Stressing Identification and Identifying Stress: The Psychological Well-Being of California’s Undocumented College Students

Ivania Enriquez Perez
Dr. Marya Endriga, faculty mentor

ABSTRACT
Serving the educational needs of undocumented immigrant students in higher education is a highly polarized topic. Although there is much controversy, little research is available regarding undocumented students in California or their psychological well-being. This study uses surveys to measure psychological well-being, acculturation stress, coping and feelings about documentation status in undocumented students as compared to their documented, naturalized, or native peers. This study results reveal that undocumented students experience more negative feelings regarding their legal status than documented students. In addition, acculturation stress is negatively associated with psychological well-being. Despite several study limitations, further psychological research with this unique population of college students appears warranted.

Although the United States is considered by many to be the land of the free and a place where dreams come true, there is still a large group of individuals who live in fear, insecurity and invisibility: unauthorized or undocumented foreign born immigrants (Perez 2009). In 2008, there were 39.9 million foreign born immigrants, 11.9 million of which were undocumented (Passel and Cohn 2009). About three-quarters (76%) of unauthorized immigrants are of a Hispanic/Latino background and the majority of this group (59%) are from Mexico (Passel and Cohn 2009). With such a large group within our society, the research question this study attempts to answer is the following: Are AB 540 students more susceptible to anxiety and emotional difficulties as a result of their legal status?

LITERATURE REVIEW
One significant barrier that undocumented immigrants face is access to education (Perez 2009). The 1982 Texas case of Plyler v. Doe ruled that undocumented immigrant children could not be denied access to public education (Frum 2007). This case found that undocumented immigrants imposed no significant financial burden, but that immigration status would
create a “lifetime of hardship” and a permanent “underclass” in a nation where education and social mobility is so highly interconnected that a college degree is considered the “ticket to the middle class” (Frum 2007). Despite the success of *Plyler v. Doe*, barriers to successful completion of higher education remain. There are approximately 65,000 unauthorized high school graduates each year, out of these only 13,000 enroll in college (Contreras 2009). For Hispanic/Latinos, 29% of undocumented immigrants have had less than a 9th grade education and only 18% have a high school degree (Passel and Cohn 2009). In this group, little support exists for the youth and young adults, often because their parents do not know how to help them get an education and access resources; for example, parents may not realize that their children are allowed to attend college regardless of their legal status (Contreras 2009).

Another major obstacle affecting undocumented young adults is lack of identification. Having an identification card or a driver’s license opens doors to a number of very important social experiences for this age group, such as getting into a bar or ordering an alcoholic drink at a restaurant. The simple act of going out with friends can be nerve-wracking and stressful and these young people often opt to remain at home, becoming increasingly socially isolated. Verderosa (2010) conducted an interview study that helps to illustrate the feelings of isolation experienced by undocumented students. One participant expressed, “A lot of your friends want you to go out with them when you turn 21, but you can’t. You end up isolating yourself” (Verderosa 2010). Loneliness, social anxiety, and social fears were all higher among Mexican-born immigrants than U.S. born peers (Polo and Lopez 2009). Lacking identification affects many other aspects of daily life as well, including limited access to jobs, social services, loans and lines of credit, which significantly limit upward social mobility (Gonzales 2008). Undocumented students are unable to fully participate in mainstream professional society due to continued barriers to resolution of their legal status; thus, they are denied integration into middle or upper social stratum (Martinez-Calderon 2009) as well as opportunities to socially, economically and politically mobilize and organize (Green 2003).

Undocumented students also appear to struggle with acculturation stress and issues of identity (Polo and Lopez 2009). Labeling themselves as AB 540 students works as an identifier, as Donaji’s explains, ‘I don’t want to say I don’t have papers so I use it as a cover … they are not just seeing the day workers, not just housekeepers, but students like them,’ giving students a new sense of identity and in social status (Gavilanes 2007, 21). Many students arrived to this country as young children and generally have mastered the language, customs and culture. However, they often feel as if they live in
two worlds but do not completely belong to, or identify with, either one. Undocumented students are on one hand criminalized for their status, yet on the other hand legitimated for defying the odds and achieving success (Abrego 2008). As Dozier (2001) explains, undocumented students may work numerous hours and may not have access to school supplies, such as textbooks. Being a subgroup within the student body, undocumented students experience not only the challenges every college student must endure, as well as challenges regarding their immigration status (Dozier 2001).

Undocumented students are constantly reminded of their legal status when engaged in the regular tasks of daily life. This affects them socially and emotionally, as they feel unwelcomed, rejected, hopeless and without control over their situation (Gavilanes 2007). Although these experiences when encountered separately may not hinder their well-being, they are added to the normal stresses experienced by all college-age students, such as escalating school fees, difficulty obtaining federal or state financial aid and pressure to excel in academics. In addition, 59% of undocumented immigrants have no health insurance (Passel and Cohn 2009). Their problems are compounded by the fact that undocumented students are less likely to seek help for the negative effects of stress on their emotional and psychological well-being as compared with documented students (Passel and Cohn 2009). Many undocumented students suffer serious psychological and emotional distress, and are reluctant to disclose their status for fear of deportation (Drachman 2006). An AB 540 student interviewed by Gavilanes (2007, 22) described this as a burden that affects them “emotionally, psychologically, and economically, all this things get in my way of taking ownership of my education and becoming a scholar when I have to worry about surviving.”

One significant attempt to support undocumented students was Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540), which was signed by California Governor Gray Davis on October 12, 2001. This law qualifies all long-term California residents, regardless of immigration status, as exempt from nonresident tuition in the state’s public colleges and universities (Firebaugh 2001; Abrego 2008). The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), which was established in 1968, is a community organization promoting social change advocacy and offers legal services to Latinos in the community. MALDEF has guides and up to date information regarding immigrants’ legal issues posted on its Web site for the benefit of California communities. According to MALDEF, AB 540 students qualify as such by having attended a California high school for at least three years and having graduated or attained a general education diploma (GED). They must also be currently enrolled in a California community college, or public university. The MALDEF (2011) Web site also states that eligible students must submit
an affidavit to the school they plan to attend, stating their qualifications under AB 540, and that they have or will file an application to adjust their immigration status. Finally, these students had to have been brought to California when they were younger than 18-years old.

Despite the victory for undocumented students, other legislative attempts to provide assistance to undocumented students have not been successful, such as California’s SB 1460, which would allow AB 540 students to access state and federal financial aid (Cedillo 2010). Undocumented students would be able attain the Board of Governors (BOG) Fee Waiver, in which eligible California residents can get their full fees waived (Folsom Lake College 2011). Indeed, there has been a great deal of resistance when it comes to the immigrants’ rights, as shown by bills such as Arizona’s SB 1070, which was signed into law in 2010 and is considered one of the most controversial anti-illegal immigration measures in recent history (Senate Bill 1070 2010). For example, SB 1070 made it illegal for non-citizens to be in the state without documentation or to shelter, hire or transport undocumented immigrants (Wessler 2011). The bill requires police officers to check the immigration status of anyone suspected of being undocumented, allowing an official to require proof of documentation based on superficial appearance (i.e., racial profiling) or, as the bill states, ‘reasonable suspicion that the person is an alien’ (Senate Bill 1070 2011). Future research that furthers our understanding of the psychological and emotional experiences of undocumented college students is important, not just for its mental health applications, but also for its legal implications. Specifically, federal legislation such as the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) that would grant residency status to undocumented students who arrived in the U.S. as unauthorized minors has been reintroduced to the Senate (FIREbaugh 2001). This legislation would enable undocumented students to resolve their immigration status and pursue their professional careers without fear of deportation or discrimination due to their legal status (Gonzales 2006).

Psychological research with Latino/Mexican American youth and young adults, regardless of documentation status, has revealed several areas of mental health risk (Polo and Lopez 2009). Physical health and discrimination has been negatively associated with acculturation stress, even more so on individuals who lack social support (Finch and Vega 2003). For example, Polo and Lopez (2009) found that Mexican American adolescents had higher levels of depression, suicidal ideation, and feelings of hopelessness than other minority groups, such as African Americans. Issues that have impacted these students’ lives include difficulties with education, language skills, and the ability to adequately negotiate the acculturation process. They may have
also encountered acculturation stress, termed by Polo and Lopez (2009) as
difficulties encountered by individuals coming into contact with another
culture. Polo and Lopez (2009) also investigated contextual factors associated
with mental health and legal status. They concluded that immigrant Mexican
American youth exhibited higher levels of internalizing distress compared to
U.S.-born Mexican American students (Polo and Lopez 2009). Immigrant
youth experience higher levels of isolation and lower self-esteem compared
to non-immigrant peers (Polo and Lopez 2009).

Nafiz et al. (2009) explain in their report on stress and coping among
minority college students that Latino college students are faced with many
stressors including acculturation stress. Latino students suffering from stress
report problems with sleep, anxiety and concentration and perform worse
in assignments and exams than European peers. In addition, they tend to
be less satisfied with college and are more likely to drop out of school.
Latino students cope with stress by seeking support from friends and family,
although many use less healthy coping strategies such as using alcohol
(Nafiz et al. 2009). Nafiz et al. (2009) also reported on research showing the
association between discrimination and stress; for example, experiences of
being accused of law breaking or cheating were associated with increased
psychological distress and depression.

Finch, Kolody and Vega (2000) also found a direct relationship between
discrimination and depression. According to their research, discrimination
is an intrinsic part of a minority student’s life on a daily basis. For
undocumented students, discriminatory experiences arise from within their
ethnic group (i.e., from documented or native peers) as well as outside of
their ethnic group. Coping with discrimination is considered to be a chronic
life stressor (Finch et al. 2000), which AB 540 students deal with on a daily
basis. Psychological stress is associated with investing into education; the flip
side is the outcomes, which include increased public and social prestige as
well as better health outcomes (Flores 2010).

The present study attempts to increase our understanding of the
psychological experiences of the growing population of undocumented
college students. Specifically it was expected that, in comparison to
documented or native students, undocumented students would report higher
acculturation stress and negative feelings about their documentation status
and poorer psychological well-being and coping.

METHODS
Research participants consisted of a total of 43 California college students,
mostly from a Northern California university. Within that group there
were 31 documented students and 12 undocumented AB 540 students. Documented students were classified as such by possessing residency, student visa or U.S. citizenship. Undocumented students were those who lacked these residency, visa or citizenship qualifications. There were 27 females and 16 males and all participants were of Mexican/Latino background. Most reside in Northern California, but some reside in Central and Southern California. The mean age of the participants was 23.5 years ($SD = 4.1$).

**Materials**
The S.A.F.E. Acculturation Stress Scale (Mena et al. 1987) is a measure of acculturation stress, defined as negative stressors experienced by immigrant individuals as they acculturate to their host culture (Amer 2005). It has 24 items measured on a 6-point Likert scale in which $0 = \text{have not experienced}; 1 = \text{not at all stressful}; 2 = \text{somewhat stressful}; 3 = \text{moderately stressful}; 4 = \text{very stressful};$ and $5 = \text{extremely stressful}$. The scale was developed with undocumented and documented Hispanic college students in a study of acculturation stress and coping (Mena et al. 1987). The reliability of the scale has been established in a study of Arab American mental health (Amer 2005) with a Cronbach’s alpha of .89.

The General Wellbeing Scale (Faye et al. 2005) is an 18-item scale developed to assess self-representations of subjective well-being and distress (Fazio 1977). The test-retest reliability of the scale was .85. The scale’s reliability has been established by previous studies, showing satisfactory internal consistency coefficients and item-to-total correlations; the high internal consistency indicated the scale was homogeneous and measuring general psychological state (Fazio 1977).

The Feelings About Documentation Scale (FAD) describes one’s feelings regarding legal status and was developed by the researcher based on the existing immigration literature and personal experience (Appendix A). The instrument has 40 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale in which $1 = \text{never}; 2 = \text{rarely}; 3 = \text{sometimes}; 4 = \text{most of the time};$ and $5 = \text{all the time}$. Initial support for the scale’s reliability is shown by a Cronbach’s alpha of .89 in the current study.

The brief COPE inventory (Carver 1997) is a 29-item scale that measures how individuals cope with stressors and other life problems. It uses a 4-point Likert scale in which $1 = \text{I haven’t been doing this at all}; 2 = \text{I’ve been doing this a little bit}; 3 = \text{I’ve been doing this a moderate amount};$ and $4 = \text{I’ve doing this a lot}$. The brief COPE inventory was developed using a sample of community residents in the process of coping with an extremely stressful natural catastrophe, i.e. Hurricane Andrew (Carver 1997). Alpha reliabilities averaged across three administrations of the COPE sample met or exceeded .50 (Carver 1997).
In addition, demographic information was collected from each participant on gender, age, college year, legal status, and families' location (whether or not they had family living nearby; Appendix B).

**Procedure**

Participants were identified and invited through Latino/a student organizations, word-of-mouth, “snowball” sampling (whereby participants invite friends, family), and social networking sites. Most of the participants came from the MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) club, Chicano/Latino Recognition Ceremony Committee, STAND (Scholars Taking Action for a Nationwide Dream) and classroom presentations, as well as from other area campuses. Each participant received a research consent form, which highlighted all the possible risks involved in the research, a packet of four surveys and a demographics sheet. Data were collected in two ways: in person and online (through surveygizmo.com). This researcher visited the organizations and personally oversaw the data collection; this researcher also gave these participants the online address for the survey, so they could ask their friends to complete the online version. Online surveying was validated through the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPPA), which can be found at http://www.surveygizmo.com/the-fine-print.

For the in-person data collection, this researcher distributed the consent forms for the participants to sign. The survey was conducted in a public environment (i.e., student organization meeting rooms) that appeared to be most comfortable for the participants. After participants have completed the surveys and the packets were collected, the researcher debriefed the participants, answered any questions they had and handed out a debriefing sheet. The same debriefing sheet was uploaded to surveygizmo.com for participants who took the survey online.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations (SD) of all study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legal Status</th>
<th>SAFE Mean (SD)</th>
<th>GWB Mean (SD)</th>
<th>FAD Mean (SD)</th>
<th>COPE Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>45.00 (17.78)</td>
<td>57.00 (14.00)</td>
<td>120.75 (20.69)</td>
<td>72.17 (16.60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 shows one-way ANOVAs comparing undocumented and documented students on the SAFE, GWB, FAD and COPE variables.
Figure 1. Comparisons of documented and undocumented students

Undocumented students had significantly higher FAD scores than documented students (\(F[1, 42] = 19.67, p < .000\)). No significant differences were found for the SAFE, GWB or COPE. Pearson correlations among study variables (Table 2) showed a significant negative correlation between the SAFE and GWB (\(r = -.43, p < .005\)), indicating that higher acculturation stress was associated with lower psychological well-being. Correlations that were marginally significant (\(p < .10\)) suggested that acculturation stress may be associated with negative feelings about documentation and negative feelings about documentation may be associated with lower psychological well-being.
Table 2. Correlations among study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SAFE</th>
<th>GWB</th>
<th>FAD</th>
<th>COPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAFE</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-0.43**</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GWB</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-0.27*</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAD</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPE</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * = p < 0.10; ** = p < 0.005

**DISCUSSION**

There is a scarcity of psychological research conducted with undocumented college students, especially about their mental and psychosocial states. They are a growing population for which legal and public policy issues are under current, hot debate and which may ultimately create a significant impact on our society. Results from the current study suggest that further examination of the psychological well-being of AB540 students is necessary. A trend in the results from the FAD scale, showing that negative feelings about documentation may be related to higher acculturation stress and lower psychological well-being suggests that measuring experiences specific to legal status issues may be important. Although the scale is new and developed by this researcher, the finding that undocumented students show significantly different scores than documented students provides initial support for the scale’s validity. More research is needed to better inform the public about the needs of undocumented students and how they manage to stay afloat in our society.

**LIMITATIONS**

Several limitations were present in the current study. Using two methods of participant recruitment and data collection resulted in possible methodological confounds. Specifically, there were more undocumented students in the online survey procedure than in the in-person procedure. It may be that undocumented students preferred the increased anonymity of the online version and, if so, future studies might benefit from using the online procedure only. Another potential methodological confound was that randomization of surveys was done for the in-person procedure, but not the online procedure in which surveys were completed in the same order with every participant. Also, there were more incomplete surveys in the online procedure than the in-person procedure, which also may have affected the study results. Participants may not have been used to online surveys, which may have been confusing, and the lack of in-person instructions may have increased participant nervousness and may have affected their responses. In
addition to problems with data collection, the sample size in the current study was small and used convenience rather than random sampling, which did not allow for confidence in the study results or their ability to be generalized. This was most evident in the correlations, which were primarily of marginal significance. Most of the participants were from the Sacramento area, which means that geographical variables might have contributed to the results. Also, the fact that the surveys were presented in English only may have affected the responses of participants for whom Spanish may have been their primary or preferred language.

Although there were many limitations to this study, there are also some benefits. There is limited research and information about AB 540 students. As these individuals come out of the shadows, they deserve attention, especially regarding their emotional and psychological needs. With this research, the author hopes to begin building awareness of this unique group and their significant contributions to this country, the state and our communities. Although the current study focuses on psychological concerns of undocumented students, it is also important to appreciate their strengths as a cultural group. Undocumented Mexican American students tend to be community oriented and collectivistic as a whole and many return to their families and communities after college, giving back by inspiring and supporting their siblings and friends (Contreras 2009). They also inform their community members of the processes by which an education can be attained or other forms of help may be found, even when one lives with undocumented legal status. As Contreras (2009, 618) stated, they are more likely to “give back to their communities and foster economic growth.” Giving back to their community serves as a motivator, as Joel, a student interviewed by Gavilanes, expressed; “one of my motivations to pursue education is being a role model, going back to my community, to kids and telling them education is possible” (2007, 26). Thus, blaming the undocumented for our country’s economic downfall, displacement of other American students or for any other reason is not an accurate claim. Continued research in this area could also lead to information for policy makers by shedding light on the untold stories of undocumented students.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research with undocumented students could examine the presence of mental illness and psychological distress, especially as it relates to feelings about their legal status. On that note, the Feelings About Documentation scale (Appendix A), which was developed for the current study, should be further refined and tested for its reliability and validity. Using a qualitative
approach to further enhance this research would also be beneficial. For example, interview research may reveal rich psychological themes within the experience of this population that could be also used to generate hypotheses for additional quantitative research. In addition, research comparing the experiences of undocumented Latino students with students of other cultural and ethnic minority groups (e.g., undocumented European students) would also be useful.

CONCLUSION

Because there is little research on undocumented students, it is important to gain a fuller understanding of threats to their psychological well-being. They continue to experience significant barriers as they attempt to live in a society they have called their own yet do not feel as if they are wholly a part of it (Perez 2009). In addition, the current anti-immigrant climate and the derailing of the DREAM Act contribute to mounting stressors that may threaten mental health. This research serves as a first step towards better understanding this growing group of young individuals who are seeking their rightful opportunity to empower themselves and benefit this country that they call home.
REFERENCES


Amer, Mona M. “Arab American Mental Health in the Post September 11 Era: Acculturation, Stress, and Coping” (PhD diss., University of Toledo, 2005)


APPENDIX A. FEELINGS ABOUT DOCUMENTATION

Please read each statement and rate how it best describes your feelings regarding your legal status.

1 = Never  2 = Rarely  3 = Sometimes  4 = Most of the time  5 = All the time

1. _______ I feel fearful.
2. _______ I think about my legal status.
3. _______ I am easily alarmed, frightened, or surprised.
4. _______ I am easily irritated.
5. _______ I feel useless.
6. _______ I think about all the things I have not yet accomplished because of my legal status.
7. _______ I am afraid of what awaits me in the future.
8. _______ I think about how unsatisfied I am with my life.
9. _______ I worry a lot.
10. _______ I feel tense or on edge.
11. _______ I have headaches or neck pain.
12. _______ I have nightmares.
13. _______ I am afraid others will not approve of me.
14. _______ I have less interest in activities that I normally enjoyed.
15. _______ I feel good about myself.
16. _______ I feel I don’t have control.
17. _______ I have endured hardships throughout my life.
18. _______ Overall I am satisfied with my life.
19. _______ I am embarrassed to disclose my legal status.
20. _______ I feel anxious when someone asks about my legal status.
21. _______ I am apprehensive or nervous when interacting with others.
22. _______ I feel happy.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>I am afraid to disclose my legal status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>I have a lot of stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>My legal status has affected my academics in a negative way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>I have a good support system at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>My legal status has affected my life in a negative way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>I believe the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) ACT will pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>I think I have more obstacles than other students due to my legal status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>I think I work twice as hard compared to other students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>My legal status has motivated me to do better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Most of my worries are due to my legal status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>I cannot live a normal life due to my legal status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>I don't believe I will ever be able to practice my career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>I frequently worry about my legal status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>I worry about how people might perceive me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>I have a good support system at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>I have little stress due to my legal status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>None of my worries are due to my legal status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>I abstain from having fun, such as going to a club or socially drinking due to my legal status.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Age _______  2. Female _____ Male ______

3. Ethnic Background:
   _____ American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut
   _____ Asian or Pacific Islander
   _____ Black or African American
   _____ Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish Origin
   _____ Middle Eastern
   _____ White/Caucasian
   _____ Multi-Ethnic, please specify: ________________________
   _____ Other, please specify: ________________________

4. What year are you?
   _____ Freshman   _____ Sophomore
   _____ Junior     _____ Senior
   _____ Other, please specify: ________________________

5. What is your current legal status in the state of California?
   _____ U.S. Citizen
   _____ U.S. Resident
   _____ Temporary visa (student, work)
   _____ Undocumented (AB 540)
   _____ Undocumented (Not AB 540)
   _____ Other, please specify: ________________________

6. Do you have citizenship in another country?
   _____ Yes         _____ No           _____ I don’t know

7. Your extended family (parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings) live:
   _____ Mostly in the U.S. in the same city as I
   _____ Mostly in the U.S. in other cities
   _____ About half in the U.S. and half in a Mexican/Latin country
   _____ About half in the U.S. and half in another non-Mexican/Latin country
   _____ Mostly in a Mexican/Latin country
   _____ Mostly in another non-Mexican/Latin country
   _____ Other, please explain: ________________________