the shadows" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 444). A married father of three illustrated the stress of living in Texas (and many other states), whose laws now prohibit undocumented immigrants from obtaining a driver's license when he lamented, "I cannot stay late at work because the later I stay, the more police are out, and the greater the possibility that I could get arrested. I have to rush to and from work" (222). In addition, the collaboration between local police and immigration enforcement increases their vulnerability to arrest and deportation for nonviolent crimes, such as driving without a license. In places such as Texas with limited public transportation, driving is almost unavoidable. This restriction on

driving essentially criminalizes routine and necessary tasks that, when combined with allowing local police to act as immigration enforcement, leads to a situation of fear. As another father put it, "You are afraid when a police officer stops you because you can't show them a license" (107).

Undocumented parents also expressed a sense of physical limitation or entrapment because of more general fears of the police, even in circumstances where they were not in violation of any particular law or regulation. As one 35-year-old single mother of three expressed, "You are always full of fear—you go take your kids to school, see a police—and then you are afraid that you will be stopped because of your physical appearance" (224). This constant fear of arrest affects both parents and the entire family, as another mother relayed:

To be thinking that they are going to arrest you—this also affects you emotionally and physically. ... It doesn't only affect me, but also my family because they are thinking "don't you get arrested." (107)

As described by the participants, "illegality" colors most aspects of daily life. Many parents expressed a sense of constraint on their physical mobility because of this fear, ranging from not leaving the house to not traveling in the city or out of town. As one father put it, one cannot do things such as go on family vacations to other places "because you are afraid that immigration will pick you up" (111). Furthermore, a single mother of five children eloquently stated, "I feel like I am a bird in a cage; one is just locked up in the house with fear of going out into the streets ... afraid of confronting many things that may be harmful" (215).

Nearly all of the parents we interviewed described feeling trapped in this way, limited in mobility because of legal constraints and fear of the police. This narrative did not appear to vary by demographic factors, such as gender and family status. Ultimately, the participants described their fear of police as related to their overwhelming anxiety about being separated from their children. As one mother explained,

For that reason I don't drive, I know how to drive but for this reason I can't and my husband tells me "no, for what reason? No, there is danger that the police will pick you up and deport you and then

the children?" So that is the reason I don't drive, that my husband prefers that I don't drive. (214)

Threat of Family Separation

Intimately linked to the sense of being trapped, yet a discrete stressor, was the fear or threat of family separation. Parenting in the context of deportation risk meant living with the persistent possibility of separation from one's children or, even worse, the permanent loss of their children through their placement in the foster care system. Parents expressed despair about the threat that detention or deportation posed to their ability to be with their children. As a 40-year-old mother of five children said, "A million times, I prefer to be with him [her son] then separated from him. ... No my God, if they took him from me I would die" (104). Another mother reflected the following:

Just speaking of this I feel sad and worried. I get very depressed. ... What I love most in life is my children. ... I would never want to leave my children. It is extremely painful. (216)

The fear of separation was compounded by the fact that many parents were unaware of their parental rights and feared that they would lose custody of their children if deported. As one 22-year-old mother stated, "I heard that children who are born here belong to the government" (225). The parents spoke of stories they heard of parents being separated from their children, with little or no hope of reunification, such as this mother who stated, "We are always afraid that they will detain us. ... Some people say that they will take them to other homes, and that is my greatest fear" (204). This perspective likely comes from highly publicized legal cases of parents whose rights were terminated by the state following their detention. One such case is Encarnación Bail Romero, who lost custody of her son after ICE detained her. The court terminated her parental rights on the grounds of abandonment (Thompson, 2009).

This fear of separation was also linked to some undocumented parents' choice to not discuss their immigration status with their children. Among the parents we interviewed, slightly more than a quarter (27%) had not disclosed their status to their children. Undocumented parents who did not tell their children explained that they did this to protect them. One

mother said, "I have at times tried to explain but she takes everything to heart and I am afraid she will get depressed" (206). Yet most parents we spoke with (73%) had disclosed their status to their children.

Among this group, about 39% of parents reported that their children experienced fears related to deportation and family separation. A 44-year-old mother of three recalled how her children would call her whenever she was shopping for groceries saying, "Are the police going to get you because you don't have papers? Please don't go out or someone will take you" (212). Despite the risk, she tried to remind her children that she had to live her daily life. Another mother of three spoke about her daughter's recurrent nightmares wherein the police "knocked on our door and ordered us to leave because we were not from this country" (123). Some parents described explicitly leveraging their undocumented status to encourage their children to stay out of trouble. As seen in this mother's (reportedly successful) advice to her daughter because of her concern about gang activity in the schools, "Don't get involved because the one who will end up paying for it is me. I don't have papers so I cannot get involved in this kind of situation" (227). Regardless of whether their children knew about their status, parents expressed concerns about their children's anxiety over being uprooted from the life that they know. As one mother put it, "They are also afraid because they feel more secure in their own country—not in their parents' country" (115).

Altered Family Processes

Our interviews with undocumented parents revealed that parenting in the context of deportation risk also changes family dynamics by shifting roles within the family and, in the most extreme cases, by restructuring the family unit. Undocumented parents describe the effects of long-term separation on family processes as well as how their children assumed increased responsibilities to help their family navigate their parent's undocumented status. These responsibilities included activities such as language and culture brokering and assuming responsibilities for family protection. In many cases, the parents described that their undocumented status disempowered them as parents, as it placed them in a vulnerable legal position that led them to be hesitant about exercising parental authority.

Often in immigrant families, the youth play a role in helping their parents navigate their social environment. One common activity that elicited these feelings of role reversal for undocumented parents was the reliance on their children to broker communication. Children of undocumented parents, particularly if they had been in school in the United States, were important resources for their parents who were less familiar with cultural norms and rules or language. As one father explained, "Because they studied here they know a lot about things here" (222). This practice, however, was not always helpful in supporting parental sense of authority and control. As one mother complained:

I feel that in my son's school they only acknowledge him. ... Like when we went to register him for classes they would not talk to me—they only spoke to him. ... They were Americans and I have noticed when I go, they do not speak to me. I don't know if it is because I don't speak English, but no one directs their conversation to me. (204)

Many of the parents we interviewed, mostly mothers who had been in the United States for more than 5 years, identified their children as performing this role. Parents also recognized that reliance on their children for communication may both frustrate and cause worry for children. A 43-year-old mother of four remembered a time when her child scolded her with the following warning:

Mom, learn English. We are not always going to be around to help you. When we are at school and you have to go to the store, who will help you? (213)

In addition to language brokering, the parents we interviewed described other ways their children assumed increased responsibilities to help the family navigate their undocumented status. This was particularly salient in parents' descriptions of how their children talked about their plans to protect them from deportation and even work to obtain an authorized status for them. The parents reported that their children took to task the responsibility of monitoring their behavior so they would not come under the scrutiny of immigration officials. According to one father, his daughter pleaded with him saying, "Daddy, I want to ask you for a gift on my birthday. ... I want you to behave yourself, so the police don't take you" (229). Another way this appeared to manifest for citizen children is in their stated

plans or desires (according to their parents) to assume responsibility for regularizing their parent's immigration status. Parents such as one mother who had been in the United States for 16 years recalled conversations such as this one, where her son asked, "How old do I have to be to get [your papers] in order? Well, don't you worry, I am going to get your papers in order" (112). Among parents who reported their children know about their documentation status, about half stated that their children had expressed interest in or planned to fix the legal status of their parents. This particular shift in responsibility may also be tied to the amount of time the family had been living in the United States as, among parents we interviewed, those who reported their children felt responsible for regularizing their status had all been living in the United States for more than 5 years.

The increased responsibilities of children and role reversal at times contributed to a more complete shift in power dynamics that left parents feeling disempowered. Shifts in power dynamics were perhaps most clearly illustrated with regard to discipline. The context of deportation risk, the fear of detection that could lead to detention, deportation, or child removal, weighed heavily in parents' stated decisions on how to apply discipline and punishment. One reason for this was not only differences in customs and laws regarding child rights and child punishment but also children's awareness of their rights (or perceived rights) and the fear that they might use them to avoid punishment. This led some parents feeling powerless to confront behavioral problems in their children. One parent heard a neighbor's child threaten, "If you spank or scold me I am going to call the police, and they are going to deport you." This mother said, as a result, "Psychologically, there are parents that don't want to correct their children" (104). In a few cases, the actual parents in the study mentioned that their child had threatened to call the police. As one 28-year-old father of two explained, "He knows that he can call 911 if I scold him. ... So due to my documentation status I let him do what he wants" (107). These shifts in power dynamics between parents and children in undocumented families reflect how deportation risk affects the family system. Parent awareness and fear of the potential effect that their detention or deportation could have on the family created a situation in which the parents felt trapped under a constant sense of the

threat of family separation and loss. Ultimately, both of these factors worked in tandem to shift the power dynamics of the family system.

The most drastic alteration of family process was via actual separation, when children were left behind in the country of origin. Among the parents we interviewed, 11% ($n=8$) of the parents reported long-term separation from their children. The distance strained the parent-child relationship and, in many cases, appeared to change the family system permanently. A 39-year-old mother of three who had lived in the United States for 17 years talked about her relationship with her children, whom she had to leave behind in Mexico:

They feel like I abandoned them. They feel that I did not want to return. They are resentful. The boy is grown and does not talk to me and the girl will only talk to me sometimes. (209)

In some cases, the parents described relationships between themselves and their children in their home country in ways that revealed that they no longer related to one another in traditional family roles. A 30-year-old mother of four who had been separated from her children for 9 years described her longing to see her children but corrected herself stating, “Well in reality they are really not mine [anymore],” (103) because they had been raised by their grandmother for most of their lives. This latter narrative was the realization of parents’ worst fears—the loss of the parent-child relationship.

DISCUSSION

Undocumented status complicates parenthood for Latino parents by adding additional stressors that are not part of the traditional parenting experience. However, much of the literature on undocumented parents or children has focused on how immigration status shapes the lives of individuals, not how it affects family dynamics. When the family has been the focus, patterns of separation and reunification have received the most attention (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Menjívar, 2006; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Our study expands this by focusing on a less researched area, parenting and parent-child interactions and communication. We identify the following three broad categories of stressors associated with parenting

in the context of deportation risk: trapped parenting, pervasive fear of family separation, and altered family processes.

Trapped parenting describes the physical restrictions, both real and perceived, that parents experience because of their undocumented status. Previous research has shown the ways in which undocumented status limits physical and economic mobility (Abrego, 2016; De Genova, 2002). Our study expands this research by framing the consequences of these restrictions in the context of the family. Parents describe how they and their children learn how to live with undocumented status in the context of their family life. Parents changed their daily routines, limited the distance they traveled, and described a fear of being picked up by the police because of their undocumented status and ultimately because of assumptions made about their status based on their race and ethnicity. These experiences were not limited to just the parents themselves. Most children knew about the consequences of undocumented status and, because of the risks, adjusted their behavior to remain under the radar.

We found that these modifications to daily routine and persistent fear did not differ for mixed-status families; parents with citizen children also reported fear of the police and experienced a sense of limited mobility. Questions remain regarding whether U.S. citizen children feel the same level of fear of police and economic and physical exclusions experienced by their parents. In addition, there are variations in how a parent’s undocumented status is experienced for children in the 1.5 generation—those children who migrated with their parents at a young age and who often speak English well and were primarily educated in U.S. schools. Although work by Abrego (2016) suggests that there are clear intergenerational differences between undocumented parents and children, how these differences influence family dynamics and communication is not very well understood. In addition, our participants were recruited from two Southwest cities 200 miles from one another. How “trapped” parents feel may be context specific; how individuals limit their daily routines may be different in other areas of the country.

Parents and children experience pervasive fear that comes from the continued threat of family separation. Although undocumented parents often live for extended time away from

their parents and other family members (and in some cases, children), at the same time they also live with the fear of separation from their partners and children. This fear is interwoven with the experiences of trapped parenting. How the fear of separation functions for undocumented parents is best highlighted via a focus on the extreme case, the possible loss of custody of their children. Entangled in the fear of deportation is an underlying thought that the U.S. government could take custody of their children if they were deported. Parents are in tune with news coverage of cases where this occurred. Parents feel trapped because the risk of deportation brings not only the threat of their forced return to the country of origin and possible separation from their family but also the threat of complete dissolution of the family unit. Although the media has brought attention to several cases where the parental rights of caregivers were terminated, there is limited concrete information on the pervasiveness of this practice.

In the most well-known and comprehensive study to date, Wessler (2011) estimated 5,100 children were in foster care as a result of parental detention or deportation—roughly 1.25% of the national child foster care population. These projections, however, were based on data collected from 22 states with high numbers of foster care and foreign-born populations and not based on the actual number of children in the system. Despite this, in response to criticism that ICE enforcement activities were orphaning young children, the agency developed the ICE Parental Interests Directive (2013), which aims to identify parents of U.S. citizen or dependent children and parents involved in family court or child welfare proceedings. How this functions in practice is unclear, however, as parents who have children or a spouse who is undocumented are likely to be hesitant to reveal their situation to agents whose primary mission is the detention and deportation of unauthorized individuals. To date there is no information as to the effectiveness of this program. More research is needed to clarify the number of children in foster care as a result of parental detention and deportation as well as to establish best practices for community and legal service providers and enforcement agents.

In the context of the threat of family separation, parents also struggled with how to shield their children from shouldering the burden of their undocumented status. The literature on parental divorce (Gumina, 2009)

and death (MacPherson, 2005) suggests that direct communication helps to prepare the child and improves how they deal with anxiety and ambivalence. Yet among parents we interviewed, more than 25% of the families had not discussed their documentation status with their children. Lykes et al. (2013) also examined parental communication patterns about their legal status with children. They found a slightly higher proportion of families reported some form communication with their children about their legal status, 78% (Lykes et al., 2013) versus 73% in our study. In both studies, the parents cited the children's age or the desire to protect their children from the fear and uncertainty knowing brings. However, as we also found, children cannot be protected forever from this knowledge because they play an essential role in helping their families navigate life in the United States.

Undocumented parenting also functions to alter family processes, as children often act as a bridge to mainstream culture through language brokering and shifted power roles in the family system dynamic. The experience of relying on their children for language brokering was especially salient for mothers who have lived in the United States for more than 5 years. This was likely at least partly related to the fact that their children are older and have more dominance over English than children in recently arrived families. In addition to brokering language, parents report how anti-immigration policies affect their children emotionally by increasing their sense of responsibility for the family's well-being. For example, the parents report that children often feel responsible for fixing their legal status. Children may also try and deter parents from certain behaviors, such as going out with friends or driving long distances from the house. Findings from our study of undocumented Latino parents in Texas are consistent with findings about the experiences of undocumented Latino parents in other areas of the country, where parents report children to be hypervigilant, fear authority, and experience anxiety about parental deportation (Abrego, 2016; Brabeck & Sibley, 2016; Dreby, 2015; Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016).

Further illustrating how undocumented status alters family processes for parents were their descriptions of feeling disempowered, both in terms of protecting their children but also in terms of their role as parents. Changes in family dynamics occur as a result of permanent

separation, physical or emotional, from children left behind in the home county when undocumented parents migrated to the United States (Dreby, 2012; Menjivar, 2006). Parents who had experienced long-term separation from their children acknowledged the strain that this had on the parent-child relationship, with some participants describing a permanent loss of their status as parents. Parents expressed feeling that their undocumented status prohibits their full protection by the law in ways that, in some cases, their children were able to use to manipulate the power dynamic in the family. This was most apparent in the cases where parents discussed their anxiety that someone (or even their children) may call the police or child protective services. The fear expressed by parents in these scenarios is not unfounded, as there have been multiple cases where parent immigration status has been used as a proxy to determine parent fitness. In one such publicized case, a woman named Angelica was deemed unfit because she crossed over illegally with a premature baby and her parental rights were terminated (Zug, 2014). These news stories instill a sense of fear in parents that, in many cases, changes their approach toward discipline and communication with their children.

Although our study adds key information about how undocumented status shapes parenting behavior to the discourse on undocumented Latino families, it should be considered in the context of certain limitations. First, previous research has suggested that gender is an important factor in the mother and father divisions of labor in the household for undocumented families (see Abrego, 2014; Dreby, 2012, 2015; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012) and in immigration enforcement (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). Although we examined gender differences, our questions were not necessarily sufficient for soliciting gender-based differences in how families navigated undocumented parenting. More research is needed to understand how parent-child interactions and parenting behaviors differ for undocumented mothers and fathers. Second, this study relied on data from interviews with undocumented parents, not from participant observation. Thus, although we present rich information on how parents understand and perform their roles, we were not able to comment on observed interactions of parents with their children or answer questions regarding how parents

actually responded to their children's fears. Future research exploring family processes that employs participant observation methods to understand parent-child interactions and how this context shapes their daily parenting activities would help to deepen this discussion. Third, our use of snowball sampling, although appropriate for hard-to-reach and vulnerable populations (Goldberg & Allen, 2015), may not fully encompass the range of experiences of undocumented parents. Although we feel that the responses were exhaustive, it could be that recruiting participants from other areas could have deepened our results. Finally, researcher positionality must also be taken into account. Although several members of the research team had lived experiences with the undocumented community, the primary researchers' identities as middle-class women in higher education shape the lens through which data were collected and analyzed.

Conclusion

The landscape of immigration enforcement is constantly changing. As we were writing this article, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against President Obama's Executive Order granting work authorization to parents of U.S. citizen children, President Trump was sworn into office, and Texas passed Senate Bill 4 mandating local law enforcement agency compliance with ICE detainer requests and cooperation with ICE or U.S. Border Control. As such, the situations the undocumented Latino parents that we highlight in the study now face is even more precarious than it was when we collected data in 2012 to 2013. Parents do, and will continue to, grapple with the added stress undocumented status adds to the tasks of parenting. Keeping families together should be a priority given that family separation, and even threat of separation, is harmful to children. Even when there is no deportation order in place, life lived within the constraints of "illegality" has consequences on parent well-being, parenting, and parent-child interactions. Professionals could help families manage the uncertainty of their lives, especially with parents who often need guidance in understanding the changing family dynamics.

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