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"It Affects Us, Our Future"

Negotiating Illegality as a Mixed-Status Couple

[Immigration policy] does affect us in the sense [that it affects] his own opportunities and his limitations on how much he can and can't do to, not just provide for the relationship, but just provide for himself . . . his own goals. How fast can he get there or how much access he has to the things he needs to get there.

—XOCHITL LAZO

Reflecting on her two-and-a-half-year relationship, Xochitl conceded that her partner Chuy Soto's undocumented status affected her. It didn't worry her when they began dating, but she "knew there was going to be struggles if in the future we stayed together and we pursued something more serious." Sitting in Chuy's rented storefront on a busy boulevard, she recounted how he had closed down his shop because of financial difficulties. She suffered when this also forced them to move out of their shared apartment and back in with their respective parents. Before he obtained a driver's license, she drove, "making sure our lights were on and things were safe" to avoid the police. She speculated about the possibility of legalizing his status through marriage and resented that the law could take control of their relationship in this way. Although Chuy had received DACA by the time we spoke, Xochitl feared that he could lose the employment authorization and deportation protection it provided.

Nonetheless, they had built a strong relationship and were committed to working together in pursuit of upward mobility. They had serious conversations about how Chuy's undocumented status might disrupt their ability to achieve their goals together:

> I went back to school, so we were making that decision about can I go back to school? Should I go back to school? Should he go back to school before me? At the same time? So certain things like that. And ultimately because it's all a trickle effect on what our security is at our jobs, our incomes and all that.

Xochitl acknowledged that she harbored fears about how it could affect them in the future, "just thinking all the what-ifs." The more she shared, the clearer it became that immigration policies governed their relationship—and her life.

Xochitl's experiences mirror what Jane Lilly López finds in mixed-status marriages: U.S. citizens "come to live the life of an undocumented immigrant."[1] As citizen partners commit to mixed-status relationships, they become increasingly subject to the consequences of living in a context of illegality. Indeed, Xochitl asserted, "it affects us, our future," referring both to their future as a couple and to citizen partners' own futures. Immigration policies inflict shared consequences, affecting family-level outcomes and altering relationship dynamics.

This chapter explores the experiences of citizen partners of undocumented young adults to examine how illegality is experienced by someone who loves—and is building a life with—an undocumented immigrant. I find that citizens commit themselves to mediating illegality to establish stable, upwardly mobile partnerships. This infuses stress and guilt into relationships and, sometimes, lays the groundwork for unequal power dynamics. Importantly, DACA provided relief to both partners. Yet negative consequences endured because immigration policies had already introduced inequality into mixed-status relationships and citizen partners' life chances.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN TO US": TIED FUTURES AND SHARED CONSEQUENCES

Marriage is an important social contract that centers economic well-being as both a precursor and desired outcome.[2] Like any committed couple, mixed-status partners saw themselves as working together to establish upward mobility and achieve the American dream. A pervasive cultural narrative, the American dream "is the promise that the country holds out to the rising generation and to immigrants that hard work and fair play will, almost certainly, lead to success."[3] It is particularly palpable in immigrant-origin families who aspire to economic markers of full integration in hopes of achieving social acceptance; yet it is often an impossible goal for most who face structural barriers to upward mobility.[4] Despite this, undocumented young adults and their citizen partners held fast to this omnipresent ideology of upward mobility. As romantic relationships progressed, however, citizen partners began to see that immigration policies endangered the possibility of realizing these shared goals as deportation risks and limited economic mobility threated the family.

Deportation Threats

Most partners initially stressed fears that their family would be separated through deportation. Xochitl confided, "I don't think I've ever told him, but I do get scared.

Like, what if he does get deported. . . . That's always in the back of my mind." These fears were magnified when children entered the picture. Alexa Ibal explained,

> You always see those things on Facebook or in the news, "Oh, sign this petition to help this father of four not get deported." . . . It's stuff that's always kind of subconsciously in my mind. . . . And there was times that I thought I could've been pregnant. . . . So that started popping up in my head: "He doesn't even have papers. What am I gonna do if he gets deported? I'm gonna be here by myself. Oh my god!"

Like Xochitl and Alexa, most citizen partners feared their partner's sudden deportation. They dreaded the possibility of separation but also rejected the possibility of relocating outside the United States.

Citizen partners who had less exposure to deportation threats were more likely to develop intense, everyday fears. Alexa, who had been dating her partner for nine months, explained, "I always think about it [deportation]. Whenever he's driving. Or whenever I know he's going to get here in an hour and he takes like two and a half. I'm like, Oh my god, what happened? . . . I've never had to deal with these kind of worries, and now I do." These fears often instigated conflict with her boyfriend, who perceived it as "nagging." He felt like, "I've been 'doing me' for some time now. Get off my back." Most undocumented young adults did not often think about their deportability; it had been part of their lives for so long that they knew how to manage risks and often thought about it only when triggered by things like police presence or media coverage. But citizen partners often did not understand deportation risks or processes, leaving their imaginations to run wild with fears of an ever-present threat to their relationship. Alexa noted, however, "Give me like a year, and then I'll get used to it." Indeed, many long-term partners did not report such intense fears of deportation.

Partners believed that deportation posed a threat to the family's long-term stability, no matter if they reunited outside the United States or remained separated. Max Aguilar, who had been married to his undocumented wife for five years, recalled that he had told her, "Screw it, we'll go to Mexico. We'll live together in Mexico." But after he secured a job in a county agency making $3,500 a month and buying a house, he felt that "so much stuff is holding us here now. It's like we have a lot to lose, we have a lot to lose, especially me, especially her." They found it hard to imagine abandoning their piece of the American dream. Similarly, Ariana Guerrero feared how her fiancé Enrique Escobar's deportation could affect her upward mobility:

> If he ever were to get deported, I don't know if I would leave to be with him 'cause I worked so hard here. I mean, I speak Spanish, but not to the level where I can get a career. . . . I have a lot of family in Mexico, so it wouldn't be so bad if I went to Mexico. But I know what I'll be able to do there is not the same [as what] I'll be able to do here [in the United States].

Ariana had invested in her education and was on the verge of earning a master's degree to become a school counselor. Like her, most couples avoided considering deportation scenarios because they recognized that family unity may come at the cost of their own and their family's chances for upward mobility.

Limited Economic Mobility

Undocumented partners' employment barriers infused couples' lives with economic instability. Simon Mendoza explained that his undocumented wife of six years "was limited with anything. I guess everything. . . . She couldn't have the same lifestyle most people have. She couldn't even get a job at McDonald's. That's like, Whoa!" His wife had struggled with persistent unemployment, and he felt that this had made it "really difficult for us to give our child a much better life. If she had her status, it [would be] a little bit better, would make the job a lot easier for both of us." Their combined income of $2,500 a month was enough to pay the bills, but little was left over to buy things or pay for activities for their son.

Similarly, Jimena Santiago perceived her fiancé's previous employment at a fast-food restaurant as the epitome of how his undocumented status might threaten them: "I'm afraid that if something, a law changes, and he loses the privilege [to work] that he has right now. I don't know what's gonna happen to us. That's gonna bring our financial life to a downfall. It scares me." DACA had transformed her fiancé's employability, allowing him to use his college degree to work as an engineer and make $3,200 a month, almost triple his previous earnings. Jimena's comment highlights the unique nature of these concerns as low-income citizen couples are not dependent on policy changes to enable potential mobility. Marginalized citizens may experience persistent structural barriers, but they are not as legally impermeable as those faced by undocumented young adults.

Immigration-related issues also added costs to couples' strained finances. For example, Dan and Ana Aguirre worked, respectively, as a plumber and a part-time office assistant; their shared income was between $3,000 and $4,000 a month. Although he had relatively well-paid and stable employment, Dan shared his frustrations: "We were kind of F-ed. She got pulled over once [without a license], and you know what it cost us? We were a newlywed couple. Fortunately, the cop was Latino, so he understood the situation . . . let her off [without towing the car]. But I think it's like a $700 ticket." Ana also worried about the cost of immigration-related paperwork. She was agonizing over their ability to afford around $5,000 to submit her application for permanent residency. If they could not, they would have to pay $495 to renew her DACA and continue saving. These costs, as well as more universal costs like repairing aging cars, added up.

Undocumented status also prevented wealth accumulation, such as purchasing a home, which is an essential mode of ensuring generational mobility. Undocumented immigrants' low income and lack of a Social Security number

make it difficult to purchase a home, although many still aspire to homeownership.[5] Anthony Gutierrez spoke about how his wife's undocumented status created barriers:

> We plan on buying a home eventually someday. And the thing is, a lot of this was going to affect us . . . getting an apartment, getting a car, anything like that. . . . They wanted to see her credit on there as well. And because she didn't have any, that obviously was an issue. So putting her on any contracts, that was a no. And of course, that limited us as well.

Because of this, Max Aguilar and Celia Alvarez were the only couple who had purchased a home. She remembered the irony: "They wanted proof that I was undocumented to make sure I didn't have any debt. They thought I was lying that I was [undocumented]. I was like, Oh, God. I'm always fearing that they will find out, and now I'm dying to prove that I am." After struggling to come up with ways to document her undocumented status, they were finally approved for a loan based *only* on Max's income. They both felt that this restricted them to a lower-quality house in a less desirable neighborhood.

"I WANT HER, I WANT *US* TO BE OK": CITIZEN PARTNERS MEDIATING ILLEGALITY

Citizen partners had to engage with immigration policies as they tried to minimize shared consequences and negotiate their diverging social positions. Antonio Mendez lived with his partner of seven years. He pointed to how she drew on her privileged position as a citizen to ensure their joint stability:

> She would be the resource. She would be the one that—I'll be like, "Hey, can you drive?" . . . when we're going into risky areas. We were using her credit card to make purchases for home . . . things that we needed, for necessities because you're the one that can get higher credit, lower interest because you have that option.

These actions build on citizen partners' attempts to help their undocumented partner negotiate barriers when they were dating by driving or paying for dates. In committed partnerships, however, these obligations multiply as citizen partners must continually mediate illegality.

Most citizen partners recognize that they will function as their family's primary avenue to upward mobility as long as the undocumented partner cannot pursue legal employment. Xochitl tried not to think about their respective immigration statuses but admitted,

> Income-wise, I have been able to find work more easily or more permanently than him. So I see how that itself, without me wanting to, it becomes the advantage. . . . If worst comes to worst and he was ever to lose a job because of his status or whatnot, well then I come into play. . . . My income can be more of a security net.

She is adamant that she does not think of herself as "the one that's going to save us." Rather, she recognizes that her U.S. citizenship opens up opportunities for stable employment.

Citizens also committed themselves to driving to diminish the deportation and financial risks associated with unlicensed driving. Angel Padilla and Amelia Prado gave examples:

> *Angel:* I hate it when he drives to school. I hate it when he drives to work. On my days off, I'll take him . . . and I'll pick him up. Because I'd rather not deal with that. . . . Being undocumented is enough. But all the fees and [car] impoundment of having an unlicensed driver, it's not worth [it]. Especially if I have my license. It'd be really stupid for him to drive.
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> *Amelia:* If she wants to go grocery shopping, she can go ahead. I don't doubt she would have done it even without a license, but most likely she wouldn't or I would probably be the one telling her, "I'll just go, I'll drive."

Taking on these responsibilities requires citizen partners to commit time and resources and can make couples renegotiate household chores. Often they take on these responsibilities without prompting, since they learned earlier in the relationship that driving is a way that they can help.

In the end, there is little that citizen partners can actually do in the face of staunch structural barriers, so they offer emotional support. Emma Gray Delgado, Antonio's fiancé, explained that she could "help out a little bit financially. . . . But he's still going to have that burden on him that he can't do what he would like to do, just because of his status." She recalled watching Antonio come home after long days attending classes and working. She saw the toll his status took as he struggled to pay his full tuition with small scholarships and his meager wages as a waiter: "I felt bad. I couldn't help. I just listened if he wanted to talk. . . . If he didn't want to talk, I would try to have that safe space for him." Antonio remembered a few times of extreme stress: "We both had moments of crying and stuff like that because I had to expose myself through these threats. And that our being together might be in jeopardy, that we might have been separated." Emma's support and encouragement helped him manage his fears and stress but could not fix underlying problems.

Providing emotional support left many citizen partners feeling helpless in light of immigration policies. Natalie Sieu cried as they recalled witnessing their undocumented partner endure a medical emergency:

> She was on the floor crying because she had a gall bladder attack, and I can't take her to the hospital, I can't take her to the doctor. . . . It's frustrating. . . . Here you are lying on a floor crying, and I can't take care of you. She is like, "Give me the pills!" And it's the pills that she kept from her last ER visit, and they are old. . . . Stress

> affects it [the attacks]. . . . Just a lot of things in her life are stressful. She just lives a stressful existence, and I can't—as a partner you don't want your partner to be in pain. You want to help them.

Citizen partners cannot solve health care inequalities, create employment opportunities, or change policing practices. They know this but still feel frustration and pain as they bear witness to injustice.

Facing reality, citizen partners often thought about marriage as a means to permanently mediate illegality by opening up a pathway to legalization. After only six months together, Natalie was contemplating marriage: "I am thinking, how much do we need [to] save? . . . Whatever it is, we will deal with it. . . . I want her, I want us to be OK. . . . This is, I think, what would be giving us an easier life so that we can do our best." With little understanding of the process, Natalie longed for a "road map" and eagerly took notes as I offered a general explanation of the legalization process. I recounted the barriers that I traced in chapter 2 and detailed the risky and exhausting process covered in chapter 5 to show that this pathway is more complicated than most think.

Many clung to the hope that their partner would legalize. Camila and Luis Escobar recounted how he would have to return to Mexico to process his legalization petition and risk being separated from his family for up to 10 years. Realizing this after they had married over a decade earlier, Camila explained, "We thought the best decision would be to put it off until we were better prepared. . . . The worst-case scenario would be he'd go there and stay there for 10 years. Well, we can't do that in the middle of his education." Once he finished college, they delayed because she was pregnant. They held out when the federal DREAM Act was close to passing in 2010 and then again once DACA was announced. As couples hoped for immigration reform, shared consequences and mediating roles began to weigh on relationships.

"IT'LL TAKE ITS TOLL": SHARED STRESS OF IMMIGRATION STATUS DIFFERENCES

Previous research has focused on how immigration status differences become sources of vulnerability for undocumented partners. For example, Joanna Dreby documents how citizen partners' efforts to mediate illegality—by being the financial safety net, driving, or filing a petition for a partner's legal status—make undocumented partners dependent, fostering inequalities from the unequal division of household labor to domestic abuse.[6] Given the focus on severe examples of inequality, we know little about the thought processes that precipitate inequalities and infuse stress into the everyday lives of most mixed-status families.

Both citizen and undocumented partners recognized that their respective immigration statuses created unequal opportunities to contribute to their family's upward mobility. Angel Padilla, who was living with his undocumented partner

of almost a year, noted, "Certain days . . . it'll take its toll. But other than that, I think he knows things are going to get better. And I know things are going to get better. So we're just kind of living on hope." Hope and love fueled many couples as they worked together to manage everyday immigration status barriers. Still, this amassed an emotional toll when negotiation strategies strained citizen partner's limited resources, reshaped relationship dynamics, and stressed both partners.

"I Should Do Something": Gendered Stress and Dependency When Mediating Illegality

Couples' stress increased as citizen partners more actively mediated illegality. Xochitl recalled her concerns from when Chuy had been unemployed:

> I guess I have guilt-tripped myself . . . during a time when we were going through economic hardship and I think I was a little bit hard on him. How much we were doing to provide? And not to say he should provide more or equally or whatnot. Just to provide [something], you know? And I kind of stopped myself and I thought, like, It's not as easy for you to go get a job. . . . So I just kind of, like, took a deep breath and tried to figure out how we were going to do it.

Like Xochitl, citizens often assumed a responsibility to draw on their privileged position to help their undocumented partners negotiate barriers; this was their duty, no matter how unwelcome and stressful. Such negotiations also strained undocumented partners by triggering feelings of dependence. For undocumented men, this translated into feelings of undesirability from unmet gender expectations (similar to those discussed in the previous chapter). For undocumented women, these instances triggered fears about the possibility of being trapped in an unequal, or potentially abusive, relationship.

Citizen partners, regardless of gender, felt a responsibility to help; citizen men, however, often did more because of their own gendered expectations that they should provide for and protect their partners. Sol Montes, who had been dating her citizen boyfriend Rigoberto for over six years, recalled, "He was driving me everywhere. Literally." He drove her over an hour to school for most of the four years she attended college. When our first interview ran long, he waited patiently in the car to take her home; this happened frequently since she was always running late. Rigoberto felt this responsibility for both Sol and her undocumented parents: "I feel like I should do something. So like just taking their car and driving it for them because I have a driver's license." This not only took a substantial amount of time out of his day, but it also distracted him at work and when in class at a local community college.

Citizen partners often accepted the stress of their responsibilities because they saw their actions as mutually beneficial. Dante Chavez and Yvonne Zepeda, his undocumented girlfriend of almost five years, both struggled to pursue bachelor's degrees. Dante shared how he saw their educational journeys as linked:

> Obviously, she has to pay for school and stuff. When I was working, it was kind of hard for me. I guess the two years she was there [at the university], I was paying for it. Basically paid most of it, like 70 percent maybe. A good chunk. . . . Instead of focusing on my studies, I was thinking about how to get money to pay for my schooling [and], more importantly, hers. And that kind of affected my grades. Actually, I failed classes too over there. I was about to get kicked out twice, but then I just kind of had to toughen up, I guess. Discipline myself.

Dante's support of Yvonne's education could be seen an investment in their future. But his sense of responsibility cost him an extra year to complete his degree. He insists that he "could've been done earlier" if he had not had to balance school with working to cover both their educational expenses.

Despite Dante's good intentions, his help stressed Yvonne by making her feel dependent. She already felt trapped in a frustrating cycle in which she could not find a stable job that would allow her to complete her college education, but not having a college degree kept her from finding a stable job. Only one term away from graduating, she felt "stuck" and did not think she would be able to finish soon: "I'm in another economic situation. . . . My boyfriend gives me money, but I won't take it. I had to take it last time. I didn't want to take it. But he just, he pushed me. He's like, 'Here, take it! Go to school, finish, get out!' " Similarly, Sol remembered feeling frustrated when her boyfriend bought her textbooks and once took out a loan to help her cover tuition. Both women prided themselves on their independence and being able to provide for themselves. In light of their gender ideology, their partners' help made them feel beholden, creating additional stress and frustration.

Strained relationships were most common when the undocumented partner was unable to contribute to the household and the citizen partner struggled to build a stable foundation on their own. Daniela Sanchez explained how her undocumented status held her and her citizen husband back:

> Just our income and our living situation has to be limited because it's what he can make, what he can do. Whereas if it was kind of like fifty-fifty or I could get a part-time job and kind of help out. . . . Because he feels like he should take all the responsibility. But I feel like I'm inadequate. I'm just no good to put [in] my half.

Ineligible for DACA, Daniela continued to struggle with underemployment. For years she had worked only a few hours a week, first as a massage therapist and later in various capacities caring for pets. Her inability to contribute to the household had recently forced her husband to take on two jobs: one as a security guard and a second at a restaurant. She confirmed the shared stress: "He does say I wish you could work, I wish you could get a job, I wish—so we wouldn't struggle as much. And we know it. I know it. And I wish it too." She was four months pregnant when we talked, and she feared that the stress would only worsen once their son was born: "Because I'm going to be like, I want to drive my kid to the doctor's

appointments. I don't want to have to wait for him to get off of work. And for him, instead of having to do 20, 30 things in a day, it's just doubled. Because everything is just leaning on him. And again, there's only so much I can do." As their family responsibilities mounted, her dependency and his stress exacerbated their frustration. They separated within the year.

Such responsibility and dependence can set the stage for uneven relationship dynamics and conflict. Tanya Diaz had struggled for years in community college, taking one or two classes a semester while working full time in customer service. Once DACA was announced, her citizen boyfriend of three years offered to help her pursue a more fulfilling career by paying her tuition for a private cosmetology school. As a single mother with aging undocumented parents, she had carried a heavy economic burden alone for over a decade. Tears streamed down her face as she remembered feeling relief: "He's so willing to help! I've never had that help before." As she neared the end of the 18-month program, though, she realized that their relationship had become emotionally abusive: he demanded that she stop using Facebook to post pictures of herself modeling her hairstyling skills. He barged into a school event to confirm she was not lying about where she was. She recalled that in the midst of an argument, "he actually threw my school in my face. One of the things he said—that was very hurtful—was 'You owe your education to me.' . . . I was like, 'Wow! This is why I didn't want you to help me.' " In the wake of these ongoing fights, they had recently broken up.

As their relationship was unraveling, Tanya received notification that her DACA application had been approved. This infused her with a sense of independence, and she was now looking for a part-time job while she finished school:

> Even when we first started this, I told him I was going to pay him back for my school. . . . Because I don't want him to throw that in my face ever again. Because he hasn't been putting in those hours, and he hasn't been putting in the work, he hasn't been cutting his fingers cutting hair. So it's not him, it's me. And I don't like that he's trying to take that away from me.

It was precisely this type of abusive situation that undocumented young adults, particularly women, worried about when their partners offered help.

"A Little Bit Held Back": Guilt over Citizenship Privilege

In addition to feeling compelled to use their citizenship privilege to help their undocumented partners, many citizen partners wrestled with how their citizenship privilege allowed only them to participate in activities. Ariana Guerrero explained that her fiancé longed to travel. His comments do not prompt her for help, but rather highlight their different immigration statuses: "I feel sad for him and I feel bad that I can do it and he can't. That's why when I was planning my trip [to Mexico], I wouldn't really bring it up as much 'cause I didn't want him to feel like, Oh, I can't go." Negotiating diverging opportunities often left citizen partners

feeling guilty. Jimena Santiago remembered deciding to go out to a club when her fiancé, Rafael, could not: "He didn't have an ID. And I was like, 'Well, I can't go with you. I'm gonna go with my friends.' And that made him feel bad. So I had to be more sensitive about it. Like, sometimes I wouldn't go out [with friends] and I would just stay home." Others were preoccupied with their decisions to travel, particularly when leaving the country, because there was no way that their partner could join them.

As these barriers emerged, citizens sought ways to protect their undocumented partners from feeling left behind while also easing their own guilt. Like Ariana, some partners de-emphasized their privileged activities. Others opted out. Amelia Prado explained, "She's undocumented, so we can't travel outside of the country, obviously. And I like to travel. So I'm aware that I can go. But like I told her, 'I wouldn't go without you. I'm not going to go to Mexico or wherever else I want to go without you.' " She was careful to frame this as her decision and to assert that it was not her partner's "fault" that she no longer traveled.

Regardless of the management strategy, undocumented partners also felt guilty. Ariana's fiancé, Enrique Escobar, reflected on how he thinks she perceives his undocumented status's impact on their relationship:

Enrique: I think maybe she would want me to be able to—I guess travel with her or just to—I don't know. . . . I think just my status probably keeps her a little bit held back from stuff that she wants to do too.

Interviewer: So how does that make you feel?

Enrique: Just a little upset in a way and selfish somewhat, I guess—but nah, I don't know. I guess just mainly a little upset that I can't—I guess give her some of the stuff that she wants or she might enjoy more. In a way we keep it a little limited to what we do.

Enrique struggled with the idea that his undocumented status held Ariana back, both in terms of traveling and in everyday activities. These feelings amplified existing anxieties that he would be unable to provide for their future, which pushed him to avoid proposing marriage for years. These guilty feelings pervade individuals' feelings about their performance as partners, introducing doubts about if they are holding up their end of the bargain.

When asked the same question, Ariana confirmed her awareness of Enrique's guilty feelings: "He feels like he's holding me back in some things. Like, if I wanted to go somewhere, he's not able to go with me. Or getting a house or things like that. . . . Maybe he feels like he's not contributing as much as he would like to." She asserted, "I think it's not a big deal to me. Like, we're happy together, and I don't expect him to do, like—I don't know, I don't see it as a big thing. Mostly, I just feel

bad for him." For most couples, guilt did not present a threat to their relationship, but it did require them to invest emotional energy as they sought to manage their own and their partner's feelings.

One partner's guilt sometimes feeds the other's. Jimena shared, "He always told me, 'It's hard with me. If you wanna leave me, I completely understand. I wouldn't wanna be with my own self.' He tells me, 'I don't have money a lot of time and I'm struggling.'" As her partner voiced these feelings of guilt, she developed negative feelings about herself: "It made me feel selfish because I was just thinking about how I want to be and what I want and not really thinking about what he's facing." Like Ariana and Enrique, Jimena and her fiancé had to invest energy to reassure each other that they were happy with their relationship and would find a way to overcome the barriers.

In a few cases, conflict emerged when undocumented partners activated guilt by highlighting their citizen partner's privilege to persuade them to embrace opportunities. Madeline Velasquez recounted how her undocumented partner makes her feel guilty when he implores her to take advantage of educational opportunities: "He tells me, 'You have papers. At least you have papers and you can do so much. You can go to school, you can get financial aid and you know that I can't. It is harder for me than it is for you. I don't know why you are not doing right.'" Although Madeline was frustrated, she felt guilty because she recognized that her partner had a point. She planned to return to community college.

A few reported that relationships dissolved when citizen partners perceived these urgings as condemnation. Karen Rodriguez remembered her citizen ex-boyfriend's reaction to her insistence that he value his privilege:

> For example, he had a car and he crashed his car. He lost his car. He had a bazillion tickets. And to me, that was just like, Why do you not take advantage of what you have and use it for a good way? . . . And that would come in conflict a lot. Because in my view it's like I never had all of that. . . . And in his eyes it was like, Well, I've always had this 'cause I was born here. . . . We just fought a lot.

Together, complex emotional dynamics of stress, dependency, and guilt took a cumulative toll on relationships.

If negotiated effectively and openly, however, these shared experiences could have positive outcomes. As my research assistant and I interviewed Luis and Camila Escobar on opposite sides of a busy restaurant, they independently shared how their struggles had brought them closer together:

> *Camila:* In a positive way I feel that it has strengthened our relationship. We've had to learn about each other in a very different way than most couples. And we've had to endure more stressors, earlier in our relationship than most couples have. . . . We've really had to become each other's rocks.

> *Luis:* She had her depression and I had my undocumented status. So she knew my struggle, and she helped me through it. And I knew her struggle and I helped her through it. . . . I think what connected us, that we were both hurting, [like we were each] missing a leg. . . . So I think what helped was that we both made it through . . . [by] walking together.

Over 11 years, Camila and Luis had faced more than their share of challenges as they were more financially stressed and flooded with guilt than most of the couples I spoke to. But they had figured out how to support each other, communicating their needs and working together to solve their problems. In the end, their experiences brought them together instead of tearing them apart.

"I AM AFRAID TO ARGUE": GENDERING IMMIGRATION POLICY'S ROLE IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The inequality and stress in mixed-status relationships can lay the foundation for undocumented partners to experience abuse. Previous research suggests that having an immigrant background can exacerbate abuse or make it more difficult to seek help because of limited language fluency, isolation from one's family and community, lack of access to dignified jobs, and experiences with authorities in their origin countries.[7] Undocumented immigration status intensifies these factors, particularly in mixed-status relationships in which power differentials abound. Apart from this, gender inequality increases women's likelihood of victimization.[8] As a result, most previous research has focused on undocumented women's risk of abuse because of their dependence, isolation, and difficulty interacting with law enforcement and social services.[9] But the few undocumented young adults I spoke to who had experienced intimate partner abuse suggested that immigration policies complicate the traditionally gendered scholarly narratives of abuse. Rather, undocumented women, undocumented men, and those in the midst of legalization processes had distinct views about the complex webs of dependence and inequality that shaped their risk of and tolerance for abuse.

A few undocumented women reported previous abusive relationships and suggested that undocumented status intersected with other forms of inequality to foster abuse. Valeria Torres shared how her undocumented status was one way that her citizen ex-boyfriend had laid a foundation for abuse: "He would use it [my undocumented status] as a way of putting me down, as a way of him feeling superior. . . . Because, you know, he's a citizen, then he gets to have the opportunities [and] resources, and I am unable to do that." Undocumented status became one of many ways to foster low self-esteem and dehumanize her. Alternatively, Norma Mercado, who had recently left her undocumented husband of 10 years, felt that gender inequality ultimately precipitated her abuse: "I was abused physically and emotionally. I guess you can say that my self-esteem was really low. . . . I just

thought my life was over, that I had to be a wife and had to dedicate myself to working on the marriage." One day she opened her door to a Jehovah's Witness and began to learn that "women are not made to be slaves but they're made to be partners. . . . That's when my self-esteem started to become more positive. . . . I just got the courage to say [to myself], You need to leave. I need to live because my kids need me." Rather than pointing to her undocumented status, Norma credited ingrained gender roles, marrying young (at 19), and having children early on with making her believe that she was stuck with "who she picked." Immigration status may have played a role by stressing Norma's husband enough to precipitate abuse or lower her self-esteem; her characterization suggests, however, that multiple forms of inequality enabled the abuse. Overall, these women's experiences suggest that undocumented status does not single-handedly cause or ensure abuse; rather it is another factor that can facilitate abuse because of the stigma, dependence, and stress it carries.

Notably, several undocumented men worried about how gendered deportation threats increased the potential consequences of being involved in a domestic dispute. Ben Melendez explained why he ended a relationship: "He grabbed me once. And I told him, 'Get off!' And I freaked out because he held me like this." Ben grabbed my forearm. "What if he hits me and I try to defend myself and I hurt him? That can get me deported. That's what the law says." Undocumented Latino men face intersecting racial and immigration status identities marking them as criminals and making them disproportionately likely to experience deportation.[10] With domestic violence being a deportable offense, undocumented Latino men worried about accusations of intimate partner violence, even if accidental or false.

The intersection of race, gender, and immigration status produces distinct power dynamics that can lead undocumented men to tolerate abuse. Pablo Ortiz, an undocumented man in a five-year cohabitating relationship with a citizen woman, was the only participant whose discussion of conflict suggested he was currently in an abusive relationship:

> She has the power to deport me. And I do get afraid. You could say that I'm in a kind of very possessive relationship in a way. So yeah, I am afraid to argue with her. Because according to her—see, I'm a very passionate person, and sometimes my tone of voice . . . [leads to] miscommunication. One little thing could turn and could get into a big argument. And next thing you know, she's—it's hard for her to go beyond the whole negative image that she has about the immigrant community sometimes for her too. . . . So I do, I do get afraid. . . . I have read many stories on the newspapers. A lot of immigrants have been deported for, I guess, spousal abuse. And anybody could make that claim, and it doesn't have to be true or anything, but you could still go into the police department, and even though it's not true, with Secure Communities and all these other stuff that's going on, you end up [in immigration custody].

He explained that he tries to "de-escalate the conflict," frequently giving in to her demands. This gives way to objective forms of abuse: For years she has refused to petition for his legalization. She once turned off all the utilities when she got upset that he left to work out of state for a few weeks. More recently, she took their three-year-old daughter away for a month. He felt that "she took advantage of that [undocumented status] because she knew that I wasn't gonna call the cops because she knew that I didn't wanna deal with those people." Wanting to be near his daughter, he convinced her to move back in and try to work it out. But he still felt at risk: "It almost got to that point where I didn't want to be in this relationship because sometimes I'm scared of her, I'm scared of her that sometimes I feel like she tries to push my buttons so I can lose my cool."

Pablo's story could have easily come out of the lips of an undocumented woman. Indeed, scholars report similar stories among undocumented, first-generation immigrant women in relationships with citizen/documented men who establish control by threatening deportation or abandonment of legalization opportunities.[11] Ben and Pablo, though, both worried that their criminalization as Latino men increased their risk of being perceived as abusers and subsequently deported.

Although women also feared their status could precipitate inequality and abuse, they did not share men's fear of deportation because of domestic conflicts. Rather, some saw immigration policies as offering them relief after they left abusive relationships or survived sexual violence. The Violence against Women Act allows victims of domestic violence perpetrated by a U.S. citizen or permanent resident family member to apply for legal residency on their own, preventing abusers from using an immigration petition as a form of control. Further, U visas are available for victims of certain crimes—including sexual assault and abuse, domestic violence, incest, and rape—if they help with investigating and prosecuting the perpetrator; these visas later open up a pathway to legalization. Perceptions of women as victims of abuse can help them avail themselves of these laws; indeed, I spoke to three women who obtained U visas for cooperating with police after reporting domestic abuse or sexual violence. On the other hand, men, in general, underreport abuse and have difficulty accessing domestic violence services.[12] Thus, it is likely difficult for men to provide the necessary documentation to substantiate abuse-related immigration petitions.

Notably, legalizing through marriage crystalizes the risk of abuse because of the process's dependent and risky nature. Take the examples of Diego Ibáñez and Valeria Torres, who were both single at the time:

Diego: [My ex-girlfriend], she told me I should marry [her], "I'll fix your papers." . . .

Laura: So why didn't you do it?

Diego: For my honor. . . . 'Cause I don't like for people to tell me, in a few years from now, "I was the one who legalized [you]." I don't like that. . . . And also it makes me feel like I need to stay with them. And what if I don't want to stay? I can't risk my freedom.

Valeria: Once you get married to this person, what if he uses that as a way of manipulating you? So, you know, there is a lot of other things that come along with that. . . . You know, like, now you're married to me, therefore you have to do whatever I say because otherwise I'm gonna take you to [immigration authorities]. I'm gonna tell them, "Hey, you know, she's just using this marriage to just [get papers]." And [then I] get in trouble.

Pursuing legalization through marriage carries significant legal risks. Like most, both Valeria and Diego worried about how this ultimate form of mediating illegality would disrupt power dynamics. The specifics of their fears are gendered, however: Diego, like other men, worried primarily about how becoming dependent could jeopardize his honor, power, and freedom. Most women, though, worried about how this could further tip the gendered scales of dependence and potentially lead to manipulative or abusive relationships.

The cases of those who pursued legalization through marriage suggest that the risk of abuse is real and cuts across gender. Malena Landeta noted that her husband would invoke his petitioner status when they fought: "If I got upset with him about . . . him going out with friends . . . he would say, 'If you continue like this, I'll just forget about that [applying for your legal status]. We'll just stop the classes.' . . . It is a bad thing that he said that, but I understand that when someone's upset, we say a lot of things." Five years into their marriage, Javier Espinoza still feared his wife might accuse him of using her for papers:

Javier: You're still with that fear factor that if you don't go through it, she might just take it back and you might just lose your papers.

Laura: Even though you were in love . . . you give in when there's fights?

Javier: Yeah, just in case. *[Laughs.]* "Qué viva la paz [Let peace reign]." . . . I was talking to her [my wife] about that, you know, "I give in in a lot of fights and I let you get your stuff because I feel afraid of losing my papers."

Both Malena and Javier were now legal permanent residents in genuine marriages, but immigration law still haunted their relationships. They insisted that these were not frequent feelings or comments, but their partner's citizen status gave them power that they could use to explicitly or implicitly regulate their actions during disagreements.

The risk of abuse multiplies in strategic marriages in which the undocumented partner has a valid fear of being reported to authorities for marriage fraud. One such case of abuse emerged: Dulce Puente married an old high school friend who then petitioned for her legalization. While they had agreed that it was a strategic marriage, she realized later that he expected it to turn romantic. He got a tattoo of her name a few weeks after they married. While she initially entertained the idea of pursuing a romantic relationship, she felt as though she were walking a tightrope: "He's told me that he's in love with me, and I told him I don't have feelings for him. So it's a lot of pressure, and I try to keep my distance from him because of that. . . . I'm very thankful for what he's done for me, but I don't want to end up hurting him." In her second interview, Dulce revealed that her marriage had worsened. She recounted what had happened a year earlier, about six months before the needed to jointly apply to remove the conditions on her permanent residency:

> One day we were supposed to go out, and I was too tired. I told him to stay in, and I cooked dinner and we watched a movie. . . . Then the next day when I got home, he was in the shower, and I checked his phone and he had text messages with his cousin saying that he was so mad at me, that he wanted to punch me and calling me a bitch. . . . [I thought], like, What do you wanna do to me? Do you wanna kill me? . . . I didn't feel comfortable anymore.

Dulce began to fear for her safety when he punched a wall after she confronted him about the texts. She moved out, but her conditional residency status required her to recontact him, so she could apply for permanent residency. He agreed to help, and she recognized that "he was trying to manipulate me. . . . He started telling me about getting back together and all these things. And I started going with it, [even] when I knew that I didn't want to, just because I wanted him to help me." Feeling trapped, Dulce once again entertained the possibility of pursuing a romantic relationship in an emotionally and potentially physically abusive situation. Her application was approved, and she was granted permanent residency and no longer needed to maintain the relationship. But she still felt a sense of helplessness and fear: "When I was doing all the [renewal] paperwork, it said that they could investigate you even after approving you. And sometimes I think about that. But there's really nothing I can do [to fix the relationship] if he's out of state and we're not really working out." Though there is a provision to allow petitioned spouses to apply to remove the conditions on their residency on their own, few know about this process, and it requires being able to substantiate that the marriage was bona fide at the time of their petition and why it ended.[13]

It is important to recognize that most romantic partnerships did not devolve into serious conflict, abuse, or violence. Further, when abuse emerged, it was not simply because of immigration status. Rather, unequal relationship dynamics—triggered by undocumented immigration status, gender inequality, and other

social locations—intersect with immigration policies to create a complicated web of dependence and inequality that can increase the risk of and tolerance for abuse.

"THERE'S A LITTLE BIT MORE SECURITY": SHARED BENEFITS OF DACA

As mixed-status romantic partners adapted to life in a context of illegality, immigration policies seeped into citizen romantic partners' lives and structured helpful *and* harmful relationship dynamics. By the time DACA was established, long-term citizen partners had already established negotiation strategies and experienced shared consequences. DACA did not necessarily alter relationship trajectories, but rather eased the everyday consequences of illegality. For example, Xochitl and Chuy had been dating for almost a year when he received DACA. Xochitl did as much as possible to help Chuy manage immigration-related barriers. Obtaining DACA altered their relationship by reducing Chuy's dependence on her and allowing him to contribute more equally to their relationship. DACA thus enabled an important shift in relationship dynamics, leading this supportive immigration policy to spill over into the lives of citizen partners.

Obtaining employment authorization through DACA allowed undocumented partners to more equally contribute to the couple's pursuit of upward mobility. In his first interview, Chuy reported earning $800 a month after leaving his job manufacturing picture frame samples and opening his own small framing shop. Within weeks of receiving DACA, he secured a job in a framing department of a chain store. Within a few months he became a department manager, making $2,000 a month. He felt more economically stable: "There's a little bit more security. I can buy the things that I want. . . . It's a different mentality." Xochitl felt the same:

> We saw it [DACA's impact] initially with our income. Because [before DACA] the fact that he wasn't able to have a secure job, we were basically managing with whatever came into his shop and whatever I was doing through my minimum wage [job]. . . . [We had to] be spending conscious. . . . Now that he has his job . . . there's just much more things that we can access. We're able to invest now rather than just get by.

This economic stability made it much easier for them to envision and plan for a brighter future together.

Economic stability also reduced the potential for conflict. Chuy could be more independent, and Xochitl did not have to carry the stressful responsibility of mediating illegality. Chuy explained that his stable income made him finally feel comfortable spending money on a new truck. No longer afraid of being pulled over for driving without a license or incurring the costs of having his car impounded, he became more independent. This also made Xochitl's life easier: "Now we have two sources of transportation. We didn't have to be figuring that whole commute

process. How we were going to share the car and whatnot." Other citizen partners of DACA recipients noted similar feelings of security:

Max Aguilar: It feels liberating. I feel a lot safer. She could be on my [car] insurance. . . . She could be registered [with the car and] everything under her name. Everything's fine. So all of that really helped out.

Jimena Santiago: He could do things without asking me to do it. Like the cell phones, it was always under my account 'cause I was the one with the Social Security [number]. And now he's able to open that. He has credit cards so [it's] less worry [for me].

Like Xochitl, Max, and Jimena, most citizen partners reported that their responsibilities and worries decreased with DACA. This lessened their stress but did not alter their relationship's trajectory because most had willingly taken on these roles.

Despite DACA's positive shared effects, both partners remained preoccupied with illegality and the need to maintain DACA protections. Chuy thought about his status more frequently, especially as the expiration date on his work permit neared:

> That date it expires is always in your mind, you know? . . . So you've got it for two years and maybe you're good the first month, the first year. But the second year comes around and you're starting . . . a countdown. . . . So I have to reapply. Because I'm like four months away now from my thing being expired. So in order to keep my job, I have to stay on top of that.

Citizen partners were equally concerned, and Xochitl frequently reminded Chuy about the upcoming deadlines: "I need to make sure he's on top of all the other stuff to make sure he's secure here" to avoid plunging them both back into uncertainty and instability.

While most undocumented *and* citizen partners felt their worries melt away with DACA, a few suggested that their fears have simply transformed. They were no longer afraid of sudden unemployment or deportation, but they worried about whether their DACA protections would not be renewed or if the program would end. Camila Escobar explained that most of her pre-DACA fears were gone, "but now we have these new ones":

> Right now, the worry and fear is, What's gonna happen in a year when . . . his DACA is over? Are we going to be able, from now till then, [to] fix his residency finally? . . . If it [the legalization application] doesn't go through, what's gonna happen? What's going to happen to us? Are we gonna start from zero again? Is he gonna get started on a deportation proceeding? If we don't resolve this by the time his DACA expires and we reapply, what if he gets denied the second time?

At the time I was conducting interviews, the first wave of DACA recipients were beginning to apply for renewals. With no clear understanding of the process, couples worried. Yet DACA renewals proceeded smoothly as less than 1 percent of the renewals were denied.[14] But the rescission of DACA in September 2017 and the legal complexities of subsequent court injunctions on its termination likely escalated fears about what will happen if one's DACA protections expire.

It was only with permanent legal status that mixed-status couples felt that they had achieved ultimate family stability. Estefania Gutierrez-Estrada and her citizen husband, Anthony, had been married for eight years but were unable to apply for her legalization because she had entered the United States without inspection and faced the 10-year bar. After spending two years as a DACA recipient, Estefania applied for and received advanced parole, giving her permission to travel to Mexico to visit her ailing grandmother. Allowed to reenter the United States with inspection after this trip, she was able to apply for legalization without risking consular processing and a 10-year bar on her reentry.[15] They both reflected on the impact of her impending receipt of permanent residency:

Estefania: Just stability, honestly. Peace of mind. . . . I know that it's not something that I have to renew like the DACA every two years or so, or they might take away the program. . . . I feel like it took so long, and now I feel it's finally moving, finally moving.

Anthony: That just opens up a lot of options for her that she can explore and also have an impact on our finances in a positive way. It's just so many more open doors. . . . I'm looking forward to . . . [when] decisions that we have to make are not limited because of her immigration status.

DACA had provided them with some stability because Estefania could safely drive their children around and secure well-paid employment to supplement the family income. But permanent legal status would erase any fears that they might regress in the future. Both partners were excited about the opportunities permanent residency held for their family. Yet, as I will show in the next chapter, the legalization process creates new enduring consequences.

CONCLUSION

As mixed-status relationships progressed, citizen partners recognized that the context of illegality was seeping into their lives. Surrounded by marriage myths and rhetoric that marked undocumented immigrants as undesirable partners, they were invested in denying that immigration status played any role their relationship. But their everyday experiences tell a different story about how immigration policies limited them as well.

Both undocumented and citizen partners experienced illegality as a shared burden that determined their individual and collective futures. Committed to their relationships, they worked together to negotiate immigration-related barriers. Although this decreased routine risks and fears associated with everyday life, it ensured that both partners experienced feelings of dependence, responsibility, and guilt. Relationship dynamics changed and, in some cases, enabled unequal and abusive relationships. By the time DACA was implemented, most couples had established effective ways to negotiate illegality and its consequences; their lives improved, but they remained solidly situated in their relationships. As with dating, DACA's impact on recipients' relationships was tempered by couples' having already identified ways to negotiate illegality and minimize shared consequences.

If DACA is rescinded, and there is no other form of immigration relief, citizen partners will likely find themselves solidly situated in a context of illegality. They will return to an everyday reality haunted by threats of family separation, limited opportunities for upward mobility, and stressful relationship demands. Their citizenship status will not shield them from the inequalities bred by immigration policies.