Building Resilience and Identity in a Land of Uncertainty: A Case Study of a DACA Recipient's Journey in the United States

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This qualitative case study explores the lived experience of an adult DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipient through an in-depth examination of their narrative, examining the studys research question, How does DACA status impact the identity, experiences, and future aspirations of undocumented young immigrants?. Through a 40-minute semi-structured interview with a 26-year-old DACA recipient from Costa Rica, this study explored how immigration status shapes identity formation, educational pursuits, and future aspirations. Using thematic analysis and drawing from community cultural wealth theory, the analysis revealed four major themes: *(1) immigration journey and status awareness, (2) educational barriers and resilience, (3) identity formation and cultural integration, and (4) policy perspectives and future efforts.* The participant's narrative reveals complex negotiations between cultural identities, persistent educational challenges, and remarkable resilience in pursuing professional goals despite policy uncertainties. While findings from this single-case study cannot be broadly generalized, the findings provide invaluable insights into how DACA status interweaves with personal, professional, and social identities, contributing to our understanding of undocumented youths lived experiences in the United States. The study's findings have implications for immigration policy reform and support services for DACA recipients.

Keywords: DACA, immigration, qualitative research, case study, identity formation, educational access, undocumented youth

Current Study

While existing research has extensively documented the broader impacts of DACA on recipients educational attainment (Stone (2017)[1], economic mobility (Wong (2017)[2], and psychological well-being (Patler et al. (2021)[3], less attention has been paid to the intimate, lived experiences of individuals DACA recipients navigating these complex systems and policies. This qualitative study aims to provide an in-depth examination of one DACA recipients journey, offering detailed insights into how immigration policies, social structures, and individual resilience intersect in shaping life outcomes. Grounded in the CCW framework, the primary aim of this study was to understand the nuanced experiences of DACA recipients through personal narrative, focusing specifically on: 1) the psychological and social impact of immigration status awareness, 2) the navigation of educational and professional opportunities, 3) the development of cultural identity and belonging, and 4) personal perspectives on policy reform and future aspirations. This single-case study approach allows for an exploration of individual experiences that may be hidden in large-scale studies. As Sidhu and Song (2019)[4] note, the complexity of living with uncertain immigration status creates unique psychological and social challenges that warrant in-depth exploration. By focusing on one participants narrative, this study aims to illuminate the human story behind statistics and policy debates surrounding DACA. Based on previous study results and trends in their conclusions, we hypothesize that DACA status has served to become both an opportunity and limitation for the participants narrative, reflecting the complexity of living in such status as a young, undocumented immigrant.

Introduction

Every year, thousands of families attempt to cross the U.S-Mexico border towards the United States, as migrants or asylum seekers hoping to find a better future in America. According to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, there were over three million encounters, or attempts to cross the border in fiscal year 2023 (October 2022 - September 2023), over two and a half times the number from four years ago (Rattner et al. (2024)[5]. As the number of illegal crossings on the border rises each year, an increasing presence of undocumented families and children currently residing in the United States. There are around 6 or 7 million children residing in the US with at least one undocumented parent as of 2023, with a vast majority of these children being born inside the US (Sidhu & Song (2019)[4]. Of these children from undocumented families, over 500,000 experienced the deportation of at least one parent from 2011 to 2013 (American Immigration Council (2021)[6].

Millions of children in the United States with at least one un-

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documented parent experience various mental struggles arising from a lack of supportive school systems, financial struggles, harmed relations with parents, and an inability to communicate with friends (Gulbas & Zaya (2017)[7]. Moreover, adolescents who experienced the deportation of a family member were associated with significantly higher rates of suicidal thoughts, alcohol usage, and other severe issues such as PTSD (Roche et al. (2020)[8]. With millions of undocumented youth suffering from mental, legal, and social issues arising from their familys illegal status, scholars and practitioners argue that action is required to provide enduring protection and safety to such children in the United States (Terenishi et al. (2015).).

To understand the complex experiences of these immigrant youth, particularly DACA recipients, this study draws from Community Cultural Wealth Theory (CCW) (Yosso (2005), which provides a critical framework for examining how marginalized communities leverage various forms of cultural resources to navigate institutional systems not designed with them in mind. This theoretical framework is especially relevant for understanding DACA recipients' experiences, as they must navigate what Gonzales (2015)[9] terms "liminality"- the struggle to fully transition into adulthood while facing restricted participation in society compared to their U.S.-born counterparts. Rather than viewing DACA recipients through a deficit lens, CCW emphasizes how they utilize various forms of cultural wealth to overcome institutional barriers, leverage family support, and cultivate resources within the broader undocumented community (Allen-Handy & Fainde-Wu (2018)[10].

The challenges faced by undocumented youth and children of undocumented parents are multifaceted. The challenges range from limited access to educational resources to significant psychological impacts (Gulbas & Zaya (2017)[7]. These challenges underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding and support for the DACA recipients. To understand these complex experiences, scholars have increasingly highlighted asset-based frameworks that recognize the strengths and resources within immigrant communities (Rascon-Canales et al. (2024)[11].

Challenges Facing Undocumented Youth

Struggles for undocumented youth expand from lower access to education and healthcare, mental trauma, and threats of family separation, highlighting the harsh realities of their daily lives. Children of undocumented families statistically report lower rates of preschool enrollment than other ethnic groups matched for poverty, immigrant, and minority status. With lower access to education, these children perform lower in reading and mathematics skills (Sidhu & Song (2019)[4]. Alongside educational deficiencies and lost opportunities, these children also face multiple cases of mental trauma. On many occasions, children often described their lives as an obstacle ground due to the constant fears of parental deportation (Gulbas & Zayas (2017)[7].

Furthermore, fears of unintentionally revealing family information have correlated to decreased participation in Medicaid or CHIP (Child Health Insurance Program), as 50% of undocumented immigrants are uninsured compared to less than one in ten citizens (6%) and U.S.-born citizens (8%) as of 2023 KFF (2023)[12]. Furthermore, more struggles, often long-term, can arise once a family member is deported. According to a study from the American Immigration Council examining six U.S. locations, families lost 40 to 90 percent of their income, or an average of 70 percent within six months of a parents arrest or deportation (American Immigration Council (2021)[13]. This immense loss of income within a few months often led to the loss of the familys home, leaving them in poverty and lack of access to many essential resources such as food and shelter.

DACA Implementation and Impact

Due to the number of struggles associated with these undocumented immigrant families and their children, former U.S. President Barack Obama established the DACA Act in 2012 via an executive policy decision aimed at protecting undocumented youth from immigration enforcement (Albright et al. (2018)[14]. According to Christina Fiflis, chairperson of the American Bar Association Commission on Immigration, DACA was granted to individuals who met specific eligibility requirements, such as proof of identity, proof of arrival to the United States before reaching the age of 16, and proof of current or past enrollment in an education system (Fiflis (2013[15]. If a favorable outcome was reached, immigrants were then given temporary relief from deportation, access to work authorization, and access to other benefits, renewable every two years Patler et al. (2013).[3]. As immigrants began receiving benefits from DACA, new perceptions of their futures ultimately inspired them to reevaluate and expand their goals Abrego (2018)[16]. By contrast, those without DACA found themselves solely restricted to jobs in the secondary market, which are temporary, often part-time, low-paying, and dead-end Jones, R. C. (2021)[17].

More than 800,000 people have been granted participation in the DACA Act since its creation, with 81 percent of DACA beneficiaries being Mexican immigrants as of March 2023 Ruiz & Gelatt (2023)[18]. Furthermore, over 28 percent of DACA recipients possessed a Bachelors degree or higher, and of those currently enrolled in an education system, more than 70 percent were pursuing a degree Stone (2017)[1]. As well, another survey of DACA recipients found that over 90 percent of DACA youth are employed, with their median annual earnings being $32,000 (Wong, 2017)[2]. Despite such a high percentage of DACA youth being employed, their low annual earnings place them much below the median income in the United States, which was $74,500 as of 2022 Guzman & Kollar (2023)[19].

Employment amongst immigrants not only helps sustain their

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own lives but also aids the national economy and labor force in the United States. Immigrants notably take an active role in fostering innovation, particularly in areas of science and engineering. Notably, a one percentage point increase in the population share of immigrant college graduates increases patents per capita by 6 percent Hunt & Gauthier-Loiselle (2010)[20]. However, the program's impact remains limited by its temporary nature and ongoing legal challenges. The Trump administrations 2017 attempt to rescind DACA, followed by subsequent court battles, has created a precarious environment for recipients (National Immigration Law Center (2020)[21]. The legality of the DACA Act has continuously changed for the next few years, but it is currently declared as illegal as of 2024.

The complex challenges involving undocumented youth in the United States underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms. While previously, the DACA program has granted a second lifeline for thousands of immigrants, the various drawbacks of the program led to legal concerns, ultimately deeming the program illegal. To fully address the conditions faced by undocumented youth and ensure their prolonged protection, a newly planned reform of policies must be established to provide legality and safety to these adolescents.

Educational Experiences and Identity Development in Institutional Contexts

Studies that examine DACA recipients' experiences in educational settings suggest a complex developmental trajectory influenced by both institutional barriers and identity formation processes. Scholars highlight that while social inclusion may be achieved in early education, DACA recipients increasingly face barriers to important milestones that their documented peers take for granted as they progress through adolescence (Gonzales, 2011, 2015)[9,22]; (O'Neal et al. 2016)[23]. These barriers include limited access to financial aid, uncertainty about educational investments, and difficulties navigating institutional systems (Perez & Cortes (2011)[24]; (Teranishi et al. (2015)[25]. This framework is especially relevant given how DACA recipients must navigate what Gonzales (2015) and other scholars term liminality- the struggle to fully transition into adulthood while facing restricted participation in society compared to their U.S.-born counterparts. This liminal state often leads to what Gonzales coined as early exiters- young people who leave educational systems for employment in the service industry.

Despite these challenges, research highlights resilience among DACA recipients in educational contexts. Many overcome multiple barriers throughout their college journey (Munoz, 2015)[26] by developing sophisticated strategies for managing multiple cultural identities while navigating institutional systems (Siemons et al. 2017)[27]. This resilience is often supported by family networks, such as parental sacrifices that become a source of cognitive capital (Aguilar, 2019)[28]. However, even when achieving educational opportunities like college admission, DACA recipients continue to face uncertainty, fear, prejudice, and stress (Perez & Cortes, 2011)[24]; (Teranishi et al. 2015)[25], highlighting the ongoing nature of these challenges throughout their educational journey.

To understand the complex experiences of DACA recipients, this study draws from the Community Cultural Wealth Theory (CCW) (Yosso, 2005)[29], which explains how marginalized communities leverage various forms of cultural resources to navigate institutional systems not designed with them in mind. Given the precarious sociopolitical context DACA recipients face, particularly following multiple legal challenges to the program (National Immigration Law Center (2021)[21], an asset-based theoretical approach is crucial for understanding how these individuals navigate institutional barriers. CCW identifies six forms of cultural capital particularly significant to DACA recipients experiences: aspirational capital (maintaining hopes despite barriers), familial capital (cultural knowledge nurtured by family), linguistic capital (intellectual skills gained through multiple language experiences), social capital (networks of people and community resources), resistant capital (knowledge and skills developed through challenging inequality), and navigational capital (skills to maneuver through social institutions) (Yosso, 2005)[29]; (Perez Huber, 2009)[24].

Rather than viewing DACA recipients through a deficit lens, CCW emphasizes how they utilize various forms of cultural wealth to overcome institutional barriers, leverage family support, and cultivate resources within the broader undocumented community (Allen-Hangy & Fainde-Wu, 2018)[10]. This theoretical lens helps reveal how DACA recipients draw upon these forms of cultural wealth to pursue educational opportunities despite their unstable immigration status (Flores Morales & Garcia, 2021)[30].

Methods

Research Design

This study employed an instrumental single-case study design (Stake, 1995)[31] to examine the lived experience of a DACA recipient. The instrumental case study approach was chosen because it allows researchers to use a particular case to gain insight into a larger phenomenon or theoretical question (Stake, 2005)[31]. While single-case studies have inherent limitations, they provide valuable insights when the case represents a unique or revelatory perspective (Yin, 2018)[29] or when it exemplifies a broader phenomenon worthy of in-depth investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018)[32].

Emma, a 26-year-old DACA recipient from Costa Rica, was recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with a community organization leader who had established rapport with

DACA recipients who had openly shared their status at community events. This sampling method is particularly appropriate for reaching participants from vulnerable populations while ensuring trust and ethical engagement (Patton, 2015).[33]. The community organization director initially approached potential participants and shared the researcher's contact information. This careful, relationship-based sampling approach aligns with qualitative research methodology when seeking to understand complex social phenomena through detailed individual narratives (Maxwell, 2013)[34], while also prioritizing participant comfort and confidentiality.

Out of the possible participants for this study, Emma was selected as a fitting case to study as her experiences captured a unique narrative to bring to the discussions of previous studies. Whereas many DACA recipients are predominantly of Mexican origin, Emmas origins from Costa Rica place her in distinctions to the larger DACA population, ultimately offering a newer perspective that is both valuable and unique. To ensure ethical rigor of the study, the participants identity has been kept confidential and prioritized to allow the individual to share their experiences without risk of identification. This has been completed through the use of a pseudonym, Emma, which is utilized throughout the paper for the participant. The decision to utilize a pseudonym aligns with many other ethical practices used by scholars in qualitative research, protecting sensible or private information for both methodological and ethical integrity. This measure also helped to create a safer environment for the participant to engage in open dialogue, ensuring that she could speak freely about her experiences without fear of facing unintended consequences.

Data Collection

Data was collected through 40-minute semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol consisted of 14 questions, developed based on existing literature examining DACA recipients' experiences (Patler et al., 2021)[3]; (Abrego, 2018)[16]. The interview was audio-recorded and de-identified with pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the DACA recipient. Semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable for case study research as they allow for both systematic data collection and flexibility to explore emerging themes (Galletta & Cross, 2013)[35].

Interview questions were asked according to five subjects of inquiry: demographics, struggling experiences, community assistance, educational experiences, and future aspirations. For example, the age and year Emma was upon her first arrival to the United States was asked for demographic information in order to gain a general sense of her experiences initially upon entering the United States. Emma was also asked to detail struggles she underwent while being a DACA recipient, both in macro(policies) and micro(stereotypes) forms, followed by how communities around her attempted to assist in these struggles. Emma was also asked to outline the level of education she received while being in the United States, as well as future plans she has in either her education or career.

Data Analysis

Interview data was subjected to a thematic analysis following the methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), with particular attention to how participants' experiences reflected or expanded upon the theoretical constructs of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005)[29]. This process began with thorough familiarization with the data through multiple readings of the interview transcript, allowing for deep engagement with the participant's narrative.

Initial coding followed, where significant statements and meaning units were identified and labeled. These codes were then systematically reviewed and organized to identify emerging patterns and potential themes. Initial coding followed both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductively, codes were developed based on Community Cultural Wealth theory's six forms of capital (aspirational, familial, linguistic, social, resistant, and navigational). Inductively, open coding was used to identify additional patterns and meanings that emerged from the data. This dual approach resulted in an initial set of 47 codes. Examples of initial codes included "language barriers," "family responsibility," "professional identity," and "status awareness moments." The preliminary themes underwent careful review and refinement to ensure they accurately represented the data while maintaining internal coherence and external distinctiveness. To ensure coding reliability and analytical rigor, community center personnel with expertise in qualitative research and immigration studies independently coded the transcript. The personnel and primary researcher then met to compare their coding, discussing any discrepancies until consensus was reached. This cross-checking process led to the refinement of code definitions and the merging of overlapping codes, resulting in a final set of 35 codes. Regular meetings between the researchers throughout the analysis process helped challenge assumptions and explore alternative interpretations of the data.

Each theme was then clearly defined and named to capture its essence and relationship to the research questions. Theme development proceeded through several stages. Initial themes were generated by clustering related codes and examining their relationships. These preliminary themes were then reviewed at two levels: first, checking if themes worked to the coded extracts, and second, assessing their validity about the entire dataset. This process led to several theme refinements, including merging similar themes and discarding themes with insufficient support. For example, an initial theme about "professional aspirations" was eventually merged into the broader theme of "educational barriers and resilience" due to their conceptual

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overlap.

The final phase involved defining and naming themes. Each theme was analyzed to identify its "essence" and how it contributed to understanding the overall narrative. Themes were named to capture both their content and their relationship to the theoretical framework. This analytical process was enriched by constructivist grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2014)[6], which helped maintain sensitivity to how meaning is constructed through the participant's experiences. Additionally, the analysis was informed by existing scholarly work on DACA recipients' experiences (Sidhu & Song, 2019)[4]; (Gulbas & Zayas, 2017)[7], providing a theoretical framework for understanding the emergent themes while remaining open to new insights unique to this case.

Results

Analysis of the interview revealed four major themes that align with and expand upon existing literature on DACA recipients' experiences: Immigration journey and status awareness, Educational barriers and resilience, Identity formation and cultural integration, and Policy perspectives and Future Efforts.

Theme 1: Immigration Journey and Status Awareness

Emmas narrative revealed the complex emotional journey of discovering and understanding her undocumented status. Since coming to America during her early adolescence, she faced challenges from the start. She recalls that elementary school, mainly, was kind of traumatizing because I basically got thrown into school. Without knowing a bit of English, she often felt isolated and struggled to communicate, yet this early experience demonstrates the development of linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005)[29], as Emma had to navigate between Spanish and English: There was one Colombian kid in my class, out of my entire class, that I was able to communicate with, she said, underscoring the language barrier that led to her increased self-awareness of alienation. It felt weird at first. I could sense the differences between, like, me and my friends and my classmates, Emma further stated as she spoke of how her awareness of her status grew as she grew up.

Emma further shared how her family had to wait for citizenship for several years, and cited their undocumented status as the epitome of their complex reality. She emphasized how her whole family has been stuck in this status due to the law:

> My parents are still immigrants, and I have two younger sisters. There used to be a law that granted parents citizenship if you have any children in the country within the age of 18, but it was soon gone. Now, Im kind of stuck, unable to do anything for my parents' citizenship in the country.

On the contrary, Emma shared feelings about how she wouldve felt if she had never migrated to the United States. She believes that everyones immigration story is different, and she personally has nuanced feelings about life in her home country, Costa Rica:

> Its a weird situation. I'm very close with my family in Costa Rica, so I hear a lot about their struggles and what life is like over there. My family always jokes about how if I were to move over there [Costa Rica], I wouldn't survive. But I don't know, I feel like I might be able to adapt.

Her family members in Costa Rica view immigration positively, believing that it serves as an outlet for a plethora of other opportunities. Even years after her immigration to the United States, Emmas connection to her family and to Costa Rica leaves her in a state of uncertainty to this day. Its a foreign feeling, she reflected:

> It's a weird situation to feel like life here might be better, but then you don't know if staying [in Costa Rica] would have been better and you wouldn't have to face so many struggles. Its this strange feeling of wondering how things couldve been so different.

Theme 2: Educational Barriers and Resilience

The impact of DACA status on educational pursuits emerged as a significant theme in Emmas story. When sharing about her greatest educational barrier, she mentioned the timing of DACAs implementation, combined with her isolated experiences in a predominantly White community that may have shaped her educational aspirations and a sense of hope. Since DACA was introduced later in her educational path, Emma only became fully aware of her status in the United States further along in her life. Despite these obstacles, Emma demonstrated remarkable resilience, actively deploying her navigational and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005)[29] as she found alternative pathways to professional success:

> I noticed it more seriously in high school, because the whole DACA program didn't become a thing until around 2017, and I graduated high school in 2016. I also noticed more when I saw that everyone else was going to get their license, and I wasn't.

Emmas late realization became more prevalent when it was time for her to apply for colleges after high school. Due to the limitations held on undocumented youth immigrants at the time, her opportunities were also limited. Ultimately, her status impeded her ability to apply for college and pursue further education. I couldn't apply for colleges without Social Security,

she noted. I never really saw myself going to college because of that reason. This impediment was often the source of isolation for Emma:

> Since I live mainly in a white-predominant town, I could sense the differences between me, my friends, and my classmates. I didnt know what I was going to be able to do; I just thought I would be stuck in the working class, and college didnt seem like an option for me at the time.

She emphasized that with all these barriers, she put down going to college as an option for her future endeavors: In the end, I decided that I was never going to go. Despite these obstacles, Emma demonstrated remarkable resilience as she spoke with others regarding the setbacks she had to face for her educational pursuits:

> I think more directly with me, it's been family and friends who have supported me. [Right now], I'm an esthetician, so I work with a bunch of women, and they always talk to me about their kids and stuff. And sometimes, depending on the client, I'll get in a little bit more depth about my life, and then they're kind of like, oh, like, I've never heard of that, or, like, I didn't even know that that was a thing. So I think just a lot of people in the area are very unaware of what it is to be a DACA recipient or that it's even a thing.

As Emma describes her current occupation as an esthetician, her resilience exemplifies that she didnt surrender to her educational setbacks and continued to pursue her future aspirations. In her role, Emma occasionally connects with her clients about her personal life and has come to realize how little people in her community are aware of DACA and what it means to be a DACA recipient. Despite this, her efforts to connect with her clients highlight her efforts to educate others on her immigration journey.

Emmas experience with higher education particularly highlights the complex intersection of immigration status and academic aspirations. This aligns with Stone's (2017)[1] findings about DACA recipients' educational persistence despite institutional barriers. Notably, immigrants have even been shown to generally have a positive impact on long-run economic growth in the United States by expanding the labor force, in turn contributing to a younger generation of workers against an aging native-born population (Stone, 2017)[1].

Theme 3: Identity Formation and Cultural Integration

Emmas narrative revealed sophisticated navigation between multiple cultural identities, highlighting the complex realities faced by undocumented immigrant families in the U.S. Emma described how early she had left her adolescence due to her familys status. She delved into how, as a teenager, she became the chauffeur of the family, taking on the driving responsibilities because of her parents inability to drive legally:

> For my parents, not having a driving license limited how they could move around for work and who and what jobs they could take. [Hence], I had to drive them everywhere. Being so young and my parents not being able to drive, it was a lot. I dont think a lot of people realize how not having a source of transportation affects everything.

This role exemplifies how familial capital operates bidirectionally in immigrant families - while Emma received support from her family, she also contributed to the family's navigation of institutional barriers through her own acquired privileges under DACA. This mutual exchange of support and responsibilities demonstrates how DACA recipients often develop sophisticated strategies for leveraging their limited legal privileges to benefit their entire family unit. Taking on such adult responsibilities at a young age has been able to shape Emmas sense of self, but has simultaneously blurred the boundaries between her adolescence and adulthood. This role has not only forced her to mature quickly but has also made her recognize the cultural and systemic barriers of her family early in her life. The weight of her responsibilities highlights the unique pressures many children of immigrant families must endure, as they must cope with familial obligations and integrate into a new American society.

Emmas reflection on her identity was particularly shocking. Because she had to adapt to life in the United States so early into her life, her sense of connection to her homeland, Costa Rica, remains distant. However, her lack of U.S. citizenship further complicates her sense of belonging, leaving her connection to the United States equally tenuous.

> I can tell you so many things about the U.S. more than I can tell you about the country that I'm originally from because my entire life has been here. I lived in my country until I was four years old. Everything until 26 has been here [in the U.S.], so it's weird not being considered a citizen of the country. Were in a place you've spent basically your entire life. You don't know anything else, because, really, you're not allowed to.

In the end, Emma stated that the main cause of these complications is bound to continue due to the arbitrary nature of eligibility for her and her family. This has restrained Emma and her family from forming a strong sense of identity for themselves:

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> There are so many things that we [DACA recipients] are not allowed to do that definitely should be allowed. In reality, we're stuck in this limbo, with no route towards citizenship, which is the main goal that we all fight for. So many people, so many kids, especially, are brought into America without knowing what the limitations are of not having any sort of, like paperwork in the country, and it really limits you on a lot of aspects of life.

Emmas experience of maintaining connections to both cultures while developing a unique identity reflects Abrego's (2018)[16] findings about DACA recipients' cultural adaptation strategies. Her unique position as both an insider of American culture and an outsider of legal status has shaped her understanding of belonging and identity. Despite the struggles to form a cultural bridge in her new life and obtain a new sense of identity for herself, Emma has navigated through her troubles with resilience, reconciling cultural heritage and the restrictions placed by her new environment. Emmas growth serves as an example for other undocumented individuals to follow and overcome their own complications in a system that hinders their potential.

Theme 4: Policy Perspectives and Future Efforts

When asked what advice she would give to DACA recipients and other young immigrants in similar situations, Emma highlighted the importance of communicating with others, demonstrating her sophisticated development of navigational capital. Although Emma has maintained stable employment with her occupation as an esthetician, she recognizes that her status leaves her in limbo as she gains some, but certainly not all, rights as a U.S. citizen:

> DACA has me in a limbo where I do have some rights as citizens, but not all. The main one [issue] is that I can't leave the country. I'm not granted access back in so Im unable to visit family that I have in Costa Rica. Traveling outside of the country isn't an option. Obviously, with it [DACA], it has also changed my life for the better, because I have a working permit, I was able to get my license and, those are big things that you need.

Her emphasis on strategic self-disclosure demonstrates sophisticated navigational capital, as she has learned to carefully manage when and how to share her status in ways that build understanding while protecting herself. This advice reflects how DACA recipients develop and share strategies for navigating institutional barriers while maintaining their emotional wellbeing. Notably, she expressed her complaints on how undocumented immigrants are unable to vote despite the supposed grants they are given by DACA. She noted that even in the voting process I'm not allowed to do anything in the voting process for the country, which is crazy considering that we live in the country just like any other U.S. citizens. She contrasted this to the other privileges granted to her: *I'm able to drive, I'm able to work, but I cant vote.*

Emma also spoke of who was willing to talk to her in times of need when she had doubts over her future aspirations. She reflected how they, just like her, had the same laments over what factors could potentially be improved. She believes that without efforts by the government to help protect immigrants like her and her family, no solution can be conciliated: With me, it's been mostly family and friends who have supported me along the way, and they feel that same [with me] that there should be some sort of passage, or a way to be able to get full citizenship. In the predominantly white town I live in, its quite hard to bring up that topic often amongst strangers.

Finally, when asked what advice she would give to DACA recipients and other young immigrants in similar situations, Emma highlighted the importance of communicating with others in times of struggle. Even when policies may be against them, Emma emphasized the value of maintaining emotional ground and connecting with the right people to navigate through difficulties and complexities:

You hold in sometimes, and even though its more of a legal situation, I don't think a lot of people realize the emotional toll it takes on a lot of people. You should definitely not be afraid to speak about it with your friends and people who just just don't have any idea [about DACA]. In the end, it is our responsibility to educate other people on it. Explaining your experiences, for a lot of people, could seem a bit embarrassing, but it's also a situation that's so out of your control that talking about it with people who don't know is the biggest thing. Just letting people be aware and connecting with people is really the best way. It's better than holding everything in.

These themes interweave throughout Emmas narrative, demonstrating how immigration status, education, identity, and aspirations form a complex web of experience. This interconnection of themes reflects the multifaceted and interconnected impact of DACA status on recipients' lives (Patler et al. 2021)[3]; (Rascon-Canales et al. 2024)[11]. The findings particularly mirror Rascon-Canales and colleagues (2024)[11] recent study of DACA students' experiences following policy uncertainties, which similarly identified the intricate relationship between status awareness, educational persistence, and identity formation.

Discussion

This single-case study aimed to explore the lived experiences of a DACA recipient to highlight how immigration status intersects with personal development, educational opportunities, and identity development. While Emma's narrative offers valuable insights, it is important to recognize that her experience

represents just one perspective within the remarkably diverse spectrum of DACA recipients' experiences. Her story as a Costa Rican immigrant in a predominantly white community differs significantly from the experiences of Mexican immigrants, who comprise 81% of DACA recipients (Ruiz & Gelatt, 2023)[18], or those living in communities with large immigrant populations. Drawing on the Community Cultural Wealth Theory (CCW), Emmas narrative demonstrates the ways she has deployed various forms of cultural capital- particularly aspirational, familial, navigational, and resistant capital- to navigate institutional barriers with resilience in the face of structural constraints. The findings of the study underscore several forms of cultural wealth identified by Yosso (2005)[29].

Emmas aspirational capital is evident in her pursuit of professional certification as an esthetician despite educational barriers. In addition, her familial capital manifests in both the support she receives from and provides to her family. The ways she develops her paths to navigating capital are evident in her strategic approach to managing institutional barriers and building client relationships in her professional life. However, the manifestation of these forms of capital likely varies significantly across different cultural contexts, geographic locations, and individual circumstances. For instance, while Emma's aspirational capital is evident in her pursuit of professional certification as an esthetician despite educational barriers, other DACA recipients might channel this form of capital differently based on their unique circumstances, available resources, and community support systems (Yosso, 2005)[29].

Emma's experience of status discovery and its impact on her educational trajectory provides important insights into what "transition to illegality" (Gonzales, 2011, p. 602)[9]. Her realization of status differences became particularly apparent during high school when she recognized her inability to obtain a driver's license like her peers, consistent with prior research on how undocumented youth become aware of their stigmatized status through everyday institutional barriers (Gonzales, 2015)[22]. It may be that status awareness often crystallizes during key developmental transitions, particularly during adolescence when youth begin engaging with institutional systems that require documentation (Arnett, 2001)[36]; (Gonzales, 2011)[9]; (Surez-Orozco et al. 2015)[37]. The impact of this discovery process on educational trajectories has been well-documented in previous studies, which note how awareness of undocumented status often leads to reduced educational aspirations and increased anxiety about the future (Teranishi et al. 2015)[25]; (Perez & Cortes, 2011)[24]. While this aligns with prior research on how undocumented youth become aware of their stigmatized status through everyday institutional barriers (Gonzales, 2015)[22], it's crucial to note that the timing and nature of this discovery process may vary significantly among DACA recipients depending on their family circumstances, community context, and available support systems. However, Emma's narrative extends our understanding of this phenomenon in several important ways.

Emmas experience in a predominantly White community adds complexity to the existing literature on status discovery. Unlike DACA recipients in areas with larger immigrant populations who might find support in shared experiences, Emma navigated this transition in an environment where few understood her situation and experiences. This isolation may have intensified her awareness of status differences while simultaneously limiting access to peer support networks commonly described in urban studies of DACA recipients (Surez-Orozco et al. 2015)[37]. While this isolation may have intensified her awareness of status differences, it represents just one possible context among many where DACA recipients build their lives. Recipients in urban areas with established immigrant communities, for instance, might have access to different support networks and face distinct challenges not captured in Emma's narrative (Gonzales, 2015)[22].

Moreover, Emma's response to these challenges demonstrates what we term "educational advocacy capital" - a specific form of resistant capital through which DACA recipients transform their personal experiences into opportunities for public education. This deliberate choice to educate others represents both a form of resistance to marginalization and a sophisticated deployment of navigational capital in predominantly White spaces. Rather than remaining silent about her status, Emma may have developed the capacity to translate her experiences into accessible narratives that foster greater understanding among those unfamiliar with DACA. This development of educational advocacy capital appears particularly significant in communities where immigration status is rarely discussed openly. The finding extends our understanding of how DACA recipients not only navigate institutional barriers but actively work to transform their social environments through strategic self-disclosure and education.

The findings also reveal important avenues to understanding identity formation in the context of limited citizenship rights. Emma's description of being in limbo - knowing more about the U.S. than her birth country yet lacking full citizenship rights - exemplifies what scholars term juridical liminality (Menjvar, 2006)[34]. Emma's narrative powerfully reflects this concept through her description of being caught between worlds. It may be that she was deeply embedded in American society, yet simultaneously being unable to claim full citizenship rights exemplifies the complex psychological terrain DACA recipients must navigate.

This study was completed by a singular author, whose personal experiences and perspective on immigration correlate to better understanding the impact of DACA recipients immigration status in the United States. Being a first-generation Asian American youth growing up in the United States, his experiences bring a deeper understanding of the challenges and resilience involved in adapting to a new community. His background as a Korean-American teenager has shaped his insights on the com-

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plexities of maintaining his identity, fostering greater awareness of the social and personal challenges encountered by youth immigrants. This positionality offers his choice of approach to this study, offering his perspectives on the topic and the broader issue at hand by examining DACA recipients and their immigration experiences.

To mitigate potential biases during the studys data collection and analysis, the researcher took deliberate steps to ensure fairness. Recognizing that while being a first-generation immigrant offers informative insight to the study, it may differ significantly from those of DACA recipients. Hence, he made efforts to avoid overgeneralization of themes. Additionally, throughout the paper, he consistently utilized cross-referencing of multiple sources to reduce the influence of personal bias while adding credibility to his findings and conclusions.

Limitations

This study contains several important limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The single-case design, while providing deep insights into one individual's experience, limits the generalizability of findings to the broader DACA recipient population (Yin, 2018)[29]. Emma's experience as a Costa Rican immigrant may differ significantly from the experiences of Mexican immigrants, who make up the majority of DACA recipients (Ruiz & Gelatt, 2023)[18].

A significant limitation of the study design is its inability to control for key variables such as socioeconomic status (SES), that may significantly impact educational access, family dynamics, and professional opportunities. Yet, the single-case design makes it impossible to analyze how varying levels of SES might shape DACA recipients experiences differently. Similarly, the study cannot account for different levels of acculturation among DACA recipients, which could substantially influence their identity formation and cultural integration experiences. The study also lacks a comprehensive examination of how intersecting identity factors beyond immigration status shape DACA recipients' experiences. While Emma's narrative touches on gender dynamics within her professional context as an esthetician, the study's design limits our ability to systematically analyze how gender, socioeconomic background, and other identity markers intersect with immigration status to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. This intersectional perspective could provide valuable insights into how different identity factors combine to create unique challenges and opportunities for DACA recipients.

In addition, the timing of the study is also significant. The interview captures Emma's experience at a specific moment in DACA's policy history, and given the ongoing legal challenges to DACA, participants interviewed at different times might express different perspectives about their status (National Immigration Law Center (2020)[21]. Additionally, participants who are willing to share their stories may have different experiences than those who feel unable to participate in research due to fear or other concerns (Patton, 2015)[33]. Given that community composition can significantly affect immigrants' social integration and access to resources (Flores Morales & Garcia, 2021)[30], Emmas experience in a predominantly White community may not reflect the experience of DACA recipients in other locations with a larger immigrant population and ethnic enclave. Despite these limitations, this case study provides valuable insights into how DACA status may shape individual experiences and identity formation in ways that can inform both theory and practice.

Conclusion and Implications

This study extends prior research and our understanding of how DACA recipients navigate complex institutional systems while developing personal and professional identities. While findings from a single case cannot be broadly generalized, Emma's narrative deepens our understanding of how DACA status shapes individual experiences within existing policy frameworks. Rather than viewing DACA recipients through a deficit lens common in traditional cultural capital theories (Bourdieu, 1986), our analysis demonstrates how individuals like Emma actively deploy various forms of cultural wealth to overcome institutional barriers and construct meaningful lives despite policy constraints (Yosso, 2005)[29]; (Prez et al. 2018)[33].

The findings from this study suggest several considerations for practitioners working directly with DACA recipients. Emma's experience navigating educational barriers highlights the importance of targeted support systems within educational institutions that recognize the unique challenges DACA recipients face (Muoz, 2015)[26]; (Surez-Orozco et al. 2015)[37]. Her narrative particularly illustrates how status awareness can impact educational trajectories, suggesting that counselors and educators should be prepared to provide guidance during key transitional periods when documentation requirements may first reveal status limitations.

Mental health providers working with DACA recipients in predominantly White communities may need to consider the unique stressors that arise from navigating status disclosure in environments where understanding of DACA may be limited (Siemons et al. 2017).)[27]; (Gulbas & Zayas (2017)[7]. Emma's strategic approach to discussing her status with clients demonstrates the complex emotional labor involved in such navigation. Community organizations could potentially play important roles in providing information and support networks, helping individuals develop strategies for managing status disclosure while maintaining their cultural wealth and identity (Allen-Handy & Farinde-Wu, 2018)[10].

While this single case cannot prescribe broad policy changes, it illuminates how existing policies shape individual lives and suggests areas for further research. Future studies might exam-

ine how geographic and community contexts influence DACA recipients' experiences, as Emma's narrative indicates that community demographic composition significantly affects how recipients navigate their status (Gonzales, 2015)[22], (Flores Morales & Garcia, 2021)[30]. Longitudinal research could better capture how identity development and professional aspirations evolve over time as recipients move through different life stages and policy contexts (Gonzales, 2016)[22].

Emma's experience also raises important questions about how DACA recipients develop and deploy different forms of cultural capital across varied community contexts. Her development of what we term "educational advocacy capital" in a predominantly White community suggests that future research might explore how different environments shape the strategies DACA recipients use to navigate their status. Studies examining these variations across different geographic and cultural contexts could provide valuable insights for practitioners and researchers seeking to understand and support DACA recipients' diverse experiences. Future research directions should focus on examining how geographic and community contexts shape DACA recipients' experiences, as Emma's narrative suggests that the demographic composition of communities may significantly influence how recipients navigate their status (Gonzales, 2015)[35]; (Flores Morales & Garcia, 2021)[30].

Understanding DACA recipients not merely as policy subjects but as complex individuals navigating through multiple identities and institutional systems remains crucial for developing more effective support systems (Perez & Cortes, 2011)[24]. While broader policy discussions continue, practitioners and researchers can work to better understand and support the various ways DACA recipients like Emma deploy their cultural wealth to build meaningful lives within existing frameworks. This case study, while limited in scope, contributes to that understanding by illuminating how one individual's navigation of DACA status reflects broader patterns in identity development, cultural capital deployment, and institutional navigation identified in previous research.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

1. Demographic questions: When did you first come to the U.S.? How old were you? What state did you grow up in? Family relationship?
2. What were some common struggles you underwent while being in this situation? What were these challenges in macro- (policies) and micro- (stereotypes) forms? Have these been consistent or changing over time? How did you overcome these complications?
3. How has your community helped you, if at all, in standing up against your situation? Do you believe more support is necessary for immigrants like you undergoing these issues?
4. How was your educational experience? Were you able to attend higher levels of education, such as college? How did being a DACA recipient impact your educational pursuits?
5. What plans do you have in the future if you have any unfulfilled goals, in terms of education or career wise?

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