

“It’s Because He Wants Papers”

Choosing a Romantic Partner

With [my ex-girlfriend, who was a citizen], it was her mom thinking that I’m just trying to get her pregnant or married for papers. . . . With [my current girlfriend, who is undocumented], her dad is like . . . “You should just marry somebody who has a good job and papers and [can] fix your status.”

—DANIEL HERNANDEZ

Sitting at a sidewalk table outside a coffee shop, Daniel and I rehashed his dating experiences. He recalled how his ex-girlfriend’s mom warned her, “He doesn’t have papers, so that means he only wants you for one thing.” She invoked a common belief that undocumented immigrants marry citizens only to gain legal status. Daniel’s words became heated as he recounted these conversations from two years before: “I was fucking annoyed. . . . You seriously think that?” He laughed at the impossibility that “I can get you pregnant . . . force you to settle down with me. Like it was a Jedi mind trick,” brainwashing his partner into a relationship. We chuckled, but he was exasperated that people assumed his immigration status drove his romantic choices.

Similar comments had haunted Daniel since he was a teenager. His family members pleaded that he “shoulda just married some white girl. Fix your shit and you would have your own house and business right now.” His girlfriend at the time of our first interview was also undocumented and receiving similar comments from her family: her dad was unhappy with their relationship because it cut off her chances for legalization.

It is true that marriage to a U.S. citizen opens up a *potential* pathway to lawful permanent residency. U.S. immigration policy prioritizes family ties, allowing citizens and permanent residents to petition for immediate and extended family members’ entry into the United States, or adjust their status if already present. These laws favor U.S. citizens’ spousal petitions by immediately providing

permanent residency to these approved applications; most other family petitions have extensive backlogs because there are annual limits on the number of visas issued by country of origin.¹ Yet this seemingly straightforward path through marriage is complicated for more than half of undocumented immigrants, who face a 10-year bar on their admission because they entered the United States without inspection. Scholars Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz and Jane Lilly López document how this policy disproportionately affects low-income, Latino undocumented immigrants, particularly those of Mexican origin, and dissuades their legalization.² Indeed, most of the undocumented young adults I interviewed entered without inspection and had slim chances of legalizing through marriage. Despite this, immigration policies loomed large, placing a unique strain on their romantic relationships.

Previous work by Cecilia Menjivar and Sarah Lakhani suggests that immigrants experience “transformative effects of the law” as they pursue legalization because the specific contours of immigration law influence intimate life decisions, including those about marriage and family. They contend that those who undergo the most arduous and lengthy pathways to legalization experience the most enduring transformations as they strive to look deserving of relief. Alternatively, those who have no pathway to legalization are assumed to not transform their lives because there is no reason to.³ However, immigration law is complicated, and many undocumented young adults do not fully grasp their legalization options, especially given that they are frequently framed as deserving relief and as the focus of proposed immigration policy. As a result, undocumented young adults straddle hope and hopelessness, creating tensions in how they understand the law and complicating its potential to inspire transformative effects. I extend focus to those who are not in the midst of legalization processes to explore these tensions. I show how the power of the law extends outside formal legal contexts and into social interactions in which immigration law is commonly invoked and navigated.

In a world where romantic images drive dating and marriage, immigration law pushes undocumented young adults to think in terms of papers. I detail the mythic messages they receive about legalization through marriage and the legal realities that hinder many from pursuing this option. Most highlight legal realities and romantic narratives as they attempt to deprioritize immigration status when selecting a partner. Yet immigration law still determines how undocumented young adults approach and experience relationships. Some develop preferences for citizen partners, and others struggle with the emotional toll of not pursuing relationships with those who share their undocumented status. Couples must manage comments about their partner’s immigration status, regardless of what it is. Navigating the myths and realities of legalization policies permanently shapes undocumented young adults’ romantic and personal relationships.

“THINK ABOUT YOUR FUTURE”: MARRIAGE MYTHS
AND MESSAGES

Undocumented young adults face two myths about legalization through marriage to a U.S. citizen: (1) it is easy to legalize one’s immigration status through marriage, and (2) legalization prospects are the only reason for an undocumented immigrant to pursue a romantic relationship. The first marriage myth circulates messages that this legalization pathway is a viable reality and feeds the second myth’s message that undocumented immigrants make purely rational romantic decisions. Together, they promote a pervasive message: undocumented young adults should consider their immigration status and legalization desires when choosing romantic partners.

*It’s Easy to Legalize Your Status through Marriage:
The First Marriage Myth*

The first marriage myth—that it is easy to legalize one’s immigration status through marriage—stems predominantly from uninformed messages that legalization through marriage is a quick, accessible legal reality for all. Julián Salinas recalled, “My aunt is very . . . outspoken. . . . She would tell me, ‘Mijo [son], don’t date Mexicans; they are illegals. Go get yourself a güera [white girl]. Get your papers like that.’” He snapped his fingers—fast. These messages often rest on references to others who successfully legalized through marriage. Gloria Telles shared, “My mom’s just been like, ‘You should get married. You’re 21. Your sister did it when she was 19 . . . and she’s a [permanent] resident now.’” Seeing family, friends, or coworkers successfully legalize through marriage, many assume that it must be easy. Legal realities are, however, obscured by the fact that many couples elect not to apply when they have risky cases and because unsuccessful cases are not discussed.⁴

Media representations powerfully fuel stereotypical images of undocumented immigrants.⁵ An increasingly common one is that of undocumented immigrants legalizing through marriage. This trope is so well recognized that over the past two decades, it has been a comedic plot point in a variety of prime-time TV shows, including *Friends*, *Will & Grace*, *Parks and Recreation*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Superstore*.⁶ It is even featured in shows like *Melissa & Joey*, which target preteen and young adult audiences.⁷ It forms the story line of several mainstream movies, including *Green Card* and *The Proposal*.⁸

Released around the time of my first interviews, *The Proposal* features Sandra Bullock as a Canadian business executive who forces her assistant to marry her when her employment visa expires. The two attempt to portray a legitimate marriage while an immigration official investigates them. Their antics lead them to fall in love, and he ends up proposing: “Marry me—because I’d like

to date you.” Their coworkers swoon at his romantic speech. The two kiss as the camera pans to their interview with the foiled immigration agent and the film ends.

Raul Robles shared how this particular movie shaped the messages he receives about legalizing through marriage: “My friend is like, ‘You should marry me. We should get married.’ I was like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s not like those movies that they show you, that you just get married.’ I blame *The Proposal* for that. It’s not like you’re just gonna get your papers right away. It gets more complex.” When talking about going to see the movie, Teri Balboa’s friend asked, “Why are you watching that? Are you considering [it]?” These media portrayals circulate strong messages that prompt undocumented immigrants and citizens to view marriage as a quick and straightforward legalization pathway.

These narratives elicit direct messages that undocumented young adults should view romantic partners primarily through the legalization options they provide. Sol Montes recounted explicit messages from her mom: “You need to date and marry someone that’s a citizen. That’s your only way out.” Others, like Ana Aguirre’s father, condemned budding relationships: “Don’t date somebody who doesn’t have papers. Think about your future. . . . While it’s nice and dandy [now], you’re going to feel frustrated later on in your life.” These portrayed marriage as a deromanticized business transaction. Celia Alvarez recalled, “I would date guys and [my relatives] would ask me, ‘Oh, is he from here? Oh, you should marry him.’ My aunt would tell me, ‘I’ll pay him \$1,000, and then you just get divorced [if the relationship doesn’t work out].’” Suggesting that the citizens she had just begun dating were candidates for immediate marriage, Celia’s family often decoupled marriage and romance.

Some undocumented young adults internalize these messages, subsequently circulating them among other undocumented young adults. Leo Campos recounted a conversation when he advised his undocumented friend to stop dating his undocumented girlfriend:

I told him, “Look, I’m not trying to be messed up. It looks like you really like each other, but you should really find somebody who has papers.” And he goes, “Yeah I think you’re right.” . . . It was already in his head. I didn’t put anything in there. . . . You have to move forward, not two steps back. Getting with someone who’s undocumented just like you is two steps back! The boat’s sinking, what do we do? Add more weight? Add another hole in there? Sink faster?

Leo’s conversation offered a grim assessment. Others reported less direct comments, often jokes that nonetheless weighed on their minds. Manuel Serrano quoted a friend’s joke: “Before I ask the girl what’s her name, I should ask her if she’s legal.” Hearing recurring comments like these, undocumented young adults internalize marriage myths, drawing on them as they make romantic decisions and reinforcing them in their peers.

*Legalization Is the Only Reason You're Together:
The Second Marriage Myth*

The fact that marriage is a pathway to legalization, paired with the myth that it is an easy process, fuels a second marriage myth: legalization prospects are the only reason an undocumented immigrant pursues a romantic relationship. These messages surface early in relationships, often from citizen partners' family and friends. Enrique Escobar recalled comments that he and his citizen girlfriend heard when they began dating four years before: "[My girlfriend] told me that one of her friends told her, 'You know, he's only gonna marry you for your papers.'" Messages like these implied that undocumented partners were luring citizens into fake relationships. Such warnings were common, and many reacted like Enrique—trying to laugh it off and hoping that their partner would not think that it was true. Alexa Ibal, a citizen partner of another participant, recounted similar reactions from her parents: "I knew they would think that he was dating me just for papers. They didn't tell me anything. We don't talk about it. . . . But I feel like my mom would probably be like, 'Pues es porque él quiere papeles. [Well, it's because he wants papers].' Like in a joking way, but still sometimes a hint of truth." Even when these messages are not voiced, undocumented young adults and citizen partners sense them in others' thoughts.

This myth also affects how friends and family understand a couple's relationship. Antonio Mendez, who was living with his citizen girlfriend, explained, "That's something that people always ask: . . . 'Are you guys for real, or is it just for papers and everything?' But, I mean, right now we've [been] together five years, so it's like, how can someone be with someone else for papers if we've been together for this long?" These questions bewildered Antonio and others in long-term relationships because the length of their relationship—especially in the absence of marriage—should have suggested that they were a legitimate couple.

When mixed-status relationships become more serious, friends and family members revive this myth as they pressure the couple to pursue a petition. Mario Barillas and I were sitting side by side on some steps when I asked him if anyone had suggested he marry his citizen girlfriend. He quickly twisted toward me and interrupted: "My family. Mostly my oldest brother. He's like, '¿Cuándo se casan? [When will you marry?]' And I'm like, 'Whatever. Jerk.' And I know he's saying it for that reason. Because he told me once, 'Hey, you guys should marry so you can get your papers.' And I felt kind of offended when he said that." Mario immediately connected his brother's questions to the second myth: "It makes me think that he thinks that I'm with her just because of that [legalization]." Anger tinged Mario's memories of these conversations.

Bombarded by these myths, some undocumented young adults do begin to consider making marriage decisions based on legalization desires. When I first interviewed Felipe Moreno, he was a senior in college struggling to pay for his

final few courses. Desperate and concerned about how he would get a job after graduation, he was trying to identify a friend whom he could ask to marry him:

We have to legalize ourselves whichever way [we can]. . . . I've texted girls, I've asked them a key question so I can know which ones [might be willing to marry me]. I ask them, "Where do you see yourself five years from now?" So that way I can have an idea. If she says, "Nothing, just going to school," then you're good. Maybe I can ask her 'cause she ain't doing nothing. . . . Maybe she can take a couple of years [and be married].

Having faith in the myth of easy legalization through marriage, Felipe accepted the idea that some people marry "just for papers" and began to think strategically.

"IT'S NOT LIKE THAT": MATCHING MARRIAGE MYTHS WITH REALITY

Besieged by marriage myths, undocumented young adults searched for ways to reject insinuations that they were using their partners "for papers." Many developed counternarratives highlighting legal realities and romantic notions to deny that their undocumented status was playing a role in their relationships. They employed these to reject assumptions that they wanted to pursue legalization through marriage, convince romantic partners that their relationship was real, and assure themselves that they were not compromising their romantic and moral selves.

Highlighting Legal Realities: Complications to Legalizing through Marriage

Those pushing marriage myths rarely understood immigration law's complexities. Legal realities guarantee that legalization through marriage is a slow process and not available to all undocumented immigrants. Of note are variations in the riskiness of the process because of the 10-year bar and the long duration of the process, brought about by requirements related to the two-year conditional residency. Undocumented young adults who knew about these aspects of immigration law used them to counterbalance the first set of myths and reject the idea that they would pursue a relationship solely for legalization purposes.

"They Still Kick You Out for a Good While": The 10-Year Bar. The specifics of one's immigration history, including mode of entry and previous legalization petitions, determine the riskiness of legalizing through marriage. Forty-two percent of undocumented immigrants entered the United States "with inspection," meaning they were formally admitted and then overstayed a visa.⁹ They face a relatively straightforward legalization process: a petition filed by a U.S. citizen spouse allows them to adjust their immigration status while remaining in the country, and this

usually takes less than a year. A special provision of immigration code allows the same for those who have pending legalization petitions filed before 2001, regardless of their mode of entry.¹⁰ The remaining half, those who entered without inspection and do not have a pending petition, undergo a very different process. They are required to return to their country of origin to process their application at a U.S. consulate. If they have been in the United States for over a year, leaving the country to do so triggers a 10-year bar on their reentry.¹¹ They can petition to remove the bar by demonstrating that their absence would create “extreme hardship” for their citizen spouse, but, as I will show in chapter 5, this is a tall order. With no guarantee that this reprieve will be granted, they risk living apart from their family or forcing them to relocate outside the United States.¹² These obstacles make the legalization process incredibly risky for many.

Many participants did not know much about the 10-year bar when I mentioned it. Felipe Moreno, the one considering strategically marrying a friend, was taken aback. He claimed that the process would take only about six months to a year, which he had learned from a citizen friend who had petitioned for her husband. I shared that the process depends on how someone entered the country and that some people have to leave and could then be barred. He was adamant that I was wrong: “For marriage? No!” As I detailed the legal realities, he became puzzled. “I’ve never heard of this,” he said. “No way. Why did he get to stay?” I pointed out a small detail he hadn’t considered—his friend’s husband had overstayed a tourist visa. Recognizing that this would not apply to his case, he referenced his earlier plans, “So I’ve been living a lie.” He continued to ask more questions about the laws, shaking his head in disbelief, and commenting, “I didn’t know this” and “There’s always gotta be some bull.” Without these legal details, undocumented young adults had little reason to challenge marriage myths.

Yet a number of participants knew about the bar, using it to spin a counternarrative that it was better to remain undocumented than risk a 10-year separation. Cruz Vargas shared his vague understanding: “I heard it’s still like . . . you still gotta pay a lot of money, and then they still kick you out for a good while, you know?” He paused, looking to see if I knew what he was talking about. I added simply, “Ten years,” and he continued, “Yeah, 10. Yeah. So I’m like, Why am I gonna go out if I’m already here?” Though he did not know all the details of the process, Cruz knew enough. He felt it was safer to remain undocumented.

But this caused conflict with his citizen girlfriend, who brought up the possibility of legalizing him “all the time.” He recounted how these conversations usually went: “She’ll see something on TV. She’ll [be] like, ‘See!’ . . . I’ll tell her it’s not that I don’t want to do it, but it’s not that easy.” Like Cruz, many struggled to explain legal complexities to others who had latched onto the marriage myths. As with Cruz and his girlfriend, who seemed to suggest that he was too lazy to start the process, conflict can emerge between those who offer legally based counternarratives and those who subscribe to the marriage myths.

“*You’re in the Pedo for Three Years at Least*”: *Time Commitment*. Intent on decreasing the emergence of fraudulent or strategic marriages, the legalization process includes provisions that dictate how long a couple must remain married.¹³ If a couple has been married for two or more years when their application is approved, the undocumented spouse is granted a 10-year lawful permanent residency. If they married less than two years earlier, they are granted a two-year *conditional* residency, dependent on the continuation of the marriage. Before its expiration, the couple must jointly submit a petition for permanent residency, including additional documentation of their relationship.¹⁴ The undocumented partner can apply to transition from conditional to permanent resident on their own only if there were extenuating circumstances, such as domestic abuse; this also requires documentation and depends on the reviewing agent’s discretion.¹⁵ Thus, couples must commit to at least two years together, three if they want their citizen partner to sponsor an accelerated citizenship application rather than waiting five years to apply on their own.¹⁶ Counter to the myth of a fast process, this legal reality requires petitioning couples to commit multiple years to marriage as they gather application materials and meet legal requirements.

Many interviewees used the extensive time commitment to create a counter-narrative that it would be tough to sustain a relationship purely for legalization purposes. Paco Barrera had considered the possibility of marrying for papers: “It might have crossed my mind at some point. It will be cool, easy, just do it. Just do it. [But] you’re in the pedo for three years at least.” Aptly summarizing how easy it is to be swayed by messages, he joked that he would be trapped in a *pedo*—literally a fart or, in this context, a mess if he initiated a strategic relationship for legalization purposes. Similarly, Claudia Arellano stressed the need for a strong and committed relationship to weather this lengthy process:

It’s not easy, and it’s not even guaranteed [to be approved]. So if I’m gonna go through something like that, it’s gonna be with someone that is gonna be there with me through it. 24/7. No matter what. . . . A lot of people offer their help, but I don’t think they really know what it entails or they really know what they’re gonna have to go through.

She contended that such commitment can be found only in a long-term romantic partner, because “even if it’s a friend that really cares about me, it’s not gonna be the same.” Indeed, Jesus Perez shared that he had moved in with a friend so that they could strategically marry and file a petition. In the midst of building evidence to establish their partnership—opening joint accounts and taking pictures together—“it fell apart.” The time and effort were already more than his friend could handle, an indicator that she would not last the required two to three years.

The time commitment also meant that pursuing a relationship solely for legalization purposes would endanger future romances. Edith Sandoval spoke to this: “I would be giving up on finding someone. I mean, who’s gonna say, ‘OK, I’ll be

with you [in a relationship, but go] marry that guy?’ I don’t think so.” Similarly, Zen Cruz suggested that quickly pushing an emerging relationship to marriage would present difficulties if they broke up: “Either they’re stuck with me—if I can somehow talk them into sticking around with me—or the whole thing’s [legalization petition] gonna get dissolved. I’m probably just gonna waste their time and my time.” Both frame marriage to anyone besides their true love as creating irreversible consequences for future relationships.

Centering Romance: Love as a Necessary Requirement

Regardless of the extent that they understood legal realities, almost all participants cited love as a necessary requirement for marriage and concluded that they would not marry someone simply to legalize their immigration status. Though we might expect this romantic narrative to be gendered, men and women equally adopted similar romantic counternarratives. Take Norma Mercado and Joaquin Salas:

Norma: My whole thing was that I wasn’t ever going to marry somebody for the interest of my papers. . . . So I thought whoever it was, papers or not, that I just needed to fall in love.

Joaquin: I would never get married to be able to legalize myself or benefit from that. I think that the only way I would get married is if I loved someone.

As early as the 17th century, marriage began to transition from a political and economic tool to a search for love and companionship. Though class status complicated the spread of this cultural revolution, love-filled marriages became the predominant relationship norm. In contemporary U.S. society, cultural ideals about marriage are heavily influenced by media images of romantic love and intimacy.¹⁷ Undocumented young adults internalized these dominant romantic notions growing up in the United States, and draw on them to resist pressures that they should think strategically about marriage.

Relatedly, some participants viewed marriage as a sacred event, not to be tainted by immigration considerations. Lupe Gonzalez remembered joking with a friend who was going through an expedited legalization process through her husband, an enlisted Marine: “I was like, ‘Hey, hey, does he have a Marine friend?’” She continued, “It just crossed my mind, but it just went right out [*laughs*]. I consider marriage something sacred, so I wouldn’t mess around with it like that.” She explained, “It’s something that you can only do once. . . . You can’t just hit replay, you know? Try it with a new one.” Reflecting on her parents’ 40-year marriage and the seriousness of divorce, Lupe rejected the possibility of marrying for papers. Although Lupe’s counternarrative about marriage’s sacred nature is likely connected to her deep involvement in the Catholic Church, others, like Jaime Rios, also used these narratives: “I’m not a very religious person, but I still think marriage is an important thing. It’s not something you can take lightly. That’s

why I don't want it." Transcending religiosity, participants saw marriage as an important and serious commitment that cannot be undone. Though divorce is an option, it is an expensive, emotionally draining, stigmatized, and legally dense process that further shapes one's romantic life.

Reinforcing narratives about romance and love, participants portrayed loveless marriages as immoral. Victoria Sandoval noted that she would not marry someone simply to fix her immigration status: "What if you don't *love* that person? What if you *like* that person? I don't know. I don't think it's right. I don't think it's right to take advantage of somebody else." Such narratives of "taking advantage" or "using someone" moralized the importance of romantic love in marriage. Gloria Telles's mom told her, "You're just so young and dumb. . . . You can do love later. Just do it [legalize through marriage] now." Moral narratives helped Gloria reject this message because it was not simply about *wanting* the luxury of love; it was immoral to marry without love.

Although undocumented young adults were adamant about not "using" a partner for papers, romantic narratives helped justify the possibility that they would legalize within a loving marriage. Responding to her mom's messages, Gloria believed love and legalization could coincide:

[Legalization's] not the first reason why I want to do it [get married]. . . . I like marriage. I like the idea of two people coming together and creating a life. . . . So I want to find somebody that I can get married to. And if papers come, then that's a plus. I'm not gonna be like, "No, let's not do the process."

Continuing to prioritize romantic love while recognizing this legalization pathway, Gloria and others suggest that falling in love with and marrying a citizen is a "plus" or "bonus." As Yahir Villa suggested, this is ideal because one can "get romance *and* documentation." These narratives reinforced the idea that their search for legal status should not compromise their romantic or moral selves.

"IT'LL BE PROBABLY ON THE LIST":
EDUCATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN COMPLYING
WITH MARRIAGE MYTHS

Legal and romantic counternarratives seek to dispel the mythic messages directed at undocumented young adults. Yet marriage myths still shape their partner preferences and shade how others view their relationships with citizens. Notably, pursuing higher education makes it more likely that an undocumented young adult partners with a citizen by increasing their sense of exclusion—making the marriage myths more appealing—and fostering exposure to citizen-dominated dating markets.

Reacting to Exclusion: Preferencing Citizens

When I asked participants what they look for in a partner, almost all talked about personality, physical appearance, and romantic chemistry. Reflecting previous research, many stated a preference for and/or were dating other Latinas/os who shared their

cultural background and would fit into their Spanish-speaking families.¹⁸ Those with higher education often desired a similarly educated partner, reflecting patterns in the general population.¹⁹ Marriage myths, however, added a unique consideration by forcing many to weigh immigration status. Those who felt highly excluded from U.S. society were most susceptible to the myths and more likely to develop explicit preferences for citizen partners to keep their legalization options open.

Some undocumented young adults successfully resist marriage myths, while others restrict themselves to citizen partners. Carolina Sandoval and Abel León exemplify these two diverging viewpoints:

Carolina: [Immigration status] doesn't have to do with being in a relationship with somebody. If you like the person, you wanna be with the person, that has nothing to do with it.

Abel: One of my friends . . . called me [and] said, "Hey [Abel], I have two girls [who want to go out], can you help me with one of these girls?" I'm like, "Sure, but are they AB 540 [undocumented]?"²⁰ He's like, "Yeah, man." I'm like, "No . . . I don't even want to waste my time. I don't want to waste my money. I don't even want to try. I don't care if they're cute. . . . I'm sorry, dude, call somebody else. I don't go out with AB 540 girls."

Marriage myths forced both Carolina and Abel to negotiate the fact that a citizen partner opens up a potential (albeit complicated) pathway to legalization. Carolina refused to let this dictate her choices and had been with her husband, also an undocumented young adult, for 10 years. Internalizing marriage myths, Abel limited his dating pool to citizens to ensure that he would fall in love with someone who could adjust his immigration status.

Although illegality raises the same structural barriers for all undocumented young adults, those who *understand* their immigration status as a severe source of exclusion tend to develop citizen preferences. Abel's successful pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a California State University campus was filled with many legal barriers. Initially, he believed his immigration status barred him from attending college. College application deadlines had passed when he learned about Assembly Bill 540, which allows Californian undocumented youth to pay more affordable in-state tuition rates. A high school teacher managed to get him enrolled. Still, he battled to balance full-time enrollment with full-time employment, which was necessary due to undocumented students' ineligibility for financial aid at the time. Since graduating, he had struggled to use his degree to pursue his desired career in politics. Thus, Abel thought about his immigration status "all the time" and felt it was an unrelenting barrier. These exclusionary experiences led Abel to believe that legalization would transform his life:

Abel: I feel like I can't do anything. I do a lot of stuff. But still, it's hard. I feel like I'm waiting for somebody else to make it happen.

[For lawmakers to say,] “OK, let’s give them the opportunity. . . .”
I feel that someone is holding me back.

Laura: Do you think you’ll eventually gain legal status? How important is that to you?

Abel: It’s like a dream come true! It is.

To Abel, legalization through marriage appeared to be his only hope for upward mobility, leading him to only date citizens.

It is important to recognize that Abel’s explicit preferences are unique; many participants resisted expressing such unequivocal citizen preferences because of competing narratives of romantic love. Reflecting on the hypothetical question of whether she would date someone who was undocumented, Juana Covarrubias, then a community college student preparing to transfer to a top University of California campus, quickly acknowledged how this would limit her: “Of course, sometimes you think it’s not gonna get me anywhere. We’re still gonna be stuck in a hole.” She reasoned, “But, I mean, if it’s love, then, of course, I wouldn’t mind [their undocumented status]. Um, like, again, it’s just papers, right? And although it would limit me—because, again, I want to achieve big things—at the same time if it’s true love, then, of course, I wouldn’t mind.” Trying to convince herself, she repeated, “If it’s love, then, of course, I wouldn’t mind.” Attempting to merge their exclusionary realities with romantic narratives, Juana and others tried to leave space for both. Yet many left only hypothetical room to date an undocumented person and had not done so.

On the other hand, Carolina was able to deprioritize marriage myth messages when she first met her husband because, at the time, she understood her immigration status barriers as less significant. They met in high school when she was 15 and he was 16. They moved in together a year later and had their first child a year after that. Carolina recalled that she knew about her undocumented status, but “at that time I thought it was just paper and numbers. It didn’t really mean anything. . . . I didn’t really get the point of how it was going to affect me until I started trying to look for jobs and stuff.” Like others who partnered in high school, Carolina and her husband were not fully attuned to the barriers raised by undocumented status. Indeed, previous research shows that the real and perceived significance of immigration status is relatively low during high school and increases over the life course.²¹ By establishing their relationship before their immigration status became a source of explicit exclusion, Carolina and her husband could reject marriage myth messages.

Carolina has since faced staunch immigration status barriers. Soon after graduating high school, she visited a for-profit cosmetology school and left in tears after the admissions counselor told her she needed a Social Security number and then ignored her. Abandoning her dream, Carolina worked a series of “boring” jobs in customer service, at times not being paid and experiencing

intermittent unemployment. Despite this, she deprioritized the significance of legalizing her status: “I’m living my life. Like, I do want it [legalization] to happen. It would be so cool, but I don’t [wait], I’m just living my life.” Less convinced that she needed to legalize her status, both when she was in high school and 10 years later when we spoke, Carolina justified ignoring messages to not date undocumented immigrants.

Abel’s and Carolina’s stories represent larger trends among undocumented young adults: when they perceive strong barriers based on immigration status, they often keep legalization options open by developing preferences for citizen partners. This was more likely among participants, like Abel, who pursued higher education; they tended to face explicit and overwhelming immigration status barriers as they pursued upward mobility. They recognized that legalization would strongly improve their chances of using their higher education to transition into the middle class. Alternatively, those who did not pursue college were more likely to believe that they could negotiate their immigration-status barriers as needed.

In a few cases, highly excluded, college-educated participants intentionally selected undocumented partners. At the time of her first interview, Iliana Guzman was dating another undocumented college student. She explained this choice:

Let’s say something happens and I’m venting and I’m crying and I’m telling my partner about it. He understands what I’m going through and what I would need. My [citizen] partner before, I feel like I would have to tell them what I would need. . . . You know how sometimes you feel crazy because you feel like you’re the only person that’s feeling . . . ? Like when someone makes a stupid comment and no one says anything. . . . You look for that reassurance. . . . I feel like that’s what’s afforded to me quicker when I share those things with him.

Such stark social exclusion was more likely in higher education settings where undocumented students often felt they were the only ones. They longed to feel seen and understood. Iliana reasoned that her socioemotional well-being was more important than keeping legalization options open. She did not feel trapped in the same way Abel did, anticipating that her higher education and self-advocacy would allow her to find alternative ways to advance herself, even if she remained undocumented.

Several participants who had not pursued a bachelor’s degree asserted that undocumented partners would provide stronger avenues to upward mobility, despite cutting off legalization opportunities. Nancy Ortega and Erick Godinez explained how their undocumented partners compared to previous citizen partners:

Nancy: I knew his immigration status was the same as mine, but I guess because he has a lot of willpower and he’s not afraid

to work for what he has. . . . [Other guys I dated], they just assumed that because they were U.S. citizens, life would be easy on them, and it's not how it is.

Erick: People who were born here, it's like they want more [from you]. . . . And people who don't have papers, they are tough . . . flexible. . . . [My citizen ex-girlfriend], she wanted me to provide everything, and I tried my best. I gave her a [rented] house. I gave her all the necessary [things]. But she found someone else that is supposedly better and she left. . . . [My current undocumented girlfriend], she comes from a noble family, like "If we have it, we have it. And if we don't, we wait." So she's not a material person. If she could get it for cheap somewhere else, we go [there].

Both invoke gendered expectations of men as economic providers to explain how citizen partners may not be strategic choices for jointly pursuing mobility. Nancy hinted at the reality that second-generation Latino men face structural barriers to upward mobility, particularly if they did not pursue higher education. In this stratified social context, citizen Latino men may stagnate, leaving undocumented men to be perceived as more hard-working and thus better partners. On the other hand, undocumented men like Erick believed that undocumented women were more willing to renegotiate their gendered provider expectations. Both saw a shared immigrant work ethic as a more reliable pathway to upward mobility than legalization through a citizen partner.

Notably, DACA relieved some of the stress put on partner choice. Marina Balderas reflected on her decision to date another DACA recipient:

Sometimes we joke around like, "Oh, I can't marry you because you're undocumented so it's going to make me extra undocumented." But no. I mean, we don't really—now that we have DACA . . . we don't really see it like ohhhh [negative]. It's more like now we're in it together.

With DACA providing for their economic and social inclusion and the California DREAM Act facilitating their education by enabling access to financial aid, Marina and her boyfriend no longer saw their immigration status as a severe source of exclusion. Both pursuing higher education, they anticipated being able to achieve upward mobility, allowing them to uncouple their romantic choices from legalization desires.

Dating Markets: Availability of Citizens

Even when undocumented immigrants do not expressly prefer citizens, their partner selection is still interpreted through marriage myth assumptions. This is particularly consequential for undocumented young adults who partnered with

citizens because of their social networks' composition. Most participants reported meeting partners in high school or college and at work. Some met through community organizations, church, friends, and family, or in clubs and bars. These spaces comprised a mixed-status dating market, but some had more citizens than others. Often, pursuing higher education increased spatial and social mobility, which increased access to citizen-dominated dating markets and increased the chances of unintentionally partnering with a citizen.

Undocumented Latinas/os/xs in Southern California disproportionately live in less desirable neighborhoods and experience residential segregation.²² Most participants reported growing up and currently living in mixed-status Latino areas. They had both citizen and undocumented peers during their K–12 education, and many reported early romantic relationships with both undocumented and documented people.

But those who experienced spatial and social mobility also gained access to citizen-dominated dating markets. During his first interview, Daniel Hernandez explained that he dated only citizens during six years of community college because “I wasn’t hanging out with other undocumented people. . . . It’s all citizens, just like, that’s what’s there.” Like others who pursued higher education, Daniel found himself surrounded by citizens who make up the vast majority of students. Only when he became active in an immigrant rights organization did he develop undocumented social networks and begin dating an undocumented woman.

Similarly, Lili Moreno, who had completed her bachelor’s degree, compared how her spatial mobility differed from her undocumented cousin who grew up in the same neighborhood:

She didn’t go to school [college]. . . . Her job is very different from what I do. It doesn’t pay as much. So she’s always more in [the city] where we’re from. Because I went off to school and because of the type of work that I do [as a community organizer], I’m always out and about meeting new people and connecting with people and stuff like that. It’s more like she’s stuck and I have more opportunities [to meet citizens].

As Lili’s contends, those who pursue higher education or employment in sectors dominated by citizens expand their dating market. Thus, those who do not have specific preferences for citizen partners may still find themselves primarily dating citizens by virtue of who surrounds them.

The undocumented young adults who spent most of their time in citizen-dominated spaces avoided pressures to reject undocumented partners. Romantic ideals kept many participants from stating strong preferences for citizen partners, speaking instead of a partner’s citizenship status as an added benefit. Lupe Gonzalez noted, “I think about their schooling. And then maybe status. . . . It’ll be

probably on the list [of dating criteria], but it wouldn't be a priority. If it comes down to it, it was not gonna matter his status if we fall in love. But I would rather him be born here, you know, have a cool status." Although Lupe admitted a preference for a citizen partner, she was open to the possibility that she might fall in love with an undocumented partner. Yet she was never faced with this choice because she mostly encountered citizen peers in college. Her dating market spared her from having to act on marriage myth messages and choose between legalization and love. Still, she appeared to prefer citizens, exposing her to potential suspicion when she began dating her citizen partner.

"I STILL CAN'T GET OVER IT": THE CONSEQUENCES OF PUTTING MARRIAGE MYTHS INTO PRACTICE

Marriage myths continue to shape romantic relationships as they progress. Those who cling to the myths must put their citizen partner preferences into practice by ending relationships with undocumented partners. Those partnered with a citizen may feel pressure to advance the relationship. Most encounter judgment for their partner choices, regardless of their partner's citizenship status, as others assume that romantic relationships only serve legalization purposes. Negotiating these marriage myth messages has enduring emotional and social consequences.

Rejecting Undocumented Partners: Emotional Consequences

Marriage myth messages encourage undocumented young adults to reject undocumented partners, creating emotional baggage that haunts future relationships. Juan Valle declared no preference for a citizen partner and spoke briefly about his slight preference for an undocumented partner, because "we can relate more, and the life experience is a little bit more similar." In his first interview, he noted that his three most recent romantic interests had been undocumented men. Their shared undocumented status had, however, prevented him and a potential partner from pursuing a relationship:

Juan: I was talking to somebody from campus. And I think he had other objectives in his life. He wanted someone that had better opportunities or, you know—

Laura: Like upward mobility or—

Juan: Um, just someone that had status in this country—someone that could provide. I was like, "That probably won't be me." [*Laughs.*] Just because of my status. So that just ended.

At the time, being gay would have prevented Juan and his prospective partner from legalizing their statuses through marriage because the federal government did not recognize same-sex marriage and prevented same-sex spouses from

filing immigration petitions.²³ Despite this, the strength of the marriage myths led Juan's prospective partner to internalize messages to not date other undocumented immigrants. Further, they both recognized that their undocumented statuses would make it hard to work together to achieve upward mobility. Indeed, Juan spoke at length about how his immigration status made it difficult to find a well-paying job, repeatedly preventing him from being able to afford transferring to a four-year university. These experiences permanently shaded Juan's approach to relationships and forced him to seriously reevaluate whether he was willing to date other undocumented men.

These same issues reemerged in Juan's most recent relationship with another undocumented man. They came to a mutual decision to break up because of the potential long-term consequences of remaining together: "This year I was dating an individual who is undocumented as well, but I was very hesitant about it." He paused, wiping away the tear rolling down his cheek: "I think he was my ideal guy, and I had put up this wall between us 'cause I didn't wanna let him in." Collecting himself, he clarified: "We both knew that we were undocumented. We just understood that it probably wouldn't work out." Juan was clearly heartbroken; he chided himself later in the interview, laughing: "The last guy I was crying about . . . it's been like five months now. I still can't get over it." Despite seeing the decision as a necessary sacrifice, there were still deep emotional costs.

Similarly, Sarai Bedolla spoke about the enduring consequences of being dumped because of shared undocumented status:

A lot of it was because of the fact that I was undocumented and his parents had a strong influence on him. . . . He ended it because he was like, "I'd rather end it now after three months than later down the road end it because we're not going to be able to fix our status." And at one point he told me, "I'm going to get married to someone with documents. And if you still want to be together, I can marry you after that." And then I was like, "No! Go to hell!"

Given the resistance to explicit partner preferences, it was often after relationships were established that one or both undocumented partners gave in to pointed marriage myth messages. Sarai explained that this experience made her feel like her undocumented status marked her as an undesirable partner: "Because he broke up with me for these reasons [of immigration status], it was kind of like a stab." Though she eventually got over the heartbreak, she feared that her undocumented status might hurt her future relationships.

These breakups can haunt people long after ending a relationship. When we began talking about the role of immigration status when dating, Antonio Mendez's first comment was about when he was in 10th grade and decided not to date a girl who was also undocumented: "That's how I dealt with my [undocumented] reality then at the time. I was like, 'This cannot go anywhere.'" He remembered the desperation he felt in high school: "I didn't want to affect her

situation . . . and her possibilities of fixing her status and mine either.” A decade later, he vividly recalled the difficulty of this decision and still tells others about it. Other undocumented people often get mad, telling him that love should conquer all. Confronting romantic narratives, he is chastised for a choice he made as a 15-year-old boy trying to understand what it means to be undocumented. Notably, Antonio’s early enforcement of citizen preferences was burned into his memory and continued to haunt him even though he was happily living with his partner of five years.

Embracing Citizen Partners: Relationship Consequences

Alternatively, marriage myth messages can push undocumented young adults to embrace citizen partners, putting undue pressure on the progress of their relationships. Luis Escobar explained how his undocumented status changed his relationship’s trajectory by spurring him to marry his partner after a year of dating: “I told her my reality. I actually told her, ‘You know what, I think I’m actually gonna go back to Mexico. This is it. I can’t do this anymore.’ And she was like, ‘Let’s get married now and try to do this.’ I’m like, OK. So we got married.” They abandoned their plans to delay marriage until completing college.

A few felt that immigration laws may also push them to marry when they did not want to. Pablo Ortiz had been with his citizen girlfriend for two years, and they had a daughter together. He explained,

I’m not a big believer of marriage. Maybe ’cause it hasn’t happened in my family. . . . That’s the reason I thought that it wasn’t important, that it’s not necessary. . . . Now in the present, that’s when I have heard a lot more people tell me, “Oh, don’t be a pendejo. Don’t be a dumb ass. You should get married and get your documents.” . . . So maybe for reasons of frustration lately, I have thought about it . . . to secure our baby’s future. . . . Getting married so we could adjust my documents.

Despite being a college graduate, Pablo struggled to provide for his family because he could not find a well-paying job. This—and his fear of being separated from his daughter through deportation—motivated his consideration of marriage. Similarly, Alexa Ibal, the citizen partner of an undocumented participant, noted that the only reason they would marry was “so he would get papers.” They were already living together, and in other circumstances they would simply continue to cohabitate because she didn’t agree with “the whole institution of marriage. I don’t want to get married through the church.” People like Pablo and Alexa are pushed by immigration realities to consider marriage, a social institution that they would otherwise choose not to participate in.

Still others reported that their immigration status created pressure to maintain relationships, even if they were not ideal. Lili Moreno spoke about her recent decision to end a five-year relationship. Her partner was about to acquire citizenship and could have petitioned to adjust her status.

I was hoping that things would work out with this person and that we would marry. But they're not. It was difficult because I was thinking how I'm losing an opportunity to get married with someone and legalize my status. When I was trying to decide to break up with him or not, this issue came up. If I want to get married and fix my papers, I'm gonna have to start over again and to get to that comfort level where you're sure you want to get married to this person. I had to let that go for the sake of my well-being.

Though all individuals, regardless of legal status, struggle with ending long-term relationships, marriage myths give undocumented young adults an extra factor to weigh when making these decisions. In Lili's case, legal myths and realities fueled a desire to legalize her status through her soon-to-be-citizen partner. Without these expectations, she would have had an easier time ending her relationship when she realized it was unhealthy.

Managing Judgment of Partner Choices: Social Consequences

Marriage myths and realities also shape others' opinions about partner choices and relationships. Having dated both undocumented and citizen individuals, Daniela Sanchez expressed a common theme: "If you're dating somebody that has papers, they think, 'Oh, you're dating him because he has papers.' If you're dating somebody that doesn't have papers, they're like, 'Are you stupid? What's wrong? Go and date somebody that does have papers!'" These messages pass judgment on all partner choices, creating a frustrating, lose-lose situation for undocumented young adults. Such judgmental messages negatively impacted undocumented young adults' relationships with their family, friends, and romantic partners.

Undocumented young adults who partner with undocumented immigrants are judged for cutting themselves off from a potential legalization pathway. Carolina Sandoval discussed her mom's early interactions with the man who is now Carolina's husband:

My mom made a dinner because I had a boyfriend, so she wanted to meet him. . . . And that was her first question, [Do you have papers?]. And I was . . . thinking like, Oh my God! . . . I was serving his plate, and I looked at him, and then he's like, "Oh no, I don't have papers." And then after she's like, "Hmmm [*disapproving*]." . . . [He asked me after], "Why did your mom tell me that? And I was like, "Well, because she says that I should marry somebody that has papers."

This conversation foreshadowed persistent tension. Carolina explained that her mom used to tell her, "You need to marry somebody that has papers in order for you to have papers. So she doesn't like my husband because of that." She laughed dismissively, and perhaps nervously, when I asked if her mom still does not like her husband: "She's not mean-mean to him, but we know she doesn't like him.

[Laughs.] . . . She's always said negative things about him, but I tell her [to] see the positive. . . . Because she always says that we didn't turn out to be what she wanted us to be." She believed that her mom's only dream for her was to marry a citizen. Many participants who partnered with another undocumented immigrant reported similar disapproval. In some cases tensions eased, but these early exchanges often soured relationships with families and friends.

Alternatively, undocumented young adults who partner with citizens often face strong suspicion that they pursued the relationship only for legalization purposes. Aida Mendoza recounted a particularly stark example in which her mom overheard her husband's family members talking at the Laundromat just weeks before their wedding: "My mom overheard her [my sister-in-law] say that her parents said, 'Oh, I'm gonna make sure that he doesn't fix papers for that hoe.'" Aida's frustration erupted as she recalled her conversation with her husband afterward: "I was so upset! . . . [My legalization] would've been a benefit . . . for your family because I'm not that type of person. I would've helped your family. . . . Your parents are older than mine. I know that one day you're gonna have to take care of them. . . . But now they're assed out!" Though they had planned to file her petition after the wedding, she refused to do anything to confirm their suspicions and instead "wasted all the money" they had saved for legal fees. Four years had passed, but the heat of her words suggested that her relationship with her in-laws still suffered. She also seemed to hold this decision against her husband, since she remembers that, at his parents' urging, he had refused to apply for her legalization when she heard about a time-sensitive legal loophole that would have allowed her to get her papers "in months." Though it seems unlikely that her application would have proceeded so smoothly, her belief that they prevented her legalization permanently warped these relationships.

While most mixed-status couples did not face such strong suspicion, many reported that their relationships were assumed to be fake or strategic, especially when they seemed to be marrying too early. Regina Castro, a permanent resident who legalized her status through her citizen husband, explained that they married out of love after dating for less than a year. She stressed that she had believed that she faced the 10-year bar until after they were married. Despite this, her friends questioned their relationship. Regina remembered a conversation at her bridal shower: "A friend of mine said, 'Cut the bullshit! Just tell us the truth. Are you getting married to fix your papers?' She was disinvited from my wedding that night! I was like, 'You are not coming because you are not my friend.' By that point, I was tired of it." Engaged and newlywed couples, like Regina and her husband, often had to prove that they loved each other. In addition to being emotionally exhausting, such suspicions can crack the foundations of trust with friends and family. Many of Regina's friendships suffered as people raised similar suspicions; her friendship circle shrank to the few people she felt were genuinely happy for her and supported her relationship.

Suspicions about a mixed-status relationship's veracity can also shape expressions of love in romantic relationships. Many undocumented partners attempted to assure their citizen partners that they were together for love, not papers. Lena Gomez remembered,

Once it gets more serious, [you think], "Are they gonna think you're trying to marry them because of the papers?" . . . And even if they don't, will their family think that? How much can their family influence them into thinking that's why you're getting married? Do you put it off to prove that that's not why you're getting married? And if you decided to marry out of love, it's just such an awful experience to have to prove that you love him. No one else has to do that.

Aware of circulating marriage myth messages, many undocumented young adults tried to figure out if their partners were concerned and strained to prove that their love was real.

Some undocumented partners also sought to delay marriage to prove this was not their motive. Alma Molina vividly remembered what her boyfriend told her six months into their relationship: "My mom thinks you're with me because you want to fix your status." Over their eight-year relationship, this had been at the forefront of her decision to avoid marriage: "There's been days where I'm like, 'Ugh, I just want to get married and become a resident.' But there's days that I'm like, 'I don't want him to feel like I'm just using him.'" While intended to strengthen their romantic relationships, their concerns and actions highlight how marriage myths shape expressions of love.

Citizen partners also receive myth-based messages that encourage them to legalize their partner and pass judgment if they have not petitioned for them. Arianna Guerrero, a citizen who has been with her boyfriend for four years, shared that others pressure her: "Oh, you guys should get married so he can start the process." Rudy Beltran, a citizen, noted that the pressure increased after he married his wife. Asked whether anyone ever asks why she is still undocumented, he responded, "Yeah, my dad. He said, 'Dummy, so what do you mean she has no papers? You guys are married. ¡Ya arrégla! [Fix it for her already!]" Encouraged by the myth that legalization through marriage is easy, family and friends often placed the responsibility for legalization in the citizen partner's hands. Thus, partners can feel guilty when marriage does not lead to legalization because of the realities hidden behind the myths.

CONCLUSION

As undocumented young adults enter adulthood, they realize the full extent to which their undocumented status contributes to their exclusion from U.S. society.²⁴ This is around the same time that that they begin seriously dating and are told that a citizen romantic partner opens a pathway to legalization. Daniela

Sanchez explained this connection: “Sometimes it’s like you feel like you’re sick and somebody has the antidote.” The metaphor of citizen spouse as antidote captures how outsiders assume that undocumented young adults would make purely logical choices in pursuit of a life-altering opportunity for legalization. But these widely circulated marriage myths ignore legal realities that over half of undocumented immigrants are unable to securely legalize their status through a citizen spouse. Further, as scholar Kara Cebulko notes, these strategic assumptions overlook internalized U.S.-based norms, including those about marriage timing and romantic love. Indeed, she finds that resistance to legalization through marriage persists among undocumented young adults who have entered with inspection and have relatively straightforward pathways to permanent residency.²⁵

Despite their resistance to legalizing through marriage, immigration law intimately shapes undocumented young adults’ early romantic choices. This occurs outside formal legal contexts and even when legalization options are murky at best. Enduring consequences ensue as they develop partner preferences and make decisions about pursuing romantic relationships. Even when they refuse to let their immigration status dictate with whom they will partner, marriage myths inch into their relationships as they attempt to prove that their relationships are for love, not papers. Slowly but surely, laws inform if and how undocumented young adults proclaim romantic love. These intimate transformations continue to emerge as family formation progresses, leading to additional enduring consequences.