



Revisiting Ethnic Niches: A Comparative Analysis of the Labor Market Experiences of Asian and Latino Undocumented Young Adults

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Drawing on thirty in-depth interviews with Korean- and Mexican-origin undocumented young adults in California, this comparative analysis explores how the intersection of immigration status and ethnoracial background affects social and economic incorporation. Respective locations of principal ethnic niches, and access to these labor market structures, lead to divergent pathways of employment when no legal recourse exists. Despite similar levels of academic achievement, Korean respondents were more likely to enter into a greater diversity of occupations relative to Mexican respondents. However, the experiences of Mexican respondents varied depending on their connection to pan-ethnic Latino nonprofit organizations. Illegality, therefore, is conditioned by opportunity structures that vary strongly by membership in different ethnoracial communities, leading to structured heterogeneity in experiences with undocumented status.

Keywords: undocumented, illegality, ethnic niche, ethnicity, race

Although scholars have explored how undocumented youth and young adults navigate barriers to higher education, their experiences in the labor market are much less understood. Some studies have pointed to the converging employment outcomes of undocumented young adults despite varying levels of education, suggesting that they often have access only to low-wage blue-collar industries of the labor market regardless of their academic and professional qualifications and aspirations (for example, Gonzales 2011; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gleeson 2010). However, we still know little about the *processes* by which undocumented young adults gain access to these jobs. More important, because these studies draw solely on data from the Latino population, it has been difficult to know whether all undocu-

mented young adults share these employment experiences, or to what degree there exists variation by ethnoracial background. Given the highly racialized discourse surrounding illegal immigration, as well as the diverse resources available to diverse immigrant communities, one might well expect that undocumented young adults inhabiting diverse ethnoracial categories will experience differentiated employment trajectories.

Therefore, drawing on in-depth interviews of Korean and Mexican 1.5-generation undocumented young adults, I explore how ethnoracially diverse undocumented immigrants navigate transitions into and within the labor market when no legal recourse for barriers to employment is available. Within this group, I focus specifically on highly educated individu-

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als covered by Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)—those who may be considered among the most advantaged within the undocumented population—to demonstrate how even strong advantages along traditional axes of incorporation are significantly constrained by legal status. Then, by highlighting these undocumented individuals who have similar ambitions, skills, and education but who nevertheless differ with respect to their membership in diverse immigrant communities, I seek to isolate the critical role of one's ethnoracial background in mediating access to socioeconomic opportunities. In this undertaking, I take seriously the call for a shift in studying undocumented migrants from a general perspective to examining the nuanced ways in which everyday illegality can be constructed across spaces and contexts (Coutin 2000; De Genova 2002; Ngai 2004; Willen 2007). I add to this growing literature on the everyday lives of undocumented youth by demonstrating the significance of meso-level ethnic structures in determining individual-level access to differentially embedded work opportunities.

In this study, I find that the distinct experiences of Korean and Mexican 1.5-generation undocumented immigrants manifest acutely in the area of work, arguably the most important marker of transition into adulthood and a fundamental aspect of social identity. Ethnoracial background, especially how that background activates different social and structural resources, shapes the range of jobs undocumented young adults to which they have access, and in turn, their material and social well-being. That is, this study shows that the divergent collective human capital of Asian¹ and Latino populations (Nee and Holbrow 2013; Lee and Zhou 2015; Massey and Pren 2012) has a spillover effect on the labor market outcomes of those undocumented in their respective co-ethnoracial communities. Namely, I find that the labor market structures of ethnic niches assume a critical role in the social and economic integration of 1.5-generation Korean

and Mexican undocumented young adults. The term *ethnic niche* has historically been used to describe for-profit businesses serving as occupation networks for ethnic communities. However, I expand the scope of this term to encompass opportunity structures, both for-profit organizations and nonprofit organizations, in which the majority of occupants are co-ethnic. Access to ethnic niches, and the location of these structures in the broader occupational hierarchy in particular, have consequential effects on the work experiences of undocumented Korean and Mexican young adults, at times providing opportunities beyond those conventionally associated with undocumented labor. Previous literatures have examined variation across ethnic niches: for example, Cubans in Miami (Portes and Bach 1985), Chinese in New York City (Zhou and Logan 1989), and Koreans in Los Angeles (Light and Bonacich 1991). The consequences of these differences have been understudied, however, especially for ethnically diverse 1.5-generation immigrants. My goal, therefore, is not to interrogate why such differences exist, but *how* these structuring conditions affect the incorporation of the 1.5-generation undocumented young adults of diverse ethnic origin.

My findings show that although all undocumented young adults struggle with barriers to employment because of their legal situation, the everyday experience of illegality is conditioned by opportunity structures that vary strongly by membership in different ethnoracial communities, leading to *structured heterogeneity* in the experience of illegality. The nature of the work they ultimately do find is significantly shaped by the primary location of their respective immigrant networks and, in particular, their access to ethnic niches. Despite comparable levels of educational achievement, Korean respondents were more likely to have access to a broader range of occupations than their Mexican counterparts. Given the extensive web of Korean employers in California (Frauenfelder 2016), jobs in these niches were within

1. Employing the vast category of "Asian" elides the internal heterogeneity that exists within this group; Asian Americans exhibit a bimodal pattern on structural indicators such as socioeconomic status and education. However, I deploy the broader racial term "Asian" throughout the paper as a rhetorical strategy to begin interrogating the ways in which race and ethnicity condition experiences with illegality.

relatively easy reach. In contrast, the work experiences of Mexican respondents varied depending on their relationship to the predominantly Latino network of nonprofit organizations supporting undocumented immigrants. Those with connections to these organizations were able to access information about creative ways to work beyond traditional low-wage jobs. That is, labor market outcomes were bifurcated among the Mexican young adult population, either more constrained or less constrained, depending on the primary type of ethnic niche in which they were embedded. All of these individuals felt trapped within immigrant enclave occupations that were categorically incommensurate with their educational background, career aspirations, and desire to be employed lawfully. However, my findings suggest that opportunities to work in a greater diversity of industries within capital-rich ethnic niches could be a path to greater material stability, particularly for those who receive work authorization through DACA or have the chance to regularize their status in the future. By examining the pre-DACA labor market experiences of Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults, therefore, this study highlights the impact of collective ethnic resources as a consequential mechanism of stratification among the lives of diverse undocumented immigrants, complicating and adding to the body of scholarship on the importance of disaggregating the variegated material and symbolic consequences of illegality (see, for example, Patler 2014; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk 2014).

THE CONVERGENCE OF RACE AND ILLEGALITY

Despite a growing presence of undocumented Asian immigrants in the United States (Rosenblum and Ruiz Soto 2015), sociological understandings of the undocumented immigrant experience have largely come from studying Latinos. This focus is not surprising considering that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants are from Mexico and other Latin American countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Nevertheless, four of the top ten countries of origin of the undocumented population are in Asia. One in five Korean, one in six Filipino, one in six Chinese,

and one in six Vietnamese immigrants are undocumented (Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker 2011). Considering the racialization of illegal immigration in political and public discourse, it is important to examine how the experience of illegality is shaped by ethnoracial background.

Research suggests that the Hispanicization of undocumented immigration coupled with the model minority stereotype may protect Asians from the constant anxiety of being profiled as undocumented (Chan 2010; Dozier 1993). However, because this rhetoric leads to assumptions regarding the legal status of Latinos, undocumented Latinos may “come out” more readily both in personal relationships and public spheres, increasing the likelihood of fostering collective and coalitional relationships. On the other hand, the legal and racial invisibility of Asians may lead to intensified feelings of shame, loneliness, and isolation as they strategically avoid revealing their undocumented status for fear of stigmatization. Unaware of the large presence of other undocumented Asians who share their struggles (Chan 2010), they might think they have more to lose on both personal and institutional levels from divulging their situation. Having a cloak of legal and racial invisibility, therefore, could function as a double-edged sword (Chan 2010). Given these racial dynamics, Asian undocumented youth might have an easier time getting jobs because they are not associated with unauthorized status, but conversely, for the very same reason, they might be more reluctant to seek help in securing employment—a difficult task given their status.

SOCIAL NETWORKS IN TRANSITIONS INTO ILLEGALITY

Ethnoracial background not only is important as symbolic material used in the construction of racialized notions of illegality, but also can have structural implications when considering access to formal and informal resources and networks, and especially, employment opportunities in ethnic niches. Scholars have illustrated the importance of social networks in shaping the experiences of the undocumented population in work, school, and family (Gonzales 2015; Abrego 2006; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Gonzalez 2011; Perez and Cortes 2011;

Menjívar and Abrego 2012). For 1.5-generation undocumented youth in particular, research has highlighted the significant effects of social networks on transitions into postsecondary education. As they exit the protection of the K-12 education system, key intermediaries such as supportive school personnel can help “cushion the blow,” minimizing structural and psychological barriers to higher education (Gonzalez 2011; Abrego 2006; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Enriquez 2011; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, Dedios-Sanguinetti 2013). However, less well understood is the subsequent stage of transition out of higher education and the structural factors that may mediate their entrance into the labor market within which no legal recourse is available. Undocumented young adults have been shown to dampen their professional aspirations and simply join their first-generation parents in harsh, exploited labor markets (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). However, these studies do not take into account the significant variation in opportunities available in the broader labor market, and furthermore, how this variation may be associated with the ethnoracial diversity of the undocumented population.

ETHNIC NICHEs AND LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES

Beyond social networks, we can consider the structural role of ethnic niches in shaping the material outcomes of undocumented young adults. The work of Alejandro Portes and colleagues suggests that they develop in part from a dearth of employment opportunities for immigrants in the primary labor market due to language barriers, a lack of cultural capital, and workplace discrimination (see, for example, Portes and Bach 1980; Wilson and Portes 1980; Portes and Bach 1985). Drawing from segmented labor market and ethnic solidarity theories (Reich, Gordon, and Edwards 1973; Light 1972), they first proposed an enclave-economy hypothesis that the returns of the enclave labor market are commensurate to the primary labor market for immigrants. Some scholars, however, have found limits to ethnic enclave economies—material benefits outside the niches surpass those within, particularly for the employees of ethnic niches relative to their employers (Bor-

jas 1986, 1990; Bates 1987, 1989; Sanders and Nee 1987). Min Zhou and John Logan also demonstrate that the advantages of working in ethnic businesses are stratified by gender, providing more economic advantages for men than women (1989). On the whole, then, the benefits of ethnic niches appear mixed, but can provide some first-generation immigrants with material and social advantages.

Scholars have also examined how ethnic niches affect the patterns of integration for second-generation immigrants. They find that second-generation youth desire to escape the ethnic economy and that many are successful in doing so (Waldinger 1996; Light and Gold 2000). Philip Kasinitz and his colleagues argue that though ethnic enclaves might have been advantageous for first-generation immigrants, little evidence indicates that they are a significant source of upward mobility for the second generation (2008). Instead, the economic future of children of immigrants is tied more closely to the overall economy than it is to “protective ethnic enclaves,” which act more as “safety nets” than “springboards” for this generation.

But what about the 1.5-generation immigrant youth, notably those lacking legal status? Scholars have not sufficiently theorized legal differentiation among the children of immigrants. Second-generation youth in the United States are granted *jus soli* (birthright) citizenship, expanding their capacity for labor market integration and social mobility. However, the 1.5-generation undocumented population lacks this legal security. If employment in the primary labor market is simply a matter of linguistic and cultural socialization, they, like the second generation, should not benefit from ethnic niches. Like their legal peers, 1.5-generation undocumented immigrants may also desire to evade the ethnic economies. However, given legal barriers into the primary labor market, these niches might serve as protective safety nets.

Furthermore, the potential for jobs in ethnic niches to be an economic springboard for undocumented immigrant young adults may vary. Korean for-profit niches are distributed across a diverse range of professional industries, whereas Mexicans occupy less favorable for-profit niches in a narrower subset of retail and

service industries (Waldinger 2001). The principal locations of readily accessible niches in an ethnoracial community could significantly shape the types of positions available, in turn affecting not only one's career trajectory but also one's sense of self-worth and identity. Many studies have suggested that, for individuals belonging to disadvantaged social groups, using homophilous social ties to find employment has at best a negligible, and often negative, effect on their employment outcomes (Battu, Seaman, and Zenou 2011; Elliott 1999). These findings have led sociologists to argue that these individuals have the "wrong networks," preventing them from achieving more desirable employment outcomes, and instead channeling them to low-paying, low-status, and ethnically homogenous jobs (Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006). However, this perspective unduly focuses only on the micro-level relationship between the individual's network resources and that individual's employment outcomes. Especially for the immigrant case, this perspective fails to take into account that individuals are actors embedded in larger structures and organizations that purposively and nonpurposively affect social capital (Small 2009). Work outcomes are not only contingent on an individual's job search strategies and social ties. They also depend on the structural conditions within which these ties are situated that determine how and whether one can, in fact, activate these ties (Menjívar 2000; Small 2009; Smith 2010). Moreover, niches vary not only by ethnic composition and occupational prestige, but also by entrepreneurial objectives. Research on undocumented youth's civic and political engagement points to the importance of grassroots and nonprofit advocacy organizations in positively shaping the experiences and outcomes of the undocumented community (Nicholls 2013). Given that the vast majority of undocumented immigrant organizations are composed of Mexican-origin individuals, we would expect that involvement in nonprofit niches would not only foster collective empowerment, but also shape tangible individual-level employment outcomes through direct employment as well as information capital.

Considering these complex contextual dynamics, a broader institutional setting must

be considered in the conceptualization of ethnic niches. Therefore, I adopt the idea of ethnic niches, which the literature has historically characterized exclusively as for-profit businesses, to encompass both for-profit and non-profit organizations in which most of its occupants are co-ethnics. Building on the long history of research on ethnic economies, I further suggest that there are two conceptually distinct levels: *ethnic industries* and *ethnic organizations*. Ethnic industries are the types of occupations certain ethnoracial groups are likely to occupy (for example, Mexicans in agriculture or Filipinos in nursing), whereas ethnic organizations are instantiations of these ethnic industries, when the work is owned and operated by co-ethnics (such as a Korean-owned laundromat or an Indian-owned liquor store); ethnic organizations can be for-profit businesses or nonprofit organizations.

Although the wrong networks perspective suggests that ethnic niches are unproductive for the 1.5-generation undocumented immigrant community, we must recognize that, particularly for individuals without work authorization, these structures can facilitate crucial material and social benefits. The prevailing literature finds that the beneficial role of ethnic niches diminishes with each generation. However, although far from an ideal employment situation, being able to mobilize collective ethnic capital and access different types of ethnic industries and organizations in particular may be instrumental for 1.5-generation undocumented young adults who face barriers to the broader labor market.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This article draws on thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews with "DACAdmented" Asian and Latino undocumented young adults from the greater San Francisco and Los Angeles areas. California is the most appropriate site for this research as it has the highest share and greatest ethnic diversity of undocumented immigrants and the largest number of DACA-approved youth and young adults (Migration Policy Institute 2014). To be eligible for this study, respondents had to be twenty-one years old or older, be of Korean or Mexican descent, and have DACA. I restricted my sample to

DACA beneficiaries in part for methodological reasons: interviewing individuals who are temporarily protected by this program minimized risk of detrimental legal consequences and thus facilitated data collection. Further, focusing on this subgroup reveals that even strong advantages along traditional lines of incorporation are significantly circumscribed by immigration status.

In an effort to overcome some of the selection bias in chain-referral sampling common in research on vulnerable populations while seeking to maximize the trust and comfort of respondents, I used two strategies to recruit program participants: a convenience sample and a snowball sample. First, I reached out to a broad range of individuals in my personal network and asked them to provide my contact information to anyone they knew who would be eligible for the study. Respondents found in this way contacted me directly to express their interest in participating. Because these respondents were often unable to provide referrals to other undocumented peers due to the latter's desire to remain "in the shadows," I also reached out to a small group of undocumented student activists who were more readily able to provide referrals because of their activist network. However, because I found that their interviews were often qualitatively different from nonactivist respondents, I limited this subsample to nine.²

The thirty respondents include sixteen undocumented young adults of South Korean origin, thirteen of Mexican origin, and one of Indian origin (see table 1). Most of the interviews were conducted between the summer of 2013 and spring of 2014; five were conducted in 2016. All of my respondents had received DACA benefits by this time. Interviews lasted one to three hours and included questions about their migration experience, school experiences, work experiences, relationships with family and friends, and how DACA may have affected these spheres. Nineteen of the respondents were female and eleven were male; they ranged be-

tween the ages of twenty-one and thirty. I intentionally focused my sample to include young adults over twenty-one in order to understand transitions to adulthood that would not be captured with a younger cohort. Educationally, my respondents were high achievers: the majority had graduated from college (or had some college) and two had received master's degrees.

In this article, I focus primarily on their labor market experiences *before* receiving work authorization through DACA. Limiting my analysis to pre-DACA employment allows for a clearer understanding of how high-achieving undocumented young adults navigate the labor market and mobilize ethnic resources in the midst of their inhibiting legal situations. I highlight the experiences of high-achieving DACAmented individuals because they have been given special attention by local, state, and federal governing bodies and therefore warrant close examination by scholars. A focused examination on this subgroup provides important theoretical insights into the processes by which the absence of legal status shapes the everyday experiences of undocumented immigrants, constraining the lives of even those who would be considered advantaged relative to the broader undocumented community.

FINDINGS: HOW ETHNIC NICHES MATTER

My research suggests that undocumented young adults' work experiences are significantly shaped by the ethnic niches they are able to access and mobilize in light of their constrained conditions. Hence, the interaction of the availability of ethnic niches and demand for ethnic labor leads to different outcomes for my sample. I demonstrate, first, that the transition to and navigation of work has been one of the most significant, formative aspects of respondents' lives as college graduates without legal status. To be excluded from the professions toward which they had invested all their academic efforts is one of the harshest realities they must

2. Nine respondents were involved in the undocumented activist movement to varying degrees from occasional volunteer to vocal leader (four Korean and five Mexican). I found it more difficult to garner responses situated in personal, concrete details from my activist interviewees unless specifically probed, because they seemed to be accustomed to sharing their experiences in a more abstract, politicized manner. In my analysis, I was therefore more sensitive to any potential differences between activist and nonactivist responses.

Table 1. Respondent Demographic and Pre-DACA Job Characteristics

| Pseudonym | Ethnicity | Gender | Age | Education | Parental Education ^b | Employment | Ethnic Niche |
|-----------|-----------|--------|-----|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Jayani | Indian | Female | 28 | Bachelor's | n/a | Korean advertising agency | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Christine | Korean | Female | 22 | Bachelor's ^a | Some college | Tutor/Korean media | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Elaine | Korean | Female | 22 | Bachelor's | High school | No work | - |
| Grace | Korean | Female | 26 | Bachelor's ^a | College | Korean café | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Helen | Korean | Female | 22 | Bachelor's ^a | College | Tutor/Korean café | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Julie | Korean | Female | 24 | Bachelor's ^a | College | Korean restaurant/café | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Miyoung | Korean | Female | 21 | Bachelor's | n/a | n/a | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Nancy | Korean | Female | 27 | High school | n/a | Korean fashion merchandising | - |
| Rachel | Korean | Female | 24 | Bachelor's | College | No work | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Sana | Korean | Female | 23 | Bachelor's | Some college | Korean law firm | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Edward | Korean | Male | 25 | Bachelor's | Master's | Korean contracting firm | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Jeff | Korean | Male | 24 | Bachelor's | n/a | Korean restaurant | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Kenny | Korean | Male | 26 | Bachelor's | College | Korean restaurant | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Kevin | Korean | Male | 26 | Bachelor's | College | Software engineering | Entrepreneurship |
| Paul | Korean | Male | 27 | Bachelor's | High school | Korean law firm | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Sun | Korean | Male | 23 | Master's ^a | Some college | Korean restaurant | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Young | Korean | Male | 25 | Master's ^a | College | Korean tennis academy | Ethnic organization (for-profit) |
| Ana | Mexican | Female | 25 | Master's | Some college | Fast food chain/franchise | Ethnic industry (for-profit) |
| Ashley | Mexican | Female | 27 | Master's | High school | Italian restaurant | Ethnic industry (for-profit) |
| Gabriela | Mexican | Female | 27 | Master's ^a | n/a | Community health clinic program | Ethnic organization (nonprofit) |
| Isabel | Mexican | Female | 27 | Bachelor's | High school | IT company | - |
| Lucia | Mexican | Female | 26 | Bachelor's ^a | n/a | Movie theater, administration | - |
| Mariana | Mexican | Female | 26 | Bachelor's ^a | Elementary | Nannying/babysitting | Ethnic industry (for-profit) |
| Miriam | Mexican | Female | 24 | Bachelor's ^a | n/a | Cleaning/housekeeping | Ethnic industry (for-profit) |
| Roslyn | Mexican | Female | 30 | Bachelor's ^a | Elementary | American restaurant | Ethnic industry (for-profit) |
| Sara | Mexican | Female | 22 | High school | n/a | Cleaning/fast food chain | Ethnic industry (for-profit) |
| Alejandro | Mexican | Male | 22 | Bachelor's | High school | Immigrant advocacy organization | Ethnic organization (nonprofit) |
| Felipe | Mexican | Male | 26 | Bachelor's | High school | Fast food chain | Ethnic industry (for-profit) |
| James | Mexican | Male | 30 | Master's ^a | Some college | Afterschool program | Ethnic organization (nonprofit) |
| Tomas | Mexican | Male | 23 | Bachelor's | College | Financial services | Entrepreneurship |

Source: Author's compilation.

^aIn progress at time of interview.

^bParental education is the highest level of education received by one or both parents; n/a indicates that the respondent chose not to answer.

confront. Second, I show that the divergent trajectories of labor market incorporation of Korean- and Mexican-origin respondents differ qualitatively because of the characteristics of their respective ethnic niches. Despite similar academic achievement, professional aspirations, and psychological resilience, Korean respondents were more likely to enter into a greater diversity of occupations than their Mexican counterparts because of their access to a greater variety of for-profit ethnic organizations. Mexican respondents, on the other hand, varied in their employment trajectories depending on their connection to the nonprofit undocumented immigrant advocacy movement. All Mexican respondents felt constrained in low-wage jobs in restrictive ethnic industries, but those who participated in ethnic organizations, namely, nonprofit agencies for undocumented immigrants, discovered alternative pathways to work deemed more fulfilling.

To be clear, the enclave occupations held by all of these high-achieving individuals are incommensurate with their educational attainment, professional aspirations, and desire to be employed lawfully. However, opportunities to work in a wider range of industries due to available ethnic resources could have beneficial long-term implications such as expedited incorporation into the primary labor market, particularly after DACA approval or potential legalization.

Transition into the Labor Market: Confronting Illegality

A recurring theme in interviewee responses was the centrality of work to their social identity regardless of their educational attainment. However, the findings discussed in this section are based primarily on the majority of the sample, who received at least a bachelor's degree. These individuals represent a small segment of the undocumented young adult population: they were not only able to matriculate into a postsecondary institution, but also to overcome the numerous structural barriers that often hindered educational progress. For these individuals, the question "What's next?" was a substantial source of trauma reminiscent of the anxiety and hopelessness that plagued them in their transition out of high school.

Twenty-six-year-old Mexican Felipe, who graduated from a prestigious university with Latin honors, described his concerns as a bomb that could explode at any moment: "It gave me some anxiety. I was like 'what's going to happen after I graduate?' It was like a *ticking time bomb*. . . . It was a nagging worry that would come up a lot" [emphasis added].

Despite the awareness of their inability to work legally, the sheer hope for a pathway to legalization sustained respondents' motivation to piece together funds to pay for tuition and prepare themselves for life after college. When Kevin, who emigrated from Korea when he was three, entered college, he realized that "the glory days" of high school were "all gone." "There's that trite saying 'College is the best four years of my life, and like high school is terrible.' Mine was the exact opposite," he told me. As a student in a competitive university, the pressure to obtain summer internships to secure a job after graduation had plagued him. He shared his experience of applying to jobs regardless of the legal barriers: "I lied and said I was a U.S. citizen just so I could get interviews. I got interviews from like all the big companies. I graduated cum laude so I had a good GPA and all that stuff . . . but *I knew I couldn't do it*" [emphasis added].

Twenty-four-year-old Korean college graduate Rachel said much the same, that her legal situation presented itself as a more salient issue in college. "I think in high school, I didn't really think about it too much. It wasn't really a big part of my life. But in college, I was like, what do I do now after college, you know? I'm here in college, I'm studying and all of that, but then what am I doing this for? I would question that. And I'd be like *how long do I have to live like this*, you know?" [emphasis added]. As Rachel explained, although hurdles continue to persist for undocumented youth pursuing education, confronting the impenetrable door to a professional career is equally daunting, if not more so.

The hopelessness that came with navigating legal status also peaked during college for Paul, who grew up in Koreatown. All he ever wanted was "to work for an American company," but when he realized that he could not obtain any jobs or internships, he "blamed

[his] parents” for his situation. He recounted seriously considering “self-deportation” to Korea, his parents’ heritage country, or France, where he was born. He poignantly told me, “After I graduated from college, *I had nowhere to go*” [emphasis added]. Despite his internal turmoil, he did not communicate his frustrations to his parents. No one, not even his parents, could allay his feelings of isolation and helplessness through this transition into the labor market.

My findings illustrate that, for high-achieving individuals, the transition out of college is one of the most traumatic moments at which they must “learn to be illegal” (Gonzales 2011). In addition to this juncture in high school when many undocumented youth discover the magnitude of the consequences of their legal situation (Gonzales 2011), the transition out of higher education into the labor market is a qualitatively distinct season of crisis. Entering the workforce full time is difficult not only because of the lack of preparation for physically demanding, restrictive labor (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012), but also because of the sheer deprivation from their long-held aspirations. Although those who have the combination of academic resilience and financial means to pursue higher education are but a small fraction of the undocumented population, as long as they are somehow able to find the resources, the opportunity to attend school legally exists. Afterward, however, the options are but two: no work or illegal work.

For this reason, a few respondents, when weighing their options after college graduation, decided to continue in higher education to remain “protected” by their status as students. Graduate school was the safest route, a legitimate “excuse not to have a job,” as twenty-seven-year-old Mexican Ashley explained:

INTERVIEWER: Were there any points through high school or college when you felt really burnt out?

ASHLEY: Not in high school so much, but in college, especially when I was about to be done with my B.A., because . . . I was thinking like, [my friends] are going to be able to get a job, and I’m not going to be able to get a job . . . It was like “What am I going to do now?” I

went to college, but I can’t work in something related to what I studied.

INTERVIEWER: So the decision to go to the master’s program was . . .

ASHLEY: In part because I knew I couldn’t get a job. It was like going to a master’s program was like an *excuse for me not to have a job*. Oh okay, I can’t get a job because I’m doing my master’s [emphasis added].

The trauma of an uncertain future was more salient for Ashley in college than it was in high school. Fear, anxiety, and shame plagued her as she realized the insurmountable barriers to entering occupations related to her undergraduate studies. Meanwhile, her documented friends had opportunities to enter the labor market without these obstacles. Despite the financial burden of educational expenses, for Ashley, continuing to learn and improve her credentials provided a sense of security that would at least temporarily shield her from the stigma of unemployment. Similarly, twenty-three-year-old Korean Sun strategically chose to attend graduate school immediately after college in hopes that a pathway to work and legalization would open up in the near future: “I thought my best bet was just to go to grad school . . . and then maybe afterwards everything would just work out step by step.”

Although only a few respondents were able to enter graduate studies, their choice is not surprising. Their desire to stay in school reflects the protected, “legitimate” identity that undocumented college students in California find in AB540, an assembly bill allowing them to pay in-state tuition given they fulfill certain qualifications (Abrego 2008). However, despite the bleakness of their career prospects, the majority still had to find employment regardless of their level of education. As children of immigrant parents who have instilled in them a strong work ethic, and an equally strong belief in the American promise of opportunity (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012), their careers are a defining aspect of their social identities. In the next section, I describe the integral role of ethnic niches in the divergent employment trajectories of the undocumented young adults in my sample. Despite similar levels of aptitude and drive, the nature of employment ulti-

mately achieved varied according to my respondents' access to and activation of their co-ethnic resources.

THE ROLE OF ETHNIC NICHE ON WORK TRAJECTORIES

Diverse Employment Possibilities in Korean Niches

"It was Korean-owned definitely. It was through a connection through my mom, or else it was really hard to find jobs working under the table."

Korean-owned *definitely*. To Sun and the other Korean respondents, the availability of work in co-ethnic organizations was a presumed reality that provided basic material benefits despite their legal status. All of them worked for Korean entrepreneurs leading to a diversity of work experiences for this group: restaurants, law firms, afterschool educational centers, a tennis academy, and a fashion merchandising company. Having a range of for-profit ethnic organizations readily accessible that willingly paid them "under the table" proved to be a significant source of material support for Korean respondents who otherwise would not be able to work at all due to their legal status. Although it was often still difficult to make ends meet, because their income was critical for the financial survival of the family, the Korean interviewees had more opportunities to work that extended beyond occupations conventionally characterized as low-wage, blue-collar labor.

All Korean respondents would search for employment primarily in Korean businesses because they knew that the chance of being hired despite their legal status was higher. "Actually I would look for places that were Korean-owned because those were the ones who pay you cash. Like even if you have your documents, they pay you cash, because they wanna avoid tax and all that stuff," twenty-seven-year-old Nancy explained. The Korean young adults in the sample used a variety of methods to find their jobs, but primarily through their parents or other family members, all of whom worked in Korean businesses. Christine, however, applied formally through a Korean media company. When I asked whether her employers were aware of her status, she explained that, though it was never explicitly discussed, they

were sympathetic to her undocumented position: "Well, so the person who worked before me, he was from my high school and he's Korean. He is in the same situation as me, and he was getting paid by cash. And he knew me, and yeah . . . I think he told the owner that I am in the same situation, and they were understanding."

Christine continued to explain the generosity of her other employers. As a private tutor for young Korean students, she was paid \$20 an hour. She described getting "more money than she deserved" at a Korean restaurant where she had worked temporarily one summer. To Christine, finding jobs easily in Korean niches was possible because of the cultural sentiment of 정 (*jung*), which roughly translates to a deep emotional bond stemming from shared experience and social responsibility. Whether Korean entrepreneurs' motivation to hire undocumented co-ethnics stems from *jung* or from a desire to evade taxes (as Nancy thought), these readily accessible for-profit organizations are sources of material security for my Korean-origin respondents.

Because of their access to jobs in co-ethnic niches, a work authorization card through DACA was therefore described by some respondents as more of a symbol of security and freedom to do things the "right way" than a significant quantitative increase in income. For Paul, more than by any of the other barriers that come with undocumented status, he had felt most deprived by the inability to work in an American company in the formal labor market. After graduating from college, Paul never went without a paid job—in fact, he worked in two law firms—but each time was employed by a Korean enterprise. Although these organizations provided material stability and work in a professional industry, Paul described the employment as tedious and irrelevant to his bachelor's degree in business. Having developed transferable skills at the Korean-operated law firms, he quickly secured a job in a "more Americanized company" once he had received work authorization through DACA.

For Nancy, who mostly worked in the Korean niche of the fashion industry in Los Angeles, "money was never an issue" because she "never had problems looking for work":

I'm looking for a job where I can work legally. . . . I mean, I'm not going to be making enough money obviously, because I was making a lot more before [DACA]. Obviously I wasn't paying taxes. . . . I had five to six years of experience in the industry, and they have like a going rate for how experienced you are, so I was making pretty good money. And it was all in cash, so I just put everything in my safe. I get paid, I put it in my safe. I didn't have a bank account, nothing. Money was never an issue for me actually. God—He's always provided. I've never had problems looking for work.

Shortly after obtaining her DACA benefits, Nancy was able to find a steady job at a major American clothing brand and finish her bachelor's. Although she has continued to struggle to make ends meet with both full-time work and full-time school, her years of working in the Korean ethnic economy provided her the means to pursue her career aspirations once a legal avenue opened up.

The experiences of 1.5-generation Korean-origin undocumented respondents demonstrate the variation in occupational location and prestige among undocumented immigrants. Previous studies have suggested that the children of immigrants avoid working in ethnic niches and that such work may even adversely affect their social mobility. However, my findings demonstrate that their undocumented peers, who have also been raised, educated, and culturally conditioned in the United States, may actually benefit from mobilizing these ethnic resources. Access to a diversity of for-profit ethnic organizations, from a law firm to a fashion merchandising company, provided opportunities for Korean respondents to work beyond industries that are often associated with undocumented labor. Contrary to prior argu-

ments affirming the ineffectual role of ethnic niches for 1.5- and second-generation immigrants, my findings show that working in ethnic organizations can indeed serve as an economic and professional springboard for the 1.5 generation who face legal barriers to the formal labor market.

Latino Niches: Limits and Opportunities

Despite comparable educational backgrounds and aspirations for upward mobility, Mexican-origin respondents experienced qualitatively different occupational pathways than their Korean-origin counterparts. Most worked in more physically intensive occupations, such as food service, swap meets, and domestic labor as nannies or cleaners. Years of excelling in their academic careers proved useless in the labor market, severely constraining their professional prospects. Hence, differences in the principal types, levels, and availability of ethnic niches—a diversity of for-profit Korean organizations versus Latino-dominated industries of largely low-wage, blue-collar labor—led to divergent trajectories for these undocumented young adults.

Within this overall pattern, however, some Mexican respondents were able to access an alternative pathway to employment through pan-ethnic Latino organizations in the burgeoning realm of undocumented youth advocacy.³ Nonprofit organizations, particularly those tailored to support undocumented immigrants, acted not only as direct employers, but also as a springboard for employment through the dissemination of invaluable information. That is, I find bifurcated outcomes among the Mexican undocumented 1.5-generation young adult population: one constrained and one less constrained. The employment decisions and experiences of Mexican respondents varied depending on their re-

3. The descriptor *pan-ethnic* more accurately captures the composition of the Latino nonprofit niches in which these respondents were involved. Because of a shared Spanish language heritage, it is easier for pan-ethnic Latino organizations to emerge and be sustained (compared to pan-ethnic Asian niches). Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that undocumented immigrant organizations are explicitly exclusionary. However, similar to for-profit Korean niches, where owners, managers, and employees are all likely to be Korean (but not necessarily so), in an analogous way, nonprofit Latino niches tend to be predominantly Latino and draw from co-ethnoracial resources and funders. Despite increasing pan-ethnic mobilization among all undocumented communities, in sheer numbers, the vast majority are of Latino origin, and, as a few Asian respondents explained, the isolated nature of niches for undocumented immigrants make them conceptually similar to market-based niches.

relationship to the predominantly Latino niche of undocumented immigrant advocacy.

The experiences of Felipe, who grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, highlight the difficulties in navigating barriers to the labor market despite strong individual-level credentials and the significant potential role of ethnic niches in structuring outcomes. Felipe has been working as a cashier at a fast-food restaurant for the past several years even though he graduated with Latin honors from a prestigious university. In fact, he enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of college so much that he stayed an extra semester after completing his requirements. However, as it came time to confront life after college, anxiety loomed over him. Felipe became angry and frustrated over the restricted options for employment as he did not have access to networks that could offer information about working without legal status.

I was nervous about getting work, like I didn't know where to look for it or who would hire me with my status. I mean, I didn't really have a network, you know what I mean? Since we didn't really tell anyone about it, we didn't have like a network of like 'oh these people would hire.' And I guess a lot of it was unwillingness to try, because I didn't wanna do a lot of the kind of things that were like. . . . You know? I mean I was like, I friggin graduated college. *I don't want to be like a dishwasher, that kinda thing.* You know what I mean? [emphasis added]

When he described not “really [having] a network,” he was not referring to any network, but one that would lead him to a profession that was reputable, remunerative, and relevant to his studies. He was aware that his networks could provide jobs, such as dishwashing, but the dearth of a diversity of ethnic niches that extended beyond blue-collar labor was a structural reality that Felipe could not overcome despite his human capital. In fact, even with work authorization through DACA, Felipe has been struggling for months to secure a job in the primary labor market. He lamented that, even with magna cum laude on his resume, his limited employment experience in food service

has hindered him from advancing as a job candidate.

Socialized by the merit-based American education system to work hard and aim high (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012), all the Mexican respondents echoed Felipe's feelings of entitlement to more rewarding careers that reflected their academic achievement and professional potential. Twenty-five-year-old Ana, who came to the United States as a toddler, also had no other choice but to work at restaurant franchises even after graduating from a top state university. It was clear that Ana sensed a stark dissonance between the menial line of labor to which she felt limited and the career trajectories she felt she deserved.

I hated it. I mean, I don't know, you just feel so useless, having a degree from one of the best institutions in the world and working as a waitress, getting yelled at by your customers for doing something, forgetting to bring this, the food taking too long. I hated it. So I always knew I wanted to go back to school. I never saw myself stopping at a bachelor's. Especially being from [my university], where everyone just talks about going to medical school. . . . All my friends are in medical school right now. I honestly came from the AP world, the science world, where everyone wants to go get an MD. . . . So I even looked down on master's programs honestly. I had a really big head coming from [my university]. [emphasis added]

Having been surrounded by high-achieving, ambitious peers throughout her schooling, Ana struggled not only with the insurmountable barrier to her professional aspirations but also with the threat that legal status posed on her social identity among her friends. Feelings of inadequacy and failure manifested acutely for educationally successful young adults like Felipe and Ana.

Alejandro had also been an outstanding student throughout his academic career, but when he had to confront a future without job prospects, he described his “dread of failure”:

Well I just felt desperate. Not knowing what I was going to do. And I felt that if I didn't do

anything, I was going to fail my parents and my sister. Like I dreaded going back [home] and saying, “Hey Lucia [my younger sister], after I graduate from college, I can’t do anything.” I didn’t want to go back and tell her, you’re going to try really hard to get into college and be a top student so you could get a scholarship, and then go to college. And then after college, you’re not going to get anything done because you can’t get a job. I just couldn’t do that . . . and I didn’t want to go back and work construction with my dad, because I also felt like that would be a failure.

Despite his impressive academic achievement and assertive, outgoing personality, Alejandro felt that he had no other immediate options beyond working in conventional industries, such as construction. Anxieties surrounding the bleakness of employment opportunities stemmed not only from financial concerns, but also from being unable to pursue a profession he deemed himself worthy for. The inability to obtain a job that reflects academic trajectory is a matter of not only material stability, but also security in social identity, even among close family members.

Hence, desperate for a job other than construction with his father, Alejandro made myriad plans to be an entrepreneur, considering ventures such as opening a cafe, monetizing a blog, and contracting for financial firms. In fact, he had decided to major in economics even though he preferred humanities and social sciences, because he had acquired “insider” knowledge from undocumented student groups that entrepreneurship was a viable route for undocumented immigrants: “Finally I ended up deciding on economics because it was like a skill that I could very easily use to start my own business or to do consulting or any kind of contract, since undocumented individuals could own their own businesses as independent contractors.”

Ultimately, however, like most other respondents, Alejandro did not become an indepen-

dent contractor by starting a business. Instead he was able to secure a job under independent contractor status at a nonprofit undocumented student advocacy group in which he was actively involved. Alejandro therefore benefited from the timely job opening in a nonprofit Latino organization. However, if it were not for these resources garnered from his co-ethnic community, his most tangible option would have been working in blue-collar labor like many of his undocumented peers.

Like Alejandro, a few other Mexican respondents were able to avoid low-wage jobs through nonprofit organizations composed primarily of co-racial Latino peers and mentors. Hence, although Korean respondents appeared to be better situated in terms of their access to readily available for-profit ethnic organizations, Mexican respondents often circumvented barriers to legal employment in the formal labor market by undertaking either entrepreneurship or employment with pan-ethnic nonprofits.⁴ Like second-generation immigrants who have been found to engage in “expressive entrepreneurship” as a way to avoid conventional low-wage occupations (Fernandez-Kelly and Konczal 2005), Mexican respondents used their knowledge of independent contracting to pursue more meaningful employment. Unlike the documented second generation, this sample of undocumented 1.5-generation Latinos pursued this path out of necessity as well as for personal satisfaction. For undocumented young adults, satisfaction does not come simply from engaging in a different type of work from their first-generation parents who primarily sought self-employment for financial stability, but also from liberation from racialized blue-collar labor.

Twenty-seven-year-old Gabriela was also able to gather information about “creative ways to work and get paid” by participating in an institutionalized network of high-achieving undocumented peers and allies. After a few years of working various jobs, such as a parking attendant, a cashier, and a telemarketer,

4. Independent contractors perform work for other individuals or entities, but are not their employees. Because independent contractors are not obligated by immigration law to verify legal status, creating a company or becoming an independent contractor has been a way for undocumented immigrants to work and get around immigration enforcement.

she found full-time work as a program manager at a nonprofit community health clinic serving underprivileged youth. She attributed her ability to find this job that would “give [her] skills that were going to lead to some sort of career path” to her involvement in an undocumented student group.

I think luckily I had a good network. Like, my friend Miguel who was working at this nonprofit. . . . I was like whoa, you know? He could do that? . . . So I think that opened up my mind a little bit more, like to different possibilities. Like, okay, maybe I could try this somewhere else, as long as I can talk to people who are already working there, or who are in the same situation. So it was always about networks, like who do I know who’s already doing something.

Gabriela recognized that she would not have been able to gain access to work beyond Latino-dominated service industries had she not been familiar with individuals who had already creatively navigated their legal situation. Some of the Mexican undocumented young adults in my sample, therefore, leveraged their educational background and involvement in nonprofit Latino organizations to strategize innovative ways to work in occupations beyond low-wage industries. These findings are echoed by a *Los Angeles Times* article that illustrated ways young undocumented immigrants found to be employed by becoming “their own bosses” (Carcamo 2013). However, entrepreneurial spirit, academic background, and resiliency are not enough on their own. These individuals were well connected to the undocumented student movement, which provided unique resources specifically targeting the empowerment of this community. Not only did they form new individual and institutional ties through their participation, which would lead to an expansion of viable options for employment, they also found significant relief from other material stressors such as navigating the application for DACA. These organizations, therefore, opened up tangible opportunities for career development, but more important, were critical in instilling new hope for a better future in solidarity with other undocumented young adults.

The vast majority of respondents, therefore, drew on co-ethnoracial resources, but the structural location of these resources was qualitatively distinct. Korean respondents were able to rely on the collective capital of their co-ethnic community and Korean-owned businesses. However, Mexican young adults—though they were able to access paid work in low-wage ethnic industries—did not end up in what they perceived as the “right” jobs. Mexican respondents who found their employment trajectories relatively more personally satisfying did so by virtue of their participation in heavily Latino nonprofit organizations. My data suggest, therefore, that the types of ethnic (and pan-ethnic) networks and niches to which undocumented young adults have access assume a significant role in shaping their employment trajectories.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Studies have shown that 1.5-generation undocumented immigrants’ labor market opportunities are stratified by legal status (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). These findings, however, illustrate that the opportunities are also stratified by ethnoracial background by way of the collective capital and resources in an immigrant community. All respondents, both Korean- and Mexican-origin, placed enormous value on their work, seeking a career of integrity and relevance to their academic backgrounds. Work not only was integral to the formation of their social identities, but also fulfilled their pragmatic need to sustain themselves and their families financially. However, their employment trajectories were significantly shaped by the structural conditions of accessible ethnic niches. Korean participants collectively occupied a diversity of occupations beyond those typically associated with undocumented labor, owing to a wide variety of readily available for-profit ethnic organizations. Mexican participants, in otherwise similar situations, generally lacked access to comparable organizations and took on menial low-wage labor instead. However, some Mexican undocumented young adults found employment through involvement in the pan-ethnic organizations of undocumented youth advocacy. Occupational stratification therefore exists within the undoc-

umented Mexican young adult community based on access to different types and levels of ethnic niches. Supportive immigrant networks, then, coupled with access to high-performing ethnic organizations—whether for-profit or nonprofit—significantly affect the material well-being of young job-seekers without documentation. Only by understanding the interaction of personal resilience, close networks, and ethnic niches can we begin to capture the nuanced mechanisms by which undocumented young adults navigate their immigration status.

It may not be surprising that ethnoracial background often shapes connections to ethnic niches. However, I emphasize that the primary mechanism here is not ethnic identity, but instead access to ethnic niches. Jayani, a twenty-eight-year-old Indian college graduate, worked at a Korean advertising agency for nearly five years. Although not Korean herself, she was able to secure a position through a Korean friend who helped her gain “experience in a lot of different areas.” Jayani remained at this job until receiving DACA approval, immediately after which she found a legal position with comprehensive benefits and started pursuing a master’s degree part time. Even though the Korean ethnic economy was neither situated in her ideal occupational industry nor immediately accessible to her as a non-Korean, the structural conditions of the Korean ethnic economy made it possible for her to cultivate skills that were marketable after obtaining the opportunity to work legally with DACA. Hence, looking solely at an individual’s cultural background is not enough: particular opportunity structures that transmit ethnic capital lead to divergent work experiences for Asian and Latino undocumented young adults.

These experiences are likely to have profound long-term implications for undocumented young adults and their families. Previous studies have argued that working in ethnic niches adversely affects the mobility of 1.5- and second-generation immigrant youths (such as Kasinitz et al. 2008). Considering the consequential barrier of legal status reveals a different story. English-language skills and cultural competency allow them to navigate ethnic organizations in strategic, innovative ways dis-

tinct from their first-generation parents. Although mainstream economic conditions may be the primary structural factor influencing employment outcomes for documented immigrant youth and young adults, ethnic organizations can play a vital role for their undocumented peers in providing immediate material resources and potentially long-term benefits, pending work authorization.

These findings suggest that the primary source of difference between Asian and Latino undocumented immigrants with respect to material circumstances may lie in the availability of ethnic niches capable of addressing their immediate needs. Scholars have pointed to the institutional mechanisms of legal entry and hyperselectivity of Asian immigrants to understand their higher human capital (Nee and Holbrow 2013; Lee and Zhou 2015), particularly when contrasted with the Latino population at the opposite end of the documentation and class spectrum (Massey 2007; Massey and Pren 2012). This study shows how the collective capital of Asian immigrants, particularly with regard to legal status and economic resources, has consequential spillover effects for their co-ethnoracial undocumented counterparts. The relative impact of documentation on work, therefore, is influenced by the broader proportion of documentation of the co-ethnic community. Among Asians in California, opportunities for employment are likely to be more extensive given a readily accessible network of co-ethnoracial entrepreneurs (Frauenfelder 2016). This study’s Korean respondents (and single Indian respondent) benefited from the broader Korean community in which they were embedded, mitigating legal violence, at least in part (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). An understanding that they were undocumented was often tacit between Korean respondents and their employers, but these same individuals generally remained “in the shadows” within their personal networks and even with many of their coworkers because of the intense shame and stigma associated with their residency status. Their ethnoracial identity nevertheless provided a kind of protective cloak that allowed them to accumulate financial resources and achieve a modicum of legitimacy in their jobs, the frustrations of legally barred aspirations notwithstanding.

However, the most salient support for Mexican respondents may not be stable employment opportunities in co-ethnic niches but instead greater access to institutionalized resources outside the traditional sphere of work: a large and vibrant undocumented Latino community. Hence, though they may not enjoy equal access to employment in for-profit ethnic organizations, some have found creative ways to take advantage of institutionalized networks through nonprofit advocacy organizations. This may also be true for Asian and other non-Latino undocumented young adults (particularly with increasing pan-ethnic mobilization), but given the sheer size of the Latino undocumented population, Latinos are the primary recipients of resources for undocumented immigrants. For instance, although Sun was civically and politically engaged in the undocumented student movement, he described experiencing the added disadvantage of being an *Asian* undocumented student. Because many scholarships were “specifically for [those of] Latino or Hispanic descent, and my mom was struggling, my sister was struggling, . . . I just found my own way to hustle,” Sun explained. Relative to the undocumented Asian community, nonprofit Latino niches not only provide instrumental support but also offer spaces for greater solidarity and empowerment. That is, both Korean and Mexican undocumented young adults gain resources through their respective ethnic organizations, but the nature and strength of these supports vary. This variation may explain diverging group-level patterns of economic, social, and civic integration, including the likelihood of political mobilization in the undocumented community.

Furthermore, the collective ethnic capital across some Asian groups may be one explanation for the disproportionately low DACA application rates among Asian-origin youth and young adults. Although additional study is necessary, these findings suggest that the capacity to address immediate financial concerns through employment at ethnic niches may delay the exigency of requesting DACA, the primary material benefit of which is work authorization. This, coupled with the persistent stigmatization of undocumented status and

relatively sparse institutionalized support systems for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) undocumented immigrants, may contribute to the fact that more than 85 percent of those eligible have not requested DACA. That is, they may not perceive the benefits as outweighing the costs of coming forward, placing their unprotected undocumented relatives at risk and bringing shame to themselves and their families.

The substantive and theoretical implications of this research point to important, new directions of inquiry. In light of the potential short-term and long-term consequences of participation in diverse ethnic niches, further work should be undertaken to examine these key support structures for undocumented immigrants. Advancing extant scholarship, I suggest that ethnic niches be differentiated into ethnic industries and ethnic organizations for greater theoretical and empirical precision. Particularly because of the evolving character of ethnic niches in contemporary society, further work should examine them in light of this conceptual distinction. Moreover, although not the primary focus of this article, respondents’ changes in employment experiences after work authorization through DACA offer strong evidence that working in certain ethnic organizations, though far from ideal professional circumstances, may equip 1.5-generation undocumented young adults with occupational skills that may lead to expedited career advancement if and once they are legalized.

By examining the role of ethnic niches on employment trajectories of Korean and Mexican undocumented 1.5-generation young adults, I have sought to highlight *structured heterogeneity* in the experience of illegality. In this study, I demonstrate how the economic consequences of illegality are conditioned by ethnoracial background via the mediating structures of ethnic niches. Mexican-origin Felipe had graduated from a top university with Latin honors and Korean-origin Paul’s academic credentials were not nearly as strong. However, their memberships in different ethnoracial communities led Felipe to stay on as a cashier of a fast-food franchise for several years and to remain trapped in that position even after receiving work authorization

through DACA, while Paul managed to work in Korean-operated law firms after college graduation and then, with DACA benefits, quickly transition into a job with benefits in the formal labor market. Future research may usefully interrogate other potential sources of heterogeneity—such as gender, socioeconomic status, educational background, family composition of immigration status, and so on—that may further modify the material and symbolic ramifications of illegality. Especially in light of record high deportation rates and heightened struggles around immigration law and policy, scholars must consider the complexities of the constitutive role of legal status on the livelihoods of immigrants, particularly as those who are differentially stratified in the broader fabric of American society.

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