

# **Pulling Back the Curtain: Examining the Backstage Gendered Dynamics of Storytelling in the Undocumented Youth Movement**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the backstage process by which undocumented youth activists developed and implemented an emotionally evocative storytelling strategy in their efforts to bring about social change. Using participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of the DREAM Act Movement, I show how they carefully cultivated and refined their storytelling performances through interaction. I also show how hegemonic gender expectations—and the stigma of victimization—complicated their efforts. Because they believed the best stories showed audiences what it *felt like* to be undocumented, this explicitly expressive tactic caused problems for men who had to overcome cultural expectations that they control their emotions and for women who worried about being perceived as weak if they showed too much vulnerability. I argue that their solution—the creation of a gendered division of emotional labor—ultimately reinforced the gender order. By revealing how the process of storytelling can simultaneously challenge and exacerbate inequalities, my research expands our knowledge of the potentials and limitations of narrative approaches to social change.

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**Introduction**

In recent years, undocumented young people have taken the lead in the immigrant rights movement with their advocacy for the passage of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, a narrowly drafted federal immigration bill that would create an exclusive path to citizenship for immigrant youth who meet certain criteria.<sup>1</sup> Originally introduced in Congress in 2001 and reintroduced every legislative session since, the DREAM Act has been repeatedly defeated. In response to this political stalemate, undocumented youth began escalating their advocacy efforts in late 2009. Drawing on lessons from past movements, they demonstrated, engaged in civil disobedience, and lobbied their congressional representatives. Most notably, though, they shared their stories. Borrowing a key tactic from the gay rights movement, they began organizing “coming out” rallies,<sup>2</sup> revealing their immigration status and sharing their personal stories in an effort to humanize the “problem” of illegal immigration and shift the frequently vitriolic public debate (Galindo 2012).

Like activists throughout history, the young people involved in the DREAM Act Movement saw personal stories as powerful political tools that could destabilize an unequal social order that cast them as undeserving Others—“criminal aliens,” welfare cheats, and pernicious invaders. They believed that their stories, if told in a compelling way, could alter perceptions, win sympathy, and challenge exclusionary laws. To show policymakers and the general public that they were good people who defy stereotypes and deserve a chance to become US citizens, members of the movement sought to tell stories that conveyed their sympathetic, blameless, and respect-worthy natures. As one of the movement leaders said at the first large-scale, public rally organized by and for undocumented youth, “It is using our lives and stories as a political tool for change.” The best stories, they believed, were those that showed audiences what it felt like to be undocumented and moved them to take supportive action. But, how were these stories created? What problems did activists encounter in implementing their narrative strategy? How did they manage them? What do their efforts tell us about how narrative operates in the context of a social movement? These are the questions that guide this study.

To date, most research on storytelling has focused on stories’ content, and scholars have endeavored to unpack their meanings through careful content,

discourse, or narrative analysis (Polletta et al. 2011). While these approaches have given us invaluable insights into the meaning- and sense-making functions of stories, we know considerably less about the “how” of storytelling (Davis 2002; Fine 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 2008; Polletta et al. 2011), or the “social processes and circumstances through which narratives are constructed, promoted, and resisted” (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, 256). By combining ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with members of the undocumented youth movement, my research sheds light on the backstage process by which storied appeals for change are crafted and refined in interaction. In what follows, I briefly review the literature on storytelling and social change. Next, I outline my approach to data collection and present my analysis. I conclude by discussing how my research deepens our understanding of the role of narrative in social movements and by suggesting the potential of narrative strategies to both challenge and sometimes reproduce inequality.

## **Storytelling and Social Change**

Scholars who study storytelling have tended to emphasize its transgressive potential, the power of stories to “make the abstract real and the political personal” (Polletta 2009, 11; for a comprehensive review and critique, see Polletta et al. 2011). But people narrate their lives within a broader social context that limits the kinds of stories they can tell and how they can tell them (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008; Polletta 2006). To access resources or assistance from social institutions, for instance, storytellers must fit their narratives to the expectations and criteria set by those institutions (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Loseke 2007). Often these are not outlined directly, but rather reflect dominant ideas about the kinds of people who deserve help. Dunn (2002), for instance, found that women who had been stalked by their partners were able to receive assistance from the courts only if they presented themselves as fearful, blameless, and helpless victims. Other storylines that revealed, for instance, that a woman had maintained periodic contact with her stalker discredited her claim to being a real victim and jeopardized her appeal for protection. Legal help, in other words, was contingent on women being able to show through their stories that they were legitimate victims (see also Nolan 2002; Tatum 2002). Self-help groups similarly socialize members to narrate their problems and their biographies in specific, institutionally sanctioned ways (Denzin 1987; Rice 2002).

Stories are also limited by cultural assumptions about the storytellers themselves (Fine 2002; Polletta 2006). Stories told by members of powerful groups tend to be taken more seriously and evaluated more positively than

those told by members of less powerful groups (Loseke 2007; Polletta 2006; Polletta and Lee 2006). For instance, in his analysis of written news reports on anti-racism campaigns in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, van Dijk (1991) found that ethnic minorities were quoted less often than whites, and when given voice, their perspectives were treated by reporters and editors as less credible than those of white speakers, who were often asked to substantiate or dispute minority claims. Similarly, Groves (1996) found in his research on animal rights activists that women were discouraged from serving in leadership roles because the activists themselves (both women and men) believed women were prone to telling emotional stories that would undermine the seriousness of their movement. Seeing men as naturally *less* emotional, they promoted them to top positions where they could lend male authority and credibility to their concerns.

Research on men and women in social movements suggests that normative ideas about gender may create special challenges for social change agents. Scholars find that militant styles of protest that involve, for instance, provoking confrontations with police or intimidating those who might consider crossing picket lines appeal especially to male activists (Fonow 1998; Kolarova 2009). The risky nature of these activities enables them to demonstrate their toughness, courage, and refusal to back down. Alternatively, movement-building activities that emphasize cooperation, interdependence, and attention to relationships are often seen as the special purview of women (Barnett 1993; Robnett 1996), as are movement tactics that encourage emotional expressivity, personal disclosure, and empathy (Taylor 1999). Because storytelling is an explicitly expressive tactic (Polletta 2006), gendered feeling rules that prescribe different emotions for women and men (Hochschild 1983; Shields 2005) can also complicate efforts to implement a narrative strategy for bringing about social change.

As I will show, movement activists were caught between a dominant gender culture that devalues emotional openness and sensitivity and a movement subculture that promoted expressive and evocative storytelling as a primary social change tactic. In Western societies, showing vulnerability is associated with femininity and can elicit attributions of weakness. Members of the movement were brought to the United States as children or young teenagers, were socialized into the dominant culture, and held similar beliefs about the meanings and risks involved in sharing one's feelings—especially in public.<sup>3</sup> However, they also believed it was important to show audiences what it felt like to be undocumented so that they would sympathize with their struggles and support them. Their desire to both elicit sympathy and avoid appearing weak created a dilemma. How did these young people construct and perform what they perceived to be effective, emotionally expressive stories that still

allowed them to claim respectability as proper men and women in US culture?

From a social constructionist perspective, storytelling is not a straightforward, objective recounting of one's experiences; rather, people craft and perform stories in a given context, using the cultural resources that are available to them (Davis 2002; Fine 2002; Jackson 2007). I show how members used gender as a resource to negotiate the contradictions they faced. Men learned to give angry and indignant performances and to account for occasional shows of vulnerability by emphasizing their masculinity. Women learned to blend tearful, feminized appeals for sympathy with defiant (and masculinized) fist-pumping. While these strategies enabled them to deflect attributions of weakness, give emotionally expressive and evocative performances, and preserve their claims to being proper women and men, they did so at a price. They ultimately left intact the cultural link between womanhood and vulnerability and the gendered system of beliefs, practices, and institutional arrangements that devalue both.

## **Data and Methods**

The data for this paper derive from eighteen months of ethnographic field work, hundreds of pages of movement documents, thirty-two formal, in-depth interviews, and many informal interviews with undocumented youth activists involved in the DREAM Act Movement. My data collection began in June 2010, when I first met with a local immigrant rights group that had formed only weeks before, and continued through the second year of the group's development. I first learned about this group when I found its information on a national website about the DREAM Act. When I emailed the contact person, I was told that the group—composed of undocumented youth activists and their college-aged allies—was just forming and that I was welcome to attend the next meeting. During this meeting, I described my research interests and asked if they would be willing to let me “hang around” and observe. As I would later discover, these young people wanted their social change activities to be recognized and taken seriously, and they agreed that it would be good to have a researcher in their group. My participation was primarily as a researcher-ally. In that role, I marched alongside the group, held signs at protest events, handed out fliers at rallies, and drove undocumented members who could not legally obtain drivers' licenses to different venues. In addition to my fieldwork with this local group, I also participated in numerous regional and national conferences, formal storytelling trainings, and direct actions aimed at passing the DREAM Act. At most of these events, I shared meals and sleeping spaces with the other participants, attended social

events, parties, and casual gatherings, in addition to the formal strategy and planning meetings. This level of participation with members of the movement helped establish rapport and build trust. It also enabled me to gain access to backstage spaces where they developed and revised their stories, taught new members how to tell their stories, and helped each other manage the sometimes painful emotions that arose in the process.

In addition to my fieldwork, I conducted thirty-two in-depth, semistructured interviews with DREAMers. Nineteen were women and thirteen were men. They ranged in age from nineteen to thirty, although most were in their midtwenties. Twenty-nine self-identified as Latina/o, two as Arab, and one as Asian. Nine identified as queer,<sup>4</sup> and twenty-three as heterosexual. Three had master's degrees, eleven had bachelor's degrees, and sixteen were either currently enrolled in college or were taking classes intermittently when they could afford it. Only two had not attended college at all. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. They ranged in length from one hour to three-and-a-half hours. Most were about an hour-and-a-half. Interview questions were open-ended and focused on how DREAMers became involved in the movement, their perceptions of its storytelling strategy, and their experiences developing and sharing their own stories.

Finally, I gathered hundreds of pages of movement materials. These included training guides used to teach new members how to create their stories, PowerPoint slides from Youth Empowerment Summits organized by the movement participants, flyers announcing storytelling events, and press releases and mission statements created by local and national groups.

My data collection and analysis were guided by the inductive principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). With this approach, there is continual movement back and forth between analysis and data collection, and coding and memo-ing are ongoing processes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Kleinman 2007; Lofland et al. 2006). While I was in the field, I often carried a small notebook and audio-recorder to make verbatim notes and to document public storytelling events. I also wrote down fleeting impressions, analytic comments, and my emotional reactions to things that were happening in the field (Kleinman and Copp 1993). As soon as I left the field, I used these jottings and recordings, as well as my "head notes," to type out full field notes, "notes-on-notes," and analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Lofland et al. 2006). As I developed hypotheses, I tested them out in the field and during interviews and modified my analysis and interview questions as I learned more.

Following other scholars who have advocated a dramaturgical approach to analyzing micromobilization activities in social movements (e.g., Benford and Hunt 1992; Gamson 1985; Yukich 2013), I used this perspective to

conceptualize storytelling in the undocumented youth movement. Dramaturgy focuses attention on expressive behavior in situated interactions and delineates between “front stage” behaviors and those that manifest in the “back stage” (Goffman 1959; see also Brissett and Edgley 1990; Schwalbe and Shay 2014). This perspective is thus particularly well suited for exploring the performative and constructed nature of storytelling in this movement.

## **On the Stage: Undocumented Men Giving Masculine Performances**

Feeling rules tell people which emotions are appropriate to feel and express in a given situation (Hochschild 1979). Different rules not only apply in different situations; they also mark and reinforce status differences (Bartky 1990; Hochschild 1983; Shields 2005). In Western societies, emotional stoicism, toughness, and rationality are considered essential components of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). From an early age, boys in US culture learn from their parents, teachers, peers, and media that big boys and real men don't cry (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992; Kane 2006). Being able to control oneself, including one's emotions, is crucial for signifying not only that one is a member of the privileged gender category, but also that one deserves the power, status, and other material and symbolic rewards that come with claiming membership in that group (Kimmel 1996; Messner 2009; Sattel 1976; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). It is also a key way men hold on to power. In high-status, male-dominated, professional jobs, for instance, men typically try to show no emotion or they cultivate angry and intimidating emotional displays to induce fear and compliance in others (Pierce 1996; Stenross and Kleinman 1989; Sutton 1991). In highly stratified societies, even marginalized and subordinated men learn that they can use an aggressive emotional stance to claim power under conditions of relative powerlessness. For the working-class Mexican immigrant men Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1999) studied, exaggerated displays of toughness gave them a way to show dominance and repair their compromised sense of masculinity. Whether as a means of holding onto or compensating for a lack of institutional power, the expectation that men show such a limited range of emotions in order to claim full status as men might be expected to create problems for men who are involved in social change groups that promote emotionally evocative and expressive public storytelling as a primary means of advancing their political agenda.

In the undocumented youth movement, men got around this problem by telling stories that signaled their competence as men and by developing

emotional displays that supported their masculine presentations of self. They emphasized, for instance, their accomplishments in school, achievements in sports, ambitions for powerful careers, and potentials for breadwinning. In addition, they tended to express a narrow range of emotions—most often indignation or righteous anger—and avoided showing emotional vulnerability, or accounted for it in ways that supported their claims to manly virtue.

Eduardo's case is a good example of the kinds of stories and emotions men in this movement tended to share publicly. He told his story at one of the first public rallies organized by undocumented youth. The goal of the rally was to connect with and mobilize other youth:

This past summer, I graduated from one of the top high schools in the state of Illinois and was accepted into one of the most highly respected universities in the city. With my school supplies packed, classes registered for, newly met friends, and a \$20,000 grant in my hands, I was excited, happy, overjoyed. Exactly *one week* prior to beginning the biggest milestone of my life, I received a call from a person who worked in the financial aid office. She asked for a piece of information: a social security number. Because I am undocumented, I was unable to produce a number. I had my work *stripped* from my hands. I was denied one of the most *fundamental* of human rights.

Eduardo portrays himself as someone who has worked hard, followed the rules, and done well so far. When he attempted to continue on his upward path, his ambitions were unjustly thwarted by arbitrary rules that discriminated against undocumented immigrants. As he told his story, Eduardo expressed indignation at being denied access to financial aid and the promise of a middle-class future. His emotional expression reflected and reinforced his image of himself as someone who had earned and was entitled to certain rewards.

When men told their stories in this movement, they often expressed this kind of outrage at the unfairness of the situations they faced. Many of them vowed to “fight back” aggressively and used language that asserted dominance and control. For instance, they did not make “asks,” they made “demands.” Men engaged in this kind of tough talk and angry emotional expression even when describing tragic situations. At a rally, Jacob related the experience of losing his mother to cancer, something he attributed to her years of breathing toxic fumes while working as an undocumented immigrant:

Anyone who had proper documentation would not work under those conditions. She lived every day in fear that one day La Migra [the immigration authorities] would walk through those factory doors and take her away from us, her family.



La Migra never came but the broken immigration system took my mother from my family. She died of cancer two months ago. At that point, I realized that I wasn't going to let my mother die in vain. I have made the choice to fight against this unjust and inhumane system, to end the exploitation of hard workers trying to put food on their families' plates. And now she's buried in the land of freedom, in the land where she's considered a criminal. I stand here to demand comprehensive immigration reform. I stand here to demand justice. And I stand here to say that I am not afraid anymore.

Jacob could have expressed sadness over his mother's death or emphasized the depression he fell into or his persistent feelings of loneliness—emotions he shared privately in an interview. Instead, he expressed outrage at the exploitive and dangerous working conditions that he believed killed his mother and caused his personal suffering. He vowed to avenge her death and to “demand justice” and social change.

When men shared their stories in public—even when they described circumstances like Jacob's that were likely to elicit a sympathetic response—they almost always framed their experiences with injustice as affronts warranting outrage. In addition, many men rejected sympathetic responses from audiences by telling them bluntly that they didn't want their “pity,” but rather expected them to be moved to action by their own sense of indignation. As Clark (1987) argued, sympathy tends to flow from those in power to those with less power. Because men are expected to be powerful in Western societies, being perceived as needing sympathy—or being pitiable—could threaten their claims to manhood. Thus, by telling sympathy-inducing stories but rejecting sympathetic responses, men in the movement could acknowledge painful experiences while still asserting strength. Although they sometimes experienced pain, their stories implied, they could manage their suffering on their own. Showing stoicism in the face of pain is a key way of signifying a masculine self (Kimmel 1996; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Shields 2005; Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe 2011). Practicing together was another way men helped control their emotional performances and maintain their claims to manly virtue.

## **Behind the Scenes: Helping Undocumented Men Emote**

Men sometimes worked independently on their stories, but more often they helped each other develop what they believed would be engaging and effective performances. This was especially common when men sought to express “feminine-defined” emotions, such as vulnerability. As one of the male

leaders of the movement explained in an interview, helping each other plan emotionally expressive performances was important, “so it’s not just like, you know, ‘oh, victimized me.’” Uncontrolled emotional displays could be discrediting by making men seem pitiable rather than respectable. The following exchange took place the night before a “youth empowerment summit,” a one-day conference organized by movement leaders to recruit new members and teach them how to use their personal stories politically. Paul and Thomas were helping their friend Ivan prepare his story to share with summit participants the next day:

Paul: Just show more emotion.

Thomas: Yeah, *way* more. You have to be really vulnerable. The more vulnerable you are, the more vulnerable they’re all going to be in their stories.

Paul: And more images.

Thomas: Like, you were saying something about crossing the barriers to college. So, what are some of those barriers to college? From your personal life or like, “I was tired of seeing my friend or something suffer and have to do this, this, this to go to college.” And then you said at one point you were still living in fear, but fear of what? Like, articulate it. Like, Paul always says in his story, “My mom would tell me, ‘Every time you see a cop car, don’t open the doors.’ So, every time I’d see a cop car, I’d be like, ‘Oh my God. That’s ICE [Immigrations and Custom Enforcement] coming after me.’” Or some shit like that.

Paul: Not really, but I just put it in there [everyone who’s been listening to this conversation laughs].

Thomas: [laughing] I do that, too.

Fabio: [calling across the room] That works, too! It makes people care!

As we can see from this exchange, when men tried to help each other incorporate feminine-defined emotions into their performances, they often did so in ways that deflected attention from the actual feelings. Although Thomas and Paul urged their friend to “show more emotion” and “be really vulnerable,” they emphasized the *strategic reasons* for doing so: it will teach new recruits effective storytelling techniques. Fabio added that it might also be

effective in winning sympathy for the movement. In other words, this wasn't about Ivan as an individual man *being vulnerable*, but about a leader in the movement doing whatever it takes to advance the interests of the broader group. Scholars find that men often cope with demands for emotional labor by recasting them as opportunities to signify masculine selves (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996; Stenross and Kleinman 1989). Leidner (1993), for instance, found that insurance salesmen managed expectations for deference by defining interactions with customers as contests for control. Pierce (1996) similarly found that male trial attorneys sometimes exhibited "strategic friendliness," or feminine-defined forms of politeness, if they thought it would help them win their case. By treating emotional expressivity as a means to an end (Sattel 1976), men in the undocumented youth movement could maintain control over a potentially threatening storytelling process and their claims to being proper men.

The above exchange also shows how men used humor, mockery, and shows of insincerity to distance themselves from the emotions they were trying to infuse into their stories and the (feminine) selves implied by them. After describing how Paul showed vulnerability in his own story, Thomas immediately characterized his emotional disclosure as "some shit like that," implying they shouldn't take it seriously and shutting off opportunities for the men to empathize with Paul's experience of fear. Moreover, Thomas and Paul joked that they duped audiences into feeling sympathy for them by adding details to their stories that weren't true. This kind of dismissive banter about emotions and storytelling enabled men to build trust with each other—to say, in effect, "I won't judge your show of vulnerability if you don't judge mine." It also communicated a shared understanding that the pain or fear they sometimes expressed in their stories was not a reflection of who they *really were*. That was just an act put on for effect (as they all know). They were only "surface acting" (Hochschild 1983), showing the right emotions but not really feeling them. In these ways, the men helped each other affirm and protect their self-images from the threats posed by expressing "feminine" emotions.

## **Helping Relatively Powerless Men Feel Powerful (and Like Men)**

While these strategies were especially helpful in getting men to show emotions typically defined as feminine, most of the time men in this movement expressed a narrower range of emotions—usually indignation or righteous anger—that did not conflict with their image of themselves as real men. As

we saw earlier, men frequently told stories that showed them to be unjustly stymied in their efforts to better themselves educationally, achieve respectable employment, and protect their families—their efforts, in other words, to claim full status as men. Although it might seem easy to get men to feel anger in response to perceived affronts to their manhood, movement leaders had to help new members channel their anger into stories.

At formal trainings like the youth empowerment summit described above, movement leaders modeled their expectations by sharing their own stories. In a typical example, a male ally who was leading a storytelling session described how he joined the movement after learning that his undocumented sister would not be able to accept a scholarship because of her status. He said:

I got *pissed* [stamps down hard on the floor for emphasis]. You know? I got pissed because I don't like when people mess with my family. . . . Shit, if someone's going to pick on my sister, it's going to be me, right? So, that's why I got involved. . . . I can't just walk away from this because this is our responsibility, right? We're not in this because social justice is cool. We're in this because it's our fucking responsibility [pounds fist on the table] and we have to fulfill that. You feel me? . . . Sorry, I get a little intense sometimes.

Unlike the men in the earlier example who coached their male friend to show vulnerability, a feminine-coded emotion, this man expressed with gusto the one emotion that is culturally marked “male”: anger. By stomping and pounding, he showed new recruits how to deliver an emotionally impactful (and masculine) story. Like the men in the previous example, he also accounted for and ennobled his anger by citing his broader “responsibility” to the movement, to “social justice,” and, in this case, to his family. The message to new members was explicitly gendered: real men take care of their families, and they get angry and fight back when somebody threatens them.

Although new recruits (men and women) typically responded enthusiastically and with noisy applause to these kinds of hypermasculine performances, some men who were new to the movement struggled to give this kind of performance. These men did not feel very powerful or believe they had much control over their lives, and they were skeptical about their ability to fight back. In other words, they didn't feel like *men*, much less social change agents. The challenge for movement leaders in these cases was to *remasculinize* them.

Movement leaders and other rank-and-file members often worked together to help these men feel better about themselves and tell more agentic stories. They frequently did so by linking notions of efficacy to constructions of masculine virtue. The qualities that made one a good man, they suggested, also

made one a good leader in the movement (and vice-versa). We can see how this worked during a small group session in which new members were practicing telling their stories. Dempsey, a twenty-something man from Latin America, explained to the group that he was married and had a young son, and what he wanted most was to buy a small house and let his wife stay home to raise their child. But, as an undocumented immigrant, he couldn't find a job that paid enough to make this possible, and the threat of deportation always hung over him. And so he felt discouraged and defeated. As he told them, "Before I got married, I wanted to have a better life, you know? I wanted to have my house. I wanted to have my own car in my name. I wanted to have those things in my name." The male facilitator responded first:

Those are things that sort of, in a sense, validate you, right? When you're married and have a family, it's a responsibility. I think a lot of people can identify with that. At the end of the day, you're just trying to make it—just like anybody else. What's so *illegal* about that? Right? So, I think those are the things you want to put in a descriptive scene so that we can see "Dempsey is a family guy that's trying to make it."

Dempsey held patriarchal beliefs about the proper role of men and women in families. However, his inability to measure up to his own masculine ideal by becoming a successful breadwinner left him feeling discouraged and immobilized. The facilitator's goal was to help him feel more powerful and capable of fighting back as a member of the movement. However, his efforts to achieve this drew on and reproduced conventional gender beliefs. By encouraging Dempsey to cast himself as "a family guy that's trying to make it," he showed him how to transform insecurities about his manhood into an assertion of male entitlement: *As a man*, he had a "responsibility" and a right to provide for his family. When he asked rhetorically, "What's so *illegal* about that?" he affirmed the naturalness of heterosexual, patriarchal family structures in which men assume responsibility for dependent women and children.

The facilitator also reminded Dempsey that remaining in the country was a "choice" that revealed his fighting spirit: "You choose to not give up. You choose to not self-deport. You choose to stay. And in a sense, that's fighting back." Other men and women in the group added that Dempsey made a clear choice to attend the summit that Sunday, when he could have stayed home and watched football like "most other guys"—including undocumented ones. Not only was he a man, they implied, he was *better* than most. To help Dempsey *identify* as a man and *feel like* one, the group members drew explicit comparisons to other, less agentic men. Collective efforts to enable men who

felt discouraged about their ability to act as change agents typically proceeded in this manner. Members of the movement usually combined emotion work to heal men's egos (Bartky 1990) with identity work to rebuild their masculine self-images.

Generally speaking, when men (and women) helped other men do emotion work, they did so in ways that emphasized their status as men and reaffirmed their masculinity. They built camaraderie through dismissive joking about showing vulnerability, affirmed the naturalness of patriarchal family relations, and assured seemingly demasculated men that they were not just men, but *better* men than most.

### **On the Stage: Undocumented Women Giving Feminine Performances**

The content of women's stories was not much different than men's. Like men, women generally highlighted their achievements in school, their work ethic, and their middle-class ambitions. But women also tended to share more details that showed their love for and commitment to their families, and their desire to give back to their communities. Women's stories diverged most dramatically from men's in their emotional expressivity. Like men, women expressed frustration over their circumstances, but they also expressed pain and vulnerability, often crying as they spoke. As a group, they assumed more responsibility for showing audiences how much it hurt to be rendered invisible in this country.

This pain is evident in a story told at a court hearing where several undocumented youth were on trial for charges related to an act of civil disobedience in a congressional representative's office. As she took her seat in the witness chair, Yasmin turned so that she was speaking directly to the judge, who had stopped typing on her laptop and was looking her in the eye. In response to a question about what the group was doing before being arrested, Yasmin explained that they had been sharing their stories with immigration staffers. As she recounted the incident, she told her story to the judge and those gathered in the courtroom:

We asked them if they had children and if they would do anything—would they sacrifice anything for their children. And they said “yes.” And that’s what our parents did. They brought us here for a better future, for better economic opportunities. My parents worked at the poultry plant for 20 years. And they always instilled in me to value education [begins crying] and to become someone in life. Like I said, I was fortunate enough to go to college—and so, we shared our concerns—about how it is to be undocumented and go through

so much in this country and how it affects you in the simplest things. Like, to go to Wal-Mart and exchange something, you need a federal, government-issued ID. And if you don't have that one, the cashiers, they'll say, "Well, too bad, you can't exchange that." You can't—it's hard to rent an apartment. It's hard to buy a house. It's hard to buy a car, to get health insurance.

Although this was an unusual storytelling venue, Yasmin's story was not. It was representative of the kinds of stories women in this movement routinely told and the way they told them. What we see in Yasmin's story is someone who loved her family members and appreciated their sacrifices, who worked hard in school but was humble about her achievements, and whose singular ambition was to "become someone in life." Rather than showing righteous anger or indignation over her circumstances, she expressed tearful frustration at being denied the (seemingly) little things other people take for granted. In fact, all three of the women who shared their stories that day cried on the stand, while the one man who also shared his story did not. In this movement, women often showed this kind of emotional vulnerability when they told their stories in public. Even when they expressed more pointed anger at immigration policies that criminalized them or their families, they often "softened" their performances by breaking into tears as they spoke.

Women also participated disproportionately in public storytelling events that emphasized emotionally painful themes, including struggles with depression. One such event was organized after an undocumented man (who was not a member of the movement) had committed suicide. Five of the six speakers were women, and all of them told stories about their own experiences with depression. One woman said:

If you look at my arms, you'll see faint scars. They've been there for years—some from eighth grade, high school, even last month. They're scars of frustration, of anger, of disappointment. I'm tired of having to live this way every single day. I'm tired of having to let legislators on Capitol Hill decide what I can and cannot do. I'm tired of having to see my parents worry about what's going to happen to them and what's going to happen to me. It's not fair that we have people in Washington, DC, *deciding* our lives. Why can't *I* decide my life? I've lost *control* and that's when I resort to that—when I feel like I have nothing, when I feel like I have no choice, no voice.

This woman painted a vivid picture of the despair sometimes felt by undocumented youth. On this occasion, a gendered division of emotional labor emerged: women did most of the emoting, while men generally assumed support roles (i.e., lying on the ground symbolically "dead" as the women spoke, taking photos of the event, and serving as media contacts). This kind of

division of labor was not unusual. At various storytelling venues, women often talked openly and tearfully about their struggles with depression, while men offered support and remained in the background. During lobby sessions, for instance, I heard only women sharing experiences with depression and suicide with congressional staffers, while men nodded or placed a sympathetic hand on a woman's shoulder as she spoke. Despite the inequity in this arrangement, I never heard anyone complain about it. Indeed, women often said that they felt obligated to tell these kinds of stories so that other youth could see that they were not alone in their struggles. Showing vulnerability, they believed, supported the goals of the movement.

### **Behind the Scenes: Helping Undocumented Women Manage Emotions**

In Western cultures, women are expected to be the “bearers of emotion” (Jaggar 1989, 158) and to use their feelings in the service of others (Shields 2005; see also Bartky 1990; Lorber 1994). As their emotionally expressive storytelling performances showed, women in the undocumented youth movement generally accepted this role. However, their frequent expression of vulnerability sometimes conflicted with their desired image of themselves as strong, capable leaders and made them worry about appearing weak or helpless. Thus, to be able to share the kinds of stories they believed were effective but that sometimes caused them anxiety, they needed to find ways of transforming either their feelings or their stories—or both.

A key way women managed their concerns was by helping each other recast expressions of vulnerability as admirable displays of courage and strength. In an interview, Kristy described becoming suddenly resistant to sharing her story at a major rally, a prospect that had previously excited her. She had been involved in the movement for over six months and had shared her story numerous times before, yet she was having doubts the day before this event. As she explained, “People were practicing their speeches, and I couldn’t do it. I was like, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t want to be a victim. I don’t want to be anything.’” She had internalized dominant ideas that equated victimhood with weakness, a quality she did not want to claim. Like other women, one of the things Kristy valued most about her involvement in the movement was her newfound sense of confidence and power. After organizing protest events, speaking to government officials, and sitting as an invited guest and “expert” on various panels and committees, she saw herself as a capable and agentic leader. She didn’t want to present herself in a way that made her seem weak and unworthy of respect. When she shared her concerns with one of the women leading her group, she told her, “You’re not



a victim. You take ownership.” When another woman, Cynthia, wondered out loud before a recruitment event if she should share her struggles with suicide, a fellow activist emphasized the importance of showing other undocumented youth that feelings of hopelessness could be reduced by becoming active in the movement. Cynthia’s story, she told her, could serve as “a calling: join the movement for your self-empowerment. Why do you want to be self-empowered? You want to be self-empowered so you can have that hope.” By helping each other reframe expressions of vulnerability as shows of strength that aided other undocumented youth, women could continue telling the kinds of stories they believed were most effective without jeopardizing their claims to being strong and capable leaders in the movement.

Another way women in the movement tried to deflect attributions of weakness was by showing a diversity of emotions in their storytelling performances. Like all stigmatizing labels, “victim” can become a master status if it sticks (Goffman 1963). To counter this totalizing effect, women often portrayed themselves as far more than victims in their stories. One woman who had been asked to tell her story at a training event spent over three hours the night before handwriting and revising it in a notebook, stopping every so often to read it aloud to other movement leaders who were also working on their stories. When I asked her what she hoped to convey, she explained, “I don’t want it to be just a story. What do they call it? Sob stories? Where everything is just sad. Because I think I’m a lot angrier than I am sad, even though I’m sad a lot. And despite that, I’m still happy.” Like other women in the movement, she did not want to tell a story that focused too much on her suffering or implied that she was helpless to fight back. The story she ultimately told blended painful discussions of hardship with references to her desire to bicycle around the world. Including images and emotions that revealed the diversity of her experiences allowed her to show others that although she sometimes suffered, it didn’t consume her. She was not *just* a victim.

Other women reworked their stories to bring them in line with the stronger, more agentic self-images they currently had of themselves. One of the most common ways they did this was by “masculinizing” their stories, or by adopting defiant presentational styles typically used by men to elicit deference (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).<sup>5</sup> One woman, for instance, believed that the first time she blogged her story, she came off as too desperate. As she told me in an interview, “I felt like I was desperately trying to say, ‘Look, I’m as American as you are. Just give me a chance.’” She later rejected this presentation of self as too deferential and accommodating (i.e., *too feminine*). As she began sharing her story at rallies, she developed a fist-pumping style of delivery she described as “unapologetic.” Others introduced themselves at

public storytelling events by declaring themselves “undocumented and unafraid,” or “undocumented and unashamed.” Although both women and men emulated them by adopting similar language, it served a distinct compensatory function for women. It allowed them to use gender as a resource to elicit audience sympathy—by crying and showing emotional vulnerability—without discrediting themselves as pitiable victims.

These women’s strategies show the complexity of the task they faced in trying to assert strong and agentic activist identities that are still respectable—and properly feminine. In a cultural environment that links femininity and vulnerability (and devalues both), these women faced an “identity dilemma” (Dunn and Creek 2015) tied to their status as women and exacerbated by the stigma of victimization (see also Leisenring 2006). Like the men in the movement, women wanted to distance themselves from associations with weakness when they expressed vulnerability or pain. Also like the men, the women often felt angry and indignant about their legal exclusion from American society. But unlike men, women could not deflect stigma by asserting overtly masculine selves, without appearing unwomanly. Their creative resolution to this gendered dilemma was to blend feminized shows of vulnerability with compensatory images of strength. But striking the right balance between feminized expressions of vulnerability and masculinized expressions of strength sometimes proved difficult. On one occasion, a young woman began sharing her story at a rally organized by a Latina/o student organization on a college campus. In a quiet, tearful voice she described herself as “a human being, with feelings, with a heart, with feet, with hands.” She told them, “If I bleed, it’s red.” But later, she adopted an angrier tone and called on the students to do more to support undocumented immigrants and the movement. As she told them:

Wake up, dude! You, Latino, Latina, you think that because you’re in college, oh, you’re *doing* something? No, mijo [sweetheart]. Get out into the streets! *Then* you will do something. *Then* we can talk. But you think that just because you’re going to college—no! The time is now to get out of class, and take it into the streets, take it into the neighborhoods, and stand up and fight for your community, because our community is under attack!

As she was speaking, the audience grew increasingly quiet. When she finished, there was only light applause and several people left. A few days later, I asked one of the allies in her group about the incident. He told me:

My friend Ryan, he works with NAACP stuff. He’s come out to a couple events. He said, you know, “You gotta really watch that, man. Because she questioned the students there and she hit them hard.” Which is good to a degree.

I mean, there's a healthy level of that, I think. But she did it in a way that was very angry and bitter. And I don't blame her. . . . But I did talk to her briefly about it. I just said, "You gotta be careful about that." . . . And she said, "You're right. Make sure you watch me on that." And then she told her story again [at a different venue] and it was more positive, I think. There's definitely still rage underneath, but it was more positive.

This example not only shows the emotional balancing act women performed, it also revealed an unspoken rule in the movement that women should not express too much anger—a masculine-coded emotion—when they shared their stories in public. When women masculinized their performances in small ways (e.g., through fist-pumping, calling themselves unafraid or unapologetic), it didn't pose a problem. But if they showed too much anger—even if it was aimed at mobilizing audiences—other members worried that they could alienate audiences. Women, thus, were urged sometimes to tone it down and give more "positive" (i.e., more *feminine*) performances. Although men in the movement routinely gave angry storytelling performances, I never heard anyone offer them similar advice.

This incident also exposes an inherent complication in using storytelling as a social change tactic. It depends entirely on the expressive skills and *cooperation* of the storytellers who, as we saw, did not always give the kinds of strategic performances members wanted them to give—those that supported their shared movement goals. Sometimes women resisted expectations that they portray themselves in ways that reinforced gender stereotypes of women as weak, vulnerable, and *not angry*. But as the above example shows, their resistance was not always supported by other members of the movement who preferred that women present themselves as more vulnerable and as less angry.

As the preceding pages have shown, undocumented youth worked together and on their own to manage the contradictions that arose around expectations for emotional expressivity in their public stories. Gender emerged as both a resource they could use to craft compelling stories for change, and a constraint on the ways in which they imagined and performed their stories. Ironically, their strategies for managing competing desires to elicit sympathy and not appear weak led them to devise narrative strategies that ultimately reinforced the narrow gender scripts for emotional expressivity that caused them problems in the first place.

## Conclusion

Gubrium and Holstein (2009, xvii) distinguish between narrative content (what stories are about) and "narrative work" (how stories are produced,

shared, and changed) and contend that we know a good deal about the former but very little about the latter. Indeed, most scholars who study narrative have treated stories as “texts” or “social products” whose meanings can be unpacked through careful content, discourse, or narrative analysis (Polletta et al. 2011). This interest in storied content has produced a vast and growing body of research on the meaning- and sense-making functions of personal stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Polletta et al. 2011). While research on narrative in social movements is still in its nascent stages, scholars have generally taken the same path, privileging content over process, and intensive interviewing and content-analytic methods over ethnographic research (Davis 2002; Fine 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 2008; Polletta et al. 2011). This has left us with a dearth of knowledge about the “how” of storytelling, or the processes by which stories are crafted and refined in interaction. Narrative-analytic approaches that incorporate ethnographic fieldwork, on the other hand, allow us to see how storytellers “call on or otherwise respond to the contexts, contingencies, and resources of narration to fashion their accounts” (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, 256).

By combining content analysis of activists’ stories with an ethnographic examination of the backstage processes by which they were crafted, I deepen our understanding of “narrative work” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) in the context of a social movement. More specifically, I showed how stories are not just “social products” but interactively constructed and institutionally regulated “social performances” (Polletta et al. 2011, 110). I found, for instance, that despite the seemingly personal nature of their public stories, participants often worked together to develop and refine performances that advanced their collective, movement goals. When members were not giving the “right kind” of performance (i.e., one that helped the movement), they were instructed to do things differently. Through modeling and coaching, leaders taught new members how to select, interpret, and infuse pieces of their biographies with emotion to create compelling narrative performances. Moreover, by using their implicit knowledge of cultural feeling rules, they were able to create strategic performances that they believed would elicit sympathy and move people to take supportive action. In these ways, members of the movement did much more than “[use their] personal stories as a political tool,” as one of the leaders put it. Their narrative work enabled the creation of personal stories that could serve *collective* goals. In this sense, my research also builds on Hunt and Benford’s (1994) pioneering work on identity talk in social movements. While my analysis supports their finding that “movement identity constructions are (re)produced and transformed via talk”—in this case, collective storytelling—it also reveals the centrality of emotions and emotion work in the process. The dilemmas the young people

in my study faced were resolved not only through identity work, by constructing stories that aligned their personal and movement identities (Hunt and Benford 1994), but also through emotion work as they helped each other navigate contradictory feeling rules and craft emotional appeals.

My sustained presence in the field also allowed me to identify storytelling patterns and inconsistencies that are not as apparent in interviews or written accounts. Continuous, on-the-ground observation was especially important for understanding the emergence of a gendered division of emotional labor in the movement. Although men and women both said the best stories were the ones that could elicit sympathy, in practice women consistently showed more vulnerability when they shared their stories publicly. Like male fast food workers who can dodge potentially emasculating demands for emotional labor by letting women work the front counter (Leidner 1993), men in the undocumented youth movement were able to avoid showing vulnerability most of the time because women were doing it (and not complaining about it). While these patterns are well documented in other social institutions, such as the workplace and the home (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Hochschild 1983; Martin 1999; Pierce 1996), my research shows how social change tactics that are explicitly expressive—like storytelling—can lead to similar inequalities in the division of emotional labor in social movements. They do so by activating deeply ingrained beliefs about the link between gender and emotional expressivity.

These gendered beliefs and meanings come from the broader culture in which the movement is embedded. Despite their efforts to create a subculture that values expressivity, members were vying with hegemonic forces that are hard to resist (Davis 2005; Swidler 1986). As Davis (2005, 25) puts it, “In their efforts to transform values and institutions, movements struggle against preexisting cultural and institutional narratives and the structures of meaning and power they convey.” In the cultural world outside the movement, showing vulnerability is associated with conventional femininity and can elicit attributions of weakness (Kimmel 1996; Messner 2009; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Although members believed it was important to show audiences how much it hurt to be undocumented, they did not want to appear weak. This created a storytelling dilemma, reflecting the difficulty groups face in trying to challenge normative meanings, ideas, and beliefs. In a broad sense my research shows how dominant cultural influences can seep into, compete with, and overpower a movement’s subculture and the strategies it uses to promote change (Swidler 1986).

Because I had access to backstage spaces where members worked through these gendered emotional binds, I was also able to show how people navigate and reconcile competing or contradictory cultural pressures in a social

movement context. While scholars have examined these processes in other institutional settings, such as the workplace and the courts (Dunn 2002; Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996), my research shows how they are resolved in yet another social arena. In the undocumented movement, men could not and did not always seek to avoid showing vulnerability by simply letting the women do it. Sometimes they believed it was important and necessary for them to show pain, too. Under these circumstances, they devised distancing strategies that allowed them to assert strength (and manly virtue) while showing vulnerability. Like male trial attorneys and salesmen who redefined potentially emasculating demands for emotional labor as masculinity contests (Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996), men in the backstage areas of the movement treated expressivity as a means to an end, joked about painful experiences, and otherwise signaled that they were not really the sensitive (or feminine) people suggested by their public emotional displays. In these ways, they could leverage cultural beliefs about men as naturally strong, competent, and brave to show a bit of vulnerability without sacrificing their masculine selves (Sattel 1976).

Like female victims of stalking and domestic violence (Dunn 2002, 2010), women in the movement were in an “emotional double bind” (Shields 2005, 9). They engaged, like the men, in emotion work by redefining expressions of vulnerability as unique opportunities to show feminine (i.e., emotional) strength. They also chose storytelling strategies that straddled the gender divide. By “borrowing” expressive tools—language, gestures, and identity codes—typically used by men to assert dominance, women were able to masculinize their often tearful, feminine performances and thereby deflect attributions of weakness. But this strategy is viable only because strength is associated with conventional masculinity in the broader culture. Because femininity is defined in opposition to masculinity—it’s everything masculinity is not—women in the movement had few feminine-defined cultural tools with which to work to show they were not weak as they expressed vulnerability.

Ultimately, it was this gender sorting and labeling of cultural resources that created the expressive storytelling dilemma in which both men and women in the movement were caught. Without challenging the gendered (race, classed, and so on) system of beliefs that supports an unequal distribution of meaning-making resources (Fine 2002; Polletta and Lee 2006), activists who seek to use expressive storytelling in their campaigns for social change will be working with a “political tool” that not only serves the interests of some members better than others, but also inadvertently reproduces inequality.

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## Notes

1. Although specific details of each version vary, the DREAM Act would provide temporary residency status to undocumented immigrants who entered the country as minors, attended US high schools, demonstrate “good moral character” (usually defined as not having a criminal record), and have been accepted into US colleges or the military. After a multi-year waiting period, if they stay out of trouble, they would be allowed to apply for permanent legal residency.
2. The “coming out” rallies organized by gay rights activists were, in turn, based on an even longer social justice tradition of bringing private stigmas into public spaces. This strategy was evident, for instance, in the “speak-outs” against rape in the early 1970s (Brownmiller 1975). Joel Best (2013, 49) describes this as “piggyback[ing],” wherein contemporary social movements borrow successful strategies from earlier movements.
3. While the young people in this study were raised in and claimed to identify with dominant (white) US culture, it’s important to note that many of their parents did not. Moreover, all of them came from highly patriarchal cultures of origin where different norms of emotional expression are likely to prevail. It is beyond the scope of this project to do a point-by-point comparison of these differences for each of the (multiple) Latina/o, Arabic, and Asian subcultures represented in this study.
4. DREAMers who did not identify as heterosexual most often described themselves as “queer,” but some alternately identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
5. In their analysis of masculinity and manhood acts, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) argue that in patriarchal societies, women who compete with men for power

often do so on men's terms, putting on "compensatory manhood acts" to demonstrate their worthiness of respect. Because politics is culturally defined as masculine, women may similarly feel compelled to act like men to claim respect in this social sphere.

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