

Situating Latinx Immigrant Romantic Relationships in the Context of Illegality

Using a Socioculturally Attuned Lens

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Over the past two decades, there have been significant advances in research with Latinx immigrant families residing in the United States (Romero & Umaña-Taylor, 2018). This research has included to a limited degree a focus on intimate partner romantic relationships, with most studies examining relationships among Mexican-origin couples and young people (e.g., Brady et al., 2009; Helms et al., 2014; Killoren et al., 2022; Pila, 2016). Although immigrants from Mexico comprise the largest share of Latinx immigrants in the United States, in more recent years, the Latinx immigrant population has become more heterogeneous, especially with the growth of immigrants hailing from Central America (Capps et al., 2020). Scholars have begun to document the lived experiences of Central American immigrants to the United States (e.g., Abrego, 2014; Menjívar et al., 2016); however, more research is needed to understand and contextualize romantic relationship formation, pathways to commitment, and relational health and functioning among diverse Latinx immigrants and their partners vis-à-vis their country of origin and where they settle in the United States.

Additionally, given how US immigration laws and policies shape and stratify Latinx immigrant experiences (Hall et al., 2019; Menjívar, 2021), family scholars must consider the ways in which varied and liminal legal statuses (among other factors related to immigration) condition and constrain the romantic relationships of Latinx immigrants residing in the United States. Importantly, research is needed to delineate how undocumented Latinx immigrants and their partners respond and adapt to, cope with, and resist nativist, anti-immigrant, and hostile laws and policies that threaten their livelihoods while they also pursue their individual and family goals and a better life (Menjívar & Kantsroom, 2014; Walsdorf et al., 2019).

In this chapter, we review the nascent research on Latinx immigrant romantic relationships in the context of illegality, with a particular focus on Central American immigrants living in the United States. We offer a socioculturally

attuned lens to reflect on the ways in which illegality shapes romantic relationships between partners, where at least one person is undocumented (Abrego, 2014; Menjívar et al., 2016; Pila, 2016). Illegality is a term used to refer to the United States immigration laws, policies, and practices that foment and expose immigrants and their families to discrimination, exploitation, victimization, violence and abuse, criminalization, detainment, deportation, and family separation based on their legal status (Abrego et al., 2017; De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Menjívar & Kantsroom, 2014; Sampaio, 2015). We argue in this chapter that illegality is a powerful structural force that transcends cultural explanations of Latinx immigrant romantic relationships. We draw upon a recent study by Letiecq et al. (2022) to apply our socioculturally attuned lens and underscore how illegality conditions and constrains the relational experiences and opportunities of Central American immigrants residing in the Washington, DC region.

Before we delve into this review, we first detail our positionalities as authors of this chapter and researchers of Latinx immigrant family life and discuss the conceptual framing that guides our work. Then, we review the changing immigration landscape and the immigration laws and policies that have produced and sustain illegality and immigrant marginalization and exploitation in the United States. We come to this work as family scientists and critical feminist scholars with deep commitments to antiracism, decolonizing research methods, and social justice.

AUTHORS' POSITIONALITY

Bethany

As a family scholar and research methodologist, I have spent the last twenty years studying and using community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) approaches to partner with immigrant and other minoritized and marginalized families (e.g., Letiecq et al., 2022). As a White cisgender heterosexual woman and US-born citizen with settler roots (my great grandparents immigrated to the United States from Portugal and Quebec, Canada), I hold many positions of intersectional privilege and power. Using CBPAR offers the possibility of sharing power with and taking action alongside people marginalized by the racialized, gendered, and classed/caste systems that reproduce social inequalities and maintain systems of White supremacy (Letiecq, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2016; Wallerstein et al., 2018; Walsdorf et al., 2019). I also practice critical reflexivity and cultural humility, orientations to community engagement that are based on an openness to interrogate the self vis-à-vis others, hold the self and others accountable to redressing unequal power relations, and be guided by people who are the experts of their own lived experiences of social, cultural, and legal marginalization and family life (Tervalon

& Murray-Garcia, 1998). My goal is to understand how structural forces (i.e., laws, policies, regulations, and rules) reproduce and maintain family marginalization and oppression at the intersections of race, gender, class, and nation in order to take action as part of an inclusive multi-racial and gender diverse collective to advance social justice.

Maria

I am a cisgender, White, heterosexual woman who holds many privileges due to my race, ability and immigration status, and education. I am originally from Honduras and was reared in the United States. My family and I had the fortune to lawfully immigrate together in 1970, become legal residents, and later US citizens, which is something that as a family we never took for granted. My father was unable to adapt to the United States, so he returned to Honduras, leaving my mother to parent alone and shifting our family dynamics to become a transnational family. We were able to benefit from a modest middle-class lifestyle, mostly due to my mother's hard work as an accountant and my brothers as skilled carpenters. Although most of my family resides in the United States lawfully, I have family members who are undocumented, are DACA recipients, and/or experience the liminal space of being under-documented due to financial and legal barriers to US citizenship. My experiences as an immigrant Latina growing up in the United States has helped me maintain my cultural roots and embrace my bi-cultural identity, with humility and a heightened awareness and sensitivity of my position of power, social location, and sense of agency. I bring these experiences to my life as a scholar and family therapist who has devoted her career to conducting studies to better understand and empower the lives of Latinx immigrant women and their families.

SOCIOCULTURAL ATTUNEMENT AS FAMILY SCHOLARS

We are informed by the many critical lenses (i.e., intersectional feminism, Latinx and transnational feminism, borderland theory, critical geography, critical race theory, queer theory) that are the foundation of socioculturally attuned family therapy and family science. This work was first proposed by McDowell and colleague (2018) in their book, "Socioculturally Attuned Family Therapy: Guidelines for Equitable Theory and Practice." The intention of socioculturally attuned family therapy is for it to serve as a transtheoretical framework that can be applied to existing couple and family therapy models in ways that encourage equity-based practice. McDowell and colleagues define sociocultural attunement as awareness of the relationship between societal systems, culture, and power, along with the intention to persistently attend and respond to and resist what is unjust. Using this lens/approach and

maintaining this stance requires scholars to seek interdisciplinary concepts to deepen our understanding of the impact of culture, power relations, and societal systems on individuals, couples, families, and communities. Sociocultural attunement goes beyond essentializing groups or analyzing between-group dynamics within a single society, to understanding the politics of difference across local, national, and global contexts and the impact of these on relationship processes (McDowell et al., 2018). Socioculturally attuned family scholars support cultural democracy while promoting just relationships. As such, it is important to carefully consider how individual and relational needs, interests, motivations, and wellbeing are reflected in the social forces that organize relationships. There is an emphasis on respecting and integrating a family's cultural values and idiosyncratic perspectives, while simultaneously challenging relational inequities and oppression at every level. This is especially important for family scholars today, whose work toward equity and social justice is at odds with strong sociopolitical forces working to maintain the status quo of White supremacy (Walsdorf et al., 2020).

McDowell and colleagues contend that sociocultural attunement paves the way for third order thinking and praxis (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019; McDowell et al., 2019). Third order thinking requires scholars and practitioners to connect the dots between a person's personal and relational problems and the broader social world and environmental context in which they are embedded. To do this, we have to maintain a keen awareness of how we organize and make sense of vast amounts of information, including how our perspectives constrain and limit our understanding and work with couples and families. Third order thinking enables one to attune to the experience of each individual within the complexities of interconnected identities and relationships within social, economic, political, and environmental contexts. This requires us to attune to the effects of uneven distribution of resources and inequitable societal structures. In essence, third order thinking helps scholars map the effects of social forces, beliefs, practices and power processes within and across cultural contexts and take collective action alongside community members to foment transformative systemic change (McDowell et al., 2018). Navigating this tension between research and action is especially important for scholars examining and witnessing the unjust effects of illegality on the lives of Latinx immigrant couples and families (Letiecq et al., 2022; Menjívar & Kantsroom, 2014).

CULTURAL VALUES VERSUS STRUCTURAL FORCES

Research on Latinx immigrant family life often points to cultural values as explanations for family dynamics and outcomes. For example, Hall et al. (2019) noted that a strong orientation toward family is a "common explanation for Latinx immigrants' early family formation transitions, relatively high rates of marriage, and higher likelihood of living in extended households"

(p. 83). Yet Hall et al. (2019), among others (e.g., Menjívar et al., 2016; Pinto & Ortiz, 2018), have questioned the relevance of arguments suggesting that the family formation behaviors and lived experiences of Latinx immigrant families are driven by cultural orientations toward the family alone. For example, Hall et al. (2019) found differences between the family and household dynamics of documented and undocumented immigrants originating from the same countries and presumably sharing similar cultural traditions regarding family life. For example, the researchers found that undocumented immigrants were less likely than documented immigrants to live with a spouse or child and more likely to live with distant kin and nonrelatives. Undocumented immigrants also experienced greater household instability, crowding, and change than their documented counterparts. Such findings suggest that structural forces, including immigration laws and policies that stratify, marginalize, oppress, and criminalize undocumented immigrants, shape the relational, familial, and household experiences of these groups (Abrego et al., 2017).

The United States immigration system, produced by a complex web of interlocking laws and policies, has varied effects on Latinx immigrant families with varied or mixed legal statuses within their family systems (Menjívar et al., 2016). Mixed statuses result when one member of the couple or family has legal authorization to be in the United States, or was born in the United States (and is therefore automatically a US citizen), whereas others are undocumented because they arrived or stayed in the United States without legal authorization or because their liminal legal status changed (Gonzales & Raphael, 2017; Terrazas et al., 2020; Walsdorf et al., 2019). It is estimated that 4.1 million US citizen children under the age of eighteen years reside with at least one undocumented immigrant parent (Capps et al., 2016). The 2011 American Communities Survey (ACS) found that one in every thirteen married couples in the United States, representing over 4 million households, are mixed status couples. López (2022) suggested that the ACS likely underestimated the numbers of mixed status couples, as it does not include, for example, cohabiting couples or families with a naturalized citizen partner and a foreign-born, non-naturalized partner. These data reflect the complexity and heterogeneity of immigrant family life in the United States – family life structurally influenced by immigration laws and policies that often focus on individuals rather than the family systems of which they are a part (López, 2022).

Although exploring the cultural values and beliefs that shape immigrants' lives is important, it is imperative for scholars to use a sociocultural lens to carefully examine and attune to the social forces (above and beyond culture) that condition and constrain lived experiences as well. This is especially critical when studying romantic relationships among Latinx immigrants in the United States, who have been consistently minoritized and marginalized by powerful structural forces undergirding the construction of illegality (Gonzales & Raphael, 2017; Menjívar et al., 2016). It is also important to

document the processes of adaptation, resilience, and resistance used by those marginalized by White supremacy in order to understand, uplift, and amplify the ways in which they navigate their intimate and familial relationships, even under harsh, punishing circumstances such as those produced by illegality (Bermudez & Mancini, 2013; Heidbrink, 2020; Tuck, 2009; Vesely et al., 2017).

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR LATINX IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Although the majority of Latinx people in the United States are native born (Pew Research Center, 2019), there are an estimated 11 million undocumented individuals in the United States, most of whom are from Mexico (Capps et al., 2020). Indeed, for decades, Mexico was the largest sending country. However, in more recent years, immigration from the Northern Triangle region of Central America, including El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, has increased (Capps et al., 2020). It is estimated that 3.4 million Central Americans immigrants reside in the United States to date and are among the fastest growing subpopulations of immigrants (Lesser & Batalova, 2017; Meyer & Taft-Morales, 2019). Among Central American immigrants in the United States, it is estimated that 1.74 million are undocumented (Capps et al., 2020). The push factors or those that force people to leave their countries of origin (e.g., poverty, war, gang violence, political corruption, natural disasters, climate crises), the pull factors or those that encourage or entice people to immigrate (e.g., better wages, family reunification), and the means and motivations of people making the decision to journey to the United States vary from place to place (Heidbrink, 2020; Jones, 2016). Immigration and related law and policy changes in the United States and around the globe likewise can greatly influence immigration flows and settlements (Menjívar et al., 2016).

From Open Borders and Circular Migration to Settlement and Illegality

Since the nineteenth century, for people living in the US-Mexico borderlands, the border was a permeable line that allowed for the movement of people and exchange of goods and services across the border with little concern or oversight. In her book, *How Immigration Became Illegal*, Aviva Chomsky (2014) explained that:

Until 1924, the new border between the United States and Mexico was virtually unpoliced, and migration flowed openly. Mexicans were exempt from the immigration restrictions passed into law before 1965. [However], because they were not considered migrants, Mexicans were also permanently deportable and were, in fact, singled out for mass deportations in the 1930s and 1950s. (p. 10)

Later, between 1965 and 1986, an estimated 28 million undocumented immigrants, mainly from Mexico, participated in what is referred to as “circular migration” (Massey et al., 2002). Mexican migrants entered the United States to work, stayed for relatively short periods of time, returned to Mexico to live with their families, and then returned seasonally to work in the United States again. Those migrants who did not migrate based on the season and chose instead to remain in the United States were often exposed to poor living conditions, segregated work camps and barrios, underfunded schools, and poor working conditions (Chomsky, 2014; Spickard, 2007). Importantly, those harsh conditions fueled the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the largest civil rights movement led by people of Mexican descent in the United States. The Chicano Movement, which coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, saw some significant gains, including the unionization of and better and more dignified working conditions and pay for farmworkers (Barajas, 2012).

However, in 1986, to stem the flow of unauthorized immigration, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). While IRCA provided for the legalization of more than three million people, it also made it illegal for the first time in US history for employers to knowingly hire an undocumented immigrant. According to Gonzales and Raphael (2017):

The logic of IRCA was clear. The policy wiped the slate clean for those unauthorized immigrants with established lives in the United States, and made a major concession to a key class of employers (growers in particular) via a legalization for seasonal agricultural workers. At the same time, by creating a sanction system for employers and prohibiting the hiring of the unauthorized, IRCA attempted to eliminate the major pull factor that had long attracted many undocumented immigrants to the United States, namely, the prospects of higher and perhaps more stable earnings. (p. 4)

IRCA also fortified the United States -Mexico border, and according to Massey et al. (2002), resulted in unintended consequences, including the growth and stability of undocumented immigrant settlements in the United States. As noted by Gonzales and Raphael (2017), by the mid-1990s, the number of undocumented immigrants settling in the United States not only grew substantially, but immigrants crossed borders with their family members, deepening ties to Latinx immigrant communities in the United States, and growing their families by bearing US-born children who are by law US citizens.

While IRCA had the unintended effect of increasing the permanence of undocumented immigrants settling in the United States, it also fomented an inhospitable policy context, where life became increasingly hostile and challenging for those in the United States without legal authorization. Undocumented immigrants were scapegoated as harming the economic opportunities of US citizens and became the targets of a “formidable deportation machine” run by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE (Gonzales & Raphael, 2017, p. 6). The treatment of Mexican workers over time “underlies

the apparent paradox between the United States as a so-called country of migrants and its xenophobia and restrictive immigration policies” (Chomsky, 2014, p. 10). As we discuss next, IRCA and a series of other US immigration and interlinked social welfare laws and policies successfully transformed immigration family life in the United States, producing the current context of illegality and deportability that shapes the everyday lives of immigrants in the United States, including how they form and sustain romantic relationships.

The Production of Illegality, Deportability, and Multigenerational Punishment

The United States has a long history of creating structurally-racist and value-based immigration laws and policies that conceived of immigrants as being either legal or illegal (Tourse et al., 2018). In the most recent anti-immigrant era, the United States not only passed IRCA but also implemented the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). Together, these acts greatly affected the everyday lives of undocumented individuals and their family members, including children (Yoshikawa, 2011). These laws denied undocumented immigrants opportunities and resources and used the threat of deportation as a cudgel to force immigrants into the shadows (Vesely et al., 2019a).

Prior to the modern era of illegality, deportations were less common, hovering around 10,000–30,000 annually, depending on the decade (US Department of Homeland Security, 2019). However, post IRCA and IIRIRA, deportations began rising steadily, reaching over 400,000 annually by 2012. Mass deportations have continued to the present (US Department of Homeland Security, 2019), criminalizing and punishing unauthorized immigrants – and especially men from Mexico and Central America – and creating high levels of stress among immigrant families with undocumented members (De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Gonzales & Raphael, 2017). Critical scholars attuned to the sociocultural context of immigration argue that deportations enforce a prejudiced and racialized migratory system that favors certain migrant groups, while denying entry to other migrants based on a racialized paradigm against migrants of color (Enríquez, 2015; Estévez, 2012; Sampaio, 2015; Valdéz, 2016). In this context of racialized illegality, legal status serves as an axis of stratification and oppression, constraining and threatening Latinx immigrant intimate partner relationships, marriages, and familial experiences (Menjívar, 2021). Indeed, in the past, marriage to a US citizen could resolve legal status problems and protect against deportation and family separation; however, current immigration policies do not allow undocumented spouses and partners to obtain legal status, which perpetuates familial instability and relational uncertainties to the detriment of individual and family wellbeing (López, 2022; Pila, 2016).

Other policies, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS), create other hierarchies of legality and mixed statuses within families (Del Real, 2019). Although DACA grants undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children (under the age of sixteen) temporary status to remain in the United States and authorizes DACA recipients to work legally and attend public universities, the authorization must be renewed every two years and does not offer any protections for the undocumented parents of DACA recipients. Today, it is estimated that there are 646,000 immigrants with DACA residing in the United States (Capps et al., 2020). These young adults occupy a liminal space between belonging and uncertainty about their futures while also fearing parental detention, deportation, and family separation.

Like DACA, Temporary Protection Status (TPS) also grants eligible immigrants temporary and conditional authorization to live and work in the United States (Menjívar et al., 2016); however, this status is limited to a small subpopulation of immigrants and affects women and men differently. The majority of TPS holders are Salvadoran and Honduran and are also disproportionately men (Adams, 2021). Undocumented Central American immigrant women who are ineligible for TPS have few to no other pathways to regularize their status, which can create gendered hierarchies of legality and differential vulnerabilities within relationships and families (Menjívar et al., 2016). The mixed statuses created within families by US immigration laws and policies like DACA and TPS can contribute to unequal, exploitative, and abusive relationships within families, in the workplace, and in the broader society (Del Real, 2019; Letiecq et al., 2022; Parrado et al., 2005).

US immigration laws and policies, when interlinked with social welfare and health-related policies, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA), can further shape and constrain immigrant romantic relationships and family experiences (Letiecq et al., 2022; Menjívar et al., 2016). PRWORA, ACA, and many other US laws and policies preclude undocumented immigrants from taking up most federal benefits and social services, including Temporary Aid for Needy Families, Supplemental Social Security Income, food stamps, housing assistance, non-emergency Medicaid, Medicare, health insurance through ACA exchanges, and COVID-19 relief funds, among others (Menjívar et al., 2016; Vesely et al., 2019a). Denying these benefits also curtails benefits and health care access among immigrants' children, who are most often US citizens, because of parents' fear that pursuit of benefits and care for children could result in deportation and family separation. This sociocultural context can result in what Enriquez (2015) calls "multigenerational punishment," in which entire family systems are exposed to economic marginalization and are made vulnerable to poor health outcomes (Vesely et al., 2019a).

THE EFFECTS OF LEGAL STATUS ON LATINX IMMIGRANT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Because of the complex US immigration system and its collusion with other social welfare and health care systems to exclude, punish, and marginalize undocumented Latinx immigrants, Latinx immigrant romantic relationships – from dating and forming partnerships to sustaining committed unions – must be understood in sociocultural context (McDowell et al., 2018). First and foremost, undocumented Latinx immigrants, and especially men from Mexico and Central America, must contend with being targeted, criminalized, detained, deported, and separated from their partners, children, and kin by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Berger Cardoso et al., 2014; De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). But, in the context of illegality, legal status also conditions and constrains the living and working conditions, educational pursuits, and everyday experiences of undocumented Latinx immigrants residing in the United States (e.g., Abrego, 2014; Donato & Armenta, 2011; Dreby, 2015; Glick, 2010; Hall et al., 2019; Menjívar et al., 2016; Stuesse, 2016; Vesely et al., 2019b). In the next section of this chapter, we draw upon and review research on undocumented immigrant approaches to dating, forming intimate partnerships, and sustaining their commitments and romantic relationships over time (e.g., Abrego, 2014; Enriquez, 2017; Fuller & García Coll, 2010; Letiecq et al., 2022; López, 2022; Menjívar et al., 2016; Pila, 2016). This review is not exhaustive, but illustrates how a sociocultural-attuned lens is useful to situate Latinx immigrant romantic relationships in the context of illegality.

Dating and Making Commitments

Research documenting friendship navigation and dating at the intersections of legal status and gender suggests that liminal and undocumented legal statuses can condition and constrain dating and romantic relationship formation in significant ways and challenge gendered dating norms and values (Cho, 2021; Enriquez, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2019). Dating, in general, engages gendered expectations; however, in the context of illegality, it is important to interlink such expectations with legal status complexity. For example, in her qualitative study of immigrant women and men from ten countries (majority from Mexico), Pila (2016) found that undocumented men expressed difficulty and frustration in adhering to gendered expectations regarding dating, such as paying for meals and activities or driving to and from a venue. Living in the United States without legal authorization significantly challenges immigrants' opportunities to earn wages, forcing many to work "under the table" for low-wages and in jobs that may not be stable and may be exploitive. Additionally, many immigrant children may feel pressure to contribute their earnings to

their family, whether living in the United States or in the form of remittances in their country of origin (Orellana et al., 2001). In many parts of the United States, undocumented immigrants cannot obtain a driver's license, which also creates significant transportation challenges, stress, and shame (Straut-Eppeteiner, 2021). The men in Pila's (2016) study reported that, although they felt pressured to pay for dates and provide transportation, their legal status often made meeting gendered cultural expectations difficult. Some men stated that they were creative in resolving these dating challenges by, for example, searching for free venues that were accessible by foot.

Women likely experience dating expectations differently than men in the context of illegality. In Pila's (2016) study, some women worried about disclosing their status for fear that such information could be used to control them by threatening deportation and family separation. Indeed, as we discuss more fully below, research findings suggest that immigrant women are vulnerable to abuse and legal violence because their legal status can be used against them (Edelson et al., 2007). Being undocumented also likely constrains the establishment of egalitarian relationships, particularly if only one partner has legal authorization to live and work in the United States (Menjívar, 1999). For example, whereas undocumented men may assert their independence through their dating decisions, women's choices may be more constrained.

The challenges of dating "without papers" also can constrain making commitments. As Pila (2016) found, fear of detention and deportation can result in stalled relationships and breakups. Women in Pila's (2016) study also reported feeling like they were "saddling their partners unfairly with their legal status problems" (p. 150) and feared they would be a burden to their partners if US citizens even after marriage, unable to build a "normal life" (p. 152) because marriage does not guarantee one can change their legal status. Women also worried that their legal status could mean that they were not viable dating partners or that their status would create hardships for or hold back potential mates. Women worried about their limited earnings potential as undocumented immigrants in the labor market and other constraints, such as not being able to travel abroad with their partners.

In another study, Romo and Hurtado (2022) found that Mexican-origin mothers discussed these dating and romantic relationship realities with their daughters (71 percent US-born; 29 percent born in Mexico; legal status not reported), highlighting how dating is a family affair. Based on data from 132 mother-daughter dyads, the researchers found that mothers were instrumental in promoting positive decision-making and dating among their daughters, advising them to take their time, choose partners wisely, insist on respect from boys, maintain autonomy in relationships, pursue education goals, and develop a sense of self-worth. They also found that mothers were especially concerned about their daughters having unwanted sex, which led to deeper discussion about negative partner dynamics and self-protective behaviors.

However, mothers were less likely to discuss the positive aspects of sexuality or vulnerabilities to dating violence and abuse. Less is known about parent-adolescent communication among undocumented youth. More research focused not only on the dating and mating experiences of Latinx immigrants with varied legal statuses, but also on how parents can help their children navigate illegality and liminal legal statuses, dating, making commitments, and relational wellbeing is needed.

Mixed-Citizenship Coupling

Latinx immigrant romantic relationship research among mixed-citizenship couples where one partner is undocumented and the other is a US citizen is likewise sparse (Schueths, 2014). Recently, López (2022) studied relational narratives of fifty-six mixed-citizenship couples and found that participants “found each other in the same way as other, ‘normal’ couples. They met at bars and birthday parties, at church and work, online and on vacation” (p. 13). López asserted that mixed-citizenship American couples followed similar trends of meeting and relating as those of same-citizenship American couples, yet each mixed-citizenship relationship was shaped and challenged by legal status matters. López (2022) also pointed out that the complexity of US immigration laws and policies resulted in quite diverse trajectories for the study participants. For some, commitments were challenged by deportations and created what Berger Cardoso et al. (2014) call “involuntary transnational families” (p. 197). For others with greater privilege, access to resources and skilled legal teams led to regularizing a partners’ legal status and stabilizing their relational experiences. Less is known about the dating lives and commitments made by undocumented partners who meet in the United States and how they navigate illegality together.

Dating Violence

In general, undocumented immigrants are placed at heightened risk of experiencing multiple forms of violence and trauma (e.g., violence crossing borders, deportation and family separation; Kaltman et al., 2011). Likewise, research suggests that Latinx adolescents and adults are at risk of experiencing dating violence, and that legal status is a risk factor (Edelson et al., 2007; Menjívar et al., 2016; Pila, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2018). Dating violence experiences in the context of illegality may be related to a complex web of structural and cultural factors (e.g., acculturation, gender role expectations; see Shaffer et al., 2018). For example, adolescents’ definitions of problematic or abusive behaviors were found to be related to traditional gender roles, and these cultural beliefs may explain acceptance of harmful dating behaviors towards females (Ulloa et al., 2008). Yet immigration laws and policies may also create dating

violence vulnerabilities at the structural level when one partner is undocumented. Researchers have noted how undocumented youth and women were wary of disclosing their status when entering relationships with others (e.g., US citizens) and may fear being exploited, manipulated, or harmed because of their legal status (Cho, 2021; Pila, 2016). Moreover, Edelson and colleagues (2007) found that Latinas who had been victims of intimate partner violence had significantly greater trauma-related symptoms, depression, and lower social and personal self-esteem than non-Latina women. It is also noted that despite greater symptoms, Latinas are less likely than women of other ethnicities to seek support and social services due to language barriers and lack of knowledge about laws and services (Vidales, 2010).

Sustaining Romantic Relationships under the Weight of Structural Oppression

In the context of illegality, structural forces affect committed romantic partners as well. Not only must they contend with threats of deportation and forced separations and other forms of violence, but also with interlocking structural forces that shape and constrain opportunities that are foundational to one's livelihood and capacity to provide for one's self and others, including opportunities to engage in the labor and housing markets. For example, in the labor market, undocumented immigrants are typically relegated to a handful of jobs that are often low-paying, physically demanding, unbenefited, unprotected, and nonstandard in terms of hours (Abrego 2014; Stuesse, 2016). This restrictive context holds implications for engaging in and sustaining romantic relationships and how couples navigate work-family conflict (Straut-Eppsteiner, 2021).

Yet, the context of illegality operates differently at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. Racialized and gendered illegality renders undocumented Latina immigrant women, and especially mothers, particularly limited in their employment opportunities and the wages they can generate (Abrego, 2014; Menjívar, 1999). While undocumented immigrant men typically work in construction, other building trades, or the restaurant industry and can command higher wages, undocumented Latina immigrants often are consigned to lower-paying jobs in the cleaning, food services, and childcare sectors (Adams, 2021). Without many childcare options, labor market exploitation also positions undocumented immigrant women as dependent on men (and their wages) in heterosexual unions, rendering women, and especially mothers, vulnerable to both relational and workplace abuses (Del Real, 2019; Menjívar et al., 2016; Parrado et al., 2005; Pinto & Ortiz, 2018).

A person's immigration status can also condition and constrain where and how a person lives (Hall et al., 2019). Ineligible for any public housing supports, undocumented immigrants must engage in the private housing

sector to secure a place to live. As we discuss later in the chapter, without the required documentation and credit histories to secure housing, many undocumented immigrants may experience overcrowded housing circumstances, further complicating relational and familial functioning (Hall et al., 2019). Additionally, Schueths' study in 2019 showed that among her participants who were US citizen women in mixed-status marriages, the deportation of their husbands placed them at high risk for poverty. That is they often found themselves in an emotionally and physically distressing situation of being separated from their spouse and having to rely on public assistance, placing them on what she coined the "deportation to welfare pathway for US citizen mothers."

Immigration also creates a shift in marital roles and expectations. Many women and families put their lives at risk to migrate for a better way of life, often (re)negotiating the traditional male-worker migration patterns. This migrant gender shift has been called by scholars the feminization of undocumented migrants (Belliveau, 2012). However, as Menjívar et al. (2016) noted, while gendered expectations of women are significantly transformed in the process of migration, changes "do not always occur in the direction of equality" (p. 80). Indeed, in an early study of Salvadoran immigrant women residing in San Francisco, Menjívar (1999) found that even when women contributed financially to the family – and sometimes earned more than their partners – the division of labor at home did not become more egalitarian because women did not want to challenge men's patriarchal authority. As such, relationship dissolution is always a looming possibility. Findings show that when couples experience pressures in fast-growing communities, it can make it more difficult to sustain their marriages, putting immigrant couples more at risk for marital dissolution or lowered marital satisfaction (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008; Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Padilla & Borrero, 2006). According to Wood et al. (2021) couples who experience different pressures due to economic marginalization and cultural factors in their "non-shared environments," are adversely affected in their marriages.

A CLOSER LOOK AT CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRANT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

To examine more closely Central American immigrant romantic relationships in the context of illegality and further illustrate the use of a sociocultural attuned lens, we discuss the findings from a recent study conducted by Letiecq and colleagues (2022). In this study, Letiecq et al. utilized a CBBAR approach and, in partnership with Latina immigrants, examined the narratives of twenty-two undocumented Central American immigrant women (along with data from 134 interviewer-assisted surveys). The majority of women in the study were in a committed heterosexual romantic relationship and were living with their partners. Findings situated romantic partners in

their community context (a low-income immigrant enclave located in the Washington, DC region) and within a labor and housing market that was economically-marginalizing, oppressive, and stratified by legal status. As we discussed earlier, undocumented Central American immigrants in this study likewise were relegated to low wage jobs that left them, and especially women, fiscally precarious. Undocumented Latina immigrants also confronted workplace abuses, such as harassment, discrimination, and threats of deportation.

In the region known for high housing costs, the majority of study participants lived with their partners and children in overcrowded apartments. Most were subletters and were vulnerable to unequal power dynamics, exploitation, harassment, and threats of eviction in addition to threats of deportation. Most couples occupied a single bedroom with their children – in some instances, rooms were filled with mattresses for sleeping and little else – and shared 1–2 bedroom apartments with other immigrants, whether single men or other family units. In these spaces, privacy was difficult to come by. When asked how couples maintained relational intimacy, one woman shared that it was difficult when sharing a room with her male partner and their two children. Another mother shared that she slept in the same bed with her husband and her son, but was hoping to find her son his own bed soon so the couple could have more space. Another woman shared that if she and her husband were in a conflict, they locked themselves in the bathroom out of earshot from their children or other apartment dwellers to resolve issues in private.

Beyond confronting the labor and housing market challenges, Letiecq et al. (2022) found that partners who were in solidarity with one another, were focused on their shared goals for a better life, especially for their children, and were working in tandem, synchronizing work schedules and childcare demands to make it in the United States. These couples often were structured as traditional nuclear family systems (i.e., male-breadwinner, female-caregiver), but some participants expressed a desire for a more egalitarian union. However, with few childcare options and women's gendered economic marginalization in the labor market, most women in the study were dependent on their male partners financially to survive US illegality. And while their family systems mirrored a traditional nuclear model, women who were dependent on undocumented immigrant men for their economic and housing stability were vulnerable, as one woman stated, to "being ruined" if their partners were to be detained, incarcerated, or deported.

As has been documented in other studies (e.g., Abrego, 2014; Bermúdez et al., 2011; Menjívar et al., 2016), Letiecq et al. (2022) also heard stories of what happened when men were detained and deported, leaving behind undocumented immigrant women and their children to face economic precarity, housing insecurity, and great uncertainty in the United States as single-mother-headed families. Women in the study were keenly aware of their vulnerable positionality in their relationships, in the labor market, and in

the context of illegality and several discussed feeling trapped in unfulfilling or abusive relationships, unable to leave unhealthy relationships and make it on their own. One woman in the study shared how she was aware of her partner's infidelity but could not leave him because she could not care for her two sons and her four-month-old child by herself. While infidelity and relational conflict are common experiences in romantic relationships in general, undocumented women are particularly vulnerable to getting trapped in relationships that, if they could, they would exit.

Letiecq et al. (2022) also highlighted narratives of Central American immigrant women who were single and found that some women in their study sought singlehood to secure their liberation. Such a finding raises important questions for future research regarding Latinx immigrant romantic relationships in the context of racialized and gendered illegality. Beyond cultural values and gendered expectations, for example, how do immigration laws and policies reproduce and maintain structural inequalities that condition and constrain gender equity, relational health, and functionality? And if we as a society wish to promote individual, relational, and family health and well-being, what kinds of structural reforms are necessary to advance such ends? Clearly, US immigration laws and policies constructing legal statuses and then targeting unauthorized immigrants for deportation, family separation, and economic marginalization are inconsistent with the government's interest in and promotion of healthy relationships and stable families. Socioculturally attuned family researchers and practitioners must work to both advance understanding of Latinx immigrant resilience, persistence and resistance in the context of racialized and gendered illegality and translate research to action for immigrant justice (McDowell et al., 2019; Vesely et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

As can be seen, the context of Latinx immigrant romantic relationships, especially among those with liminal, mixed, or undocumented statuses, is complex and made more so by the harsh and punitive US immigration system. Currently, there is a great need for scholars to more fully understand how the confluence of immigration status and hostile policies adversely affect the lives of intimate partners and their families. Likewise, there is a great need for scholars to interrogate the ways in which immigrant partners respond to, adapt, and resist structural (or socially constructed) anti-immigrant adversity and reproduce healthful relationships, intimacy, and enduring love. As noted by Hall et al. (2019), legal status not only stratifies immigrant experiences within families and across immigrant communities, it is a *sociorelational* determinant of health (McDowell et al., 2022) that shapes and constrains immigrants' lived experiences, the trajectories of their lives, and the ways in which they form and maintain intimate partner and familial relationships (Abrego, 2014;

Hall et al., 2019; López, 2022; Menjívar et al., 2016; Pila, 2016). Currently, immigration is a contentious political issue; a social ailment, criminalized by detention and incarceration, often resulting in forced family separation, deportation, and forced transnational and mixed status families. These processes and outcomes can be changed with a strong commitment to relational and societal justice. Having a heightened critical sociocultural attunement as a family scholar can enact the third order change necessary for systems to transform systems (McDowell et al., 2022). Without it, families in vulnerable and marginalized social standing will continue to suffer the effects of immigration laws and policies that are xenophobic, racist, oppressive, financially exploitive, and ultimately deadly. We urge family and relationship scholars to utilize a socioculturally attuned lens and see their work as a form of praxis (consciousness in action) and as a commitment to social justice and third order change. This work is essential to advance Latinx immigrant relational and family health and immigrant justice.

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